



HER

Filthy
GRUMP

A SINFULLY FORBIDDEN SERIES

ALEXIA CHASE

Her Filthy Grump
A Sinfully Forbidden Series
Alexia Chase

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Book Excerpt

Layla

“Oh, shit.” My heart skips a beat. I run to the covered trench and stare inside with my co-parent quacking and fluttering her head from side to side. *How am I going to get you out of there?*

“What’re you doing?” A deep voice booms from behind me.

My mouth drops as I pivot on my heel. *Holy hotness, Batman.* The man, who has apparently emerged from the monster truck with dual tailpipes, strides across the pavement.

The muscles in his shoulders and neck ripple with each movement. When did superheroes start wearing low-hung jeans and wifebeaters? I swallow over the dry ball of lust in my throat and straighten my back. “Gertrude’s baby duckling fell into the drain.”

He yanks the sunglasses off his face, and the darkest pair of brown eyes stare at me in utter disbelief. Then, he glances in all directions. “And that warrants this mess?”

I jerk backward. “What mess?”

“This.” As he waves his hand in a circle in front of him, his eyes flash with contempt. “You’re holding up traffic. All the lookie-loos are out gawking. And the Mayor’s over there holding an impromptu press conference.”

I spin around to see Mayor Wagner grinning from ear to ear as he uses his hands to talk. Tracie Atherton and Max Parson have their cellphones up as they appear to be recording his conversation. *Welcome to Meadow Bay, California.*

“Then, move on.” I shrug. “It doesn’t have to be your business.”

The man purses his lips. “Yes, it does. We received a call at the fire department, and I’m the lucky one who got the assignment.”

Chapter One

Layla

I glance out the front window of the café and groan. “There goes Gertrude again.”

“What?” Dorthey Hughes raises her empty mug and twists her head to face the street. “Ah....” She turns back and smiles. The red vinyl cushions make a rustling sound from her movements. “How many years is this now?”

“Four.”

Gertrude, the duck, waddles across the grass of the park with her bright green feathers shining under the midday sun. With each step, her yellowish-orange beak opens and closes.

Directly behind her are several puffs of brown ducklings. They all mosey in different directions. “Poor thing.” I shake my head. “This group of hatchlings seems more clueless than the last.”

Several years ago, Gertrude injured her wing and now has taken up a permanent residence at the park. The longer she’s been there, the later her ducklings’ hatch. This year, they’re months behind schedule.

I grasp Dorthey’s mug, fill it with steaming black coffee and return it to the table. The scent of dark roast swirls around the table. “Is this, okay?”

She peers inside and nods. “Perfect. I don’t want too much, or it’ll keep me up all night. I can’t afford to have a lot of caffeine in the late afternoon if I want to be in bed by eight o’clock.”

“I understand.” How many times have I heard this story? A wave of nostalgia flows through me. I’ve been here for five years. In the summers, I worked weekdays. During the school year, I worked two days a week. I even came back while in college and worked on Saturdays.

My head spins. Never mind. Math is not my strong suit. “Tell me if you need anything else.”

She reaches out her wrinkled hand and clasps mine in hers. Her fingers shake a little more this year than last. “Dear, you have such a lovely spirit. Tell me. Why hasn’t some guy swooped in and knocked you off your feet? I’ll never forget the first time I saw Mr. Hughes. God rest his soul.”

“I don’t know, Dorthey. Maybe someday.” Mr. Right has got to be around here somewhere, and I’ll find him. Never give up is my motto. So what if all the guys I dated in college never lived up to the image of what I’m searching for in a man? The men in my family have big shoes to fill. “Have a great day.”

“You, too.” She pats my hand and then stares into her mug. Her face is wistful as she seemingly drifts off into her memories of being wooed by her deceased husband.

That’s what I want—a love so vivid that sixty years later, I’m still remembering being swept off my feet.

I sigh and step to the next table. My day is filled by idle chitchat with the regulars, and over the years I’ve seen dozens of waitresses come and go. Most of them can’t hack the monotony. I love it. Not that this is the only thing I want to do with my life.

Someday, I want to open my own photography studio. Years ago, Madeline Harden took me under her wing, and I’ve had the photo bug ever since.

The screech of car tires jerks me out of my musings, and there in the middle of the street is Gertrude with her entourage. The driver of the Land Rover opens the door and waves his hands frantically at Gertrude. She hops in the air, and her neck stretches out as she quacks in frustration.

I get ya. It must be a bear trying to herd those ducks across the street. I chuckle at her antics.

The man tugs on the collar of his suit jacket and hollers as his face turns crimson. *Calm down, Mr. Big Shot.* He slides back into the vehicle.

As the door slams shut, the entire vehicle rocks from the force of his anger. I cringe. He’s going to make himself sick.

The Land Rover surges forward, and I gasp. “Oh, my God.” I set down the coffee pot with a clang. “I’ll be right back.”

Without looking to see if my boss, Blanche, heard me, I march to the front door and yank it open. The dark-haired, impeccably dressed man revs the engine, but Gertrude doesn’t budge.

That asshat had better not run over Gertrude or any of her babies. Or I’ll.... I’ll, what? I shake my head. Exactly, what am I going to do? Spank him?

I spread my arms wide, and a stiff breeze blows at the fabric of my ankle-length dress. Thankfully, the wind isn’t blowing any harder, or I’d end up with my ass hanging out.

When the man guns the engine again, I run in front of his vehicle and stop. He glares and rolls down the window. “What’re you doing?”

“Saving these precious animals before you run them over.”

“Get out of my way.” He lifts his arm and studies his wristwatch. “I’m supposed to be upstate in an hour.”

“Then, you should have left more time for your commute.” I swivel and slowly approach the duck. “Hey, girl. You’ve got a beautiful family. Let me help you get them back into the park.”

She stares with her beady eyes and then quacks.

“Right.” I grin. “Teamwork.”

The driver lays on his horn, pulls into the opposite lane, and zips past. I twist at the waist and glare at him as he zooms down the street. What a jerk.

Gertrude and I manage to corral three of the baby ducks into the park as several customers file out of the café to cheer me on.

I lean down and swoosh my arms in the air as another puffball waddles toward the yellow center line. “Oh, no, you don’t.”

At my exaggerated movements, the duckling shoots into the grass like a fox is hot on his tail feathers. “Good job, little one.”

By now, cars on both sides of the road have come to a complete stop. Mayor Wagner steps out of his Cadillac. He leans against the door with his arm resting over the top edge. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

I swipe a strand of hair out of my eyes. Only to have it fly back in my face. “Yes, it is.”

He chuckles as Gertrude darts to the side of the road and frantically quacks at a duckling that has wandered down the cement gutter. “She sure has her hands full with this batch. I don’t think they’re going to make it.”

“You and me both,” I sigh in utter frustration. There’s no time to make idle conversation. I jog to catch up with them before another unsuspecting driver ends up running over the little family.

Not that there’s anywhere for vehicles to go. The road to the south is blocked by the Mayor and a couple other drivers who’ve stopped to chat with him. And from the north, a large 4x4 is angled sideways to block traffic.

I squint. Who’s that? I don’t recognize the vehicle. Before I can catch a glimpse of the driver, the pipsqueak on the loose slips between the rails of the drain grate and disappears.

“Oh, shit.” My heart skips a beat. I run to the covered trench and stare inside with my co-parent quacking and fluttering her head from side to side. *How am I going to get you out of there?*

“What’re you doing?” A deep voice booms from behind me.

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Chapter Two

Kameron

What a clusterfuck. When I signed up for this gig, I was expecting a nice break from the city's fast pace.

Granted, the weather's beautiful, and it feels more like Mayberry than Kansas City, but this? My gaze darts between the quacking duck, the ducklings darting in all directions in the park, and Miss Pollyanna swooshing them all to safety. *Lord, save me.*

I squat down in front of the grate. The brown fuzzball stares with black eyes and an open beak. "This is why birds don't live long. Just be glad it's not raining, or you'd drown."

"What?" Miss Pollyanna stops in mid-movement and gawks like I said I was going to rip its head off and eat it.

"Birds." I motion toward the drain. "They're stupid."

Her green eyes flash in anger, and the freckles on the bridge of her nose pop as heat floods her face. "Birds aren't stupid."

I shift from my slouching position to my full height and slip the sunglasses back over my eyes. "Ma'am, this duck you call, Gertrude, has caused traffic to stop for fifteen minutes. It's brought me from the quiet of the fire station to solve your little dilemma. And this baby bird is swimming in the gutter with its mouth open."

"Oh." Her eyes go soft, and she jogs back to the drain as locks of auburn hair flow behind her in waves. "The poor guy's hungry." She glances at the ground and spins in a circle. "Do you think we could find a worm?"

"No," I sigh. Is this woman for real? "I don't think we can find a worm, and I'm not searching for one."

"That's mean." She frowns and looks at me like I'm the most evil person she's encountered today.

Hell, I probably am. I don't care about the duck. Or its offspring. All I want to do is clear the mess, report the job resolved, and wait for some real action to occur. Wrangling ducks doesn't qualify as real fireman's work. "Despite what you may think, wild animals don't appreciate you feeding their young. If we feed this damn bird, Gertrude might abandon it."

She clutches her chest. "You called her Gertrude."

"Oh, for the love of God." I shake my head and spin on my heel.

How in the hell did I end up here? Ri-i-ight. A humiliating breakup with an ex, and an offer from a cousin to housesit while he travels. Except, I wasn't expecting the Little Bo-Peep of Ducks to need help herding birds.

By this point, several of the townspeople have gathered in the park to block the rest of the hatchlings from following the mother duck and dropping their dumbasses into the drain. Thank fuck for that.

I squat and grasp the rusted grate on either side and yank upward. The metal grinds, but nothing moves. "Per-r-rfect."

"What is it?" Miss Pollyanna moves to my right and hunkers down beside me.

The coconut scent of her shampoo fills my nostrils and causes the blood in my veins to hum.

Dude, don't. You're not here to let your dick get you into more trouble, and little Miss Sunshine appears to be trouble with a capital "T."

"The drain is stuck."

"Let me see." Her tiny hands clasp the grille, and she tugs. "Yep. That's tight."

Tight. I shudder at the vision of her slender body sliding over mine with her plump lips smashed against my mouth. Her whimpers eager as I plunge into her depths. I have no doubt she'd bring a whole new meaning to tight.

Damn it. Stop. What's wrong with me? Women are the root of all evil. I've yet to meet one who wasn't deceitful and manipulative.

"What're we going to do?" Her big green eyes stare like I've got some

magic wand shoved up my ass and can solve all the world's problems.

"We aren't doing anything together," I growl with more force than intended, and her eyes fill with hurt.

Fuck. I close my eyes. *No. It's better this way. Let her think you're a prick.* I straighten my shoulders and open my eyes. "Get back, and I'll take care of it."

"Okay." Her eyelashes flutter closed as if she's shielding her response. Before I can say anything else, she stands and gives me a wide berth. Thank God. I don't need the distraction.

After studying the screen for several seconds, I place my hands at the four and ten positions. Here goes nothing. I sure the fuck don't want to call Gavin Monroe or one of the other guys at the station to help me get a damn duck out of a drain. I've only been on the job for a week, and I don't need that kind of humiliation.

And God forbid if Gavin's uncle, Chief Monroe has to come save the day. The only reason I have this job is because he's doing a favor for my cousin. It's not like there's another fire station in a town this size.

I hunch down, hold my breath, and yank with all my strength. The grate jolts upward and breaks free. The crowd surrounding us erupts into a booming cheer, and several lights flash. *Great.* I cringe. *Please, don't have this be on the cover of the newspaper.*

"Oh, my God, thank you." Little Miss Sunshine grips my bicep and ogles me like I'm *Thor*.

I press my lips together. Don't fall for it. There's always a price to pay. No one's as pure as the driven snow—even if this one looks like an angel. "Get the duck."

"Okay." She spins away from me.

Fuck. I'm a jerk. I clench my teeth and try to ignore her as she drops to her knees without seeming to care about getting dirt on her dress and scoops the critter out of the drain. "Take it straight to the grass, sit it down, and walk away."

“Yes, sir.” She marches away from me with her back as stiff as if she’d slept on a bed of bricks.

Do not imagine her using that term in a non-condescending way. I should repeat that again because the first directive doesn’t seem to be working.

When she steps into the grass, the crowd circles around her. “Guys, stand back. We don’t want to spook Gertrude or cause her to reject her baby.”

An older couple in matching burgundy tracksuits nod at her statement. The woman grabs little Miss Sunshine’s forearm. “You’re so right, dear. Wild animals hate for their young to be messed with.”

“Isn’t that all women.” A man wearing a baseball cap cracks what he considers to be a joke.

“Garrett.” She glares at him. “This isn’t a joking matter. It’ll break my heart if Gertrude abandons this poor little thing.”

I close my eyes and try to block out their chatter. I don’t need the complications of this place. Where everyone knows everyone else. That only means more people to get into your business.

“Here you go, Gertrude.” Her singsong voice breaks through my barriers and rolls over my flesh.

I don’t need this. I don’t want this. I march back to my pickup. Get me back to the safety of the fire station. How soon can I get back to civilization?

Chapter Three

Layla

When Gertrude takes her duckling under her wing, my heart fills with relief. For a second there, I'd been afraid Mr. Pricklepuss was right, and she might abandon her baby. I'd call him Picklepuss, but he's more of a prick.

Speaking of Mr. Tall, Dark, and Grumpalicious. Where did he go? The crowd in the park has thinned as the afternoon's crisis has resolved itself. Mayor Wagner hops in his vehicle and waves goodbye.

The rumble of a muffler grabs my attention as the fireman steps on the gas and rolls up his window. Right before his face disappears behind the tinted glass, his shade covered eyes glance in my direction, and my knees go weak.

Don't go there. You aren't going to go all *Layla Saves the Day* on him. Some guys you can't fix. And why would I want to fix him? He's not my type.

Dark eyes and a five o'clock shadow are not prerequisites to get hung-up on. I want a strong man with a big heart who treats me like a queen. Is that too much to ask?

Apparently so. I snort.

As a twenty-three-year-old virgin, you'd think I'd give up finding that elusive unicorn and settle for a donkey with a paper hat held on by an elastic string. Hell, if I was looking for a unicorn, I might have better luck.

When I make it back inside the café, my boss arches an eyebrow and glances at the clock.

I smile sheepishly. "Can we call it a late lunch?"

"Layla, one of these days, your big heart is going to get you into a world of hurt." Blanche crosses her arms over her ample bosom.

"Whatever." I roll my eyes, grab the coffee pot from the empty table,

and snatch up my five-dollar tip. “You know the customers love my personality.”

“Yes, they do.” She grabs a dishrag and scrubs along the front counter. “That’s why I put up with your flighty do-goodery. That and your Grandma Monroe was one of my favorite classmates. By the way, how’s Gladys?”

“Grandma’s good. She’s settled in nicely at home after her hip surgery.”

“Fantastic. I suppose you’ve been helping her at the house as she recovers.” She gives me a weak smile and flushes a light pink.

“Of course. See.” I smile. “My do-goodery is beneficial in this case. Well, actually, in all cases.” I shrug. “Maybe I’m late to a few appointments, or I forgot a class or two when I was in college, but it was always for a good cause. I wasn’t out partying.”

“No, dear.” She shakes her head. “You were helping carry someone’s groceries or taking somebody’s dog to the vet. Hell, it’s usually my customers. So, how can I complain?”

I set the pot on the counter and lean my hip against one of the stools. After the interlude in the park, there’s only one table left with customers, and they’re tidying up their plates. “Is it a bad thing I like to help people?”

She touches my hand. “Only when you leave me in a lurch. You’ve got to remember to let me know when you’re going to be late or find someone to cover for you.” She tilts her head toward the front door. “Or going outside to rescue ducks.”

“Sorry, Blanche.” The scuffed counter has been around as long as Blanche, and like her, they’re both holding up well. “I should have made sure you heard me before I left.”

“Honey, I love your spirit. Everyone does. Don’t go changing that. Just remember to be a little more responsible before saying yes to helping people out. You’ve got to balance your desire to help while meeting your obligations.”

“You’re right.” I’ve been blessed growing up in this small town.

Everyone looks out for me.

My parents and grandparents are staples of the community, and as an only child, I was doted on, but now I'm a grown woman. I can't depend on a big smile and a generous heart to get out of everything.

"On to the important stuff." Blanche places her elbows on the counter and cups her chin. "Who was the hottie outside helping you with Gertrude? I never thought I'd consider a wifebeater tank top sexy, but those muscles." Her eyes glow as she shakes her head. "And those tattoos."

"Blanche!"

"Hey." She leans up and fans herself before patting her gray curls. "I might be old, but I'm not blind. I took more than one roll in the sheets before settling down with Mr. Waters."

"Really?" I wiggle my eyebrows. "Tell me more."

"Gi-i-irl." She smirks. "Don't change the subject. We're talking about your chivalrous helper."

I wrinkle my nose. "I don't think he fits that category. He didn't want to help and thought I was ridiculous." *And hurt my feelings.* I'm so not going to say that out loud. I'm an adult woman. I should be made from sturdier stuff. "I don't even think he likes animals. Who doesn't like animals?"

She chuckles. "Not everyone has a bleeding heart like you."

Bleeding heart? I frown. Should I be tougher? Does it make me weak to care about animals and the elderly?

I don't know the first thing about hardening my heart. Sometimes I wish I did because I cry every time Bambi is on television, and that's embarrassing at this stage of my life. I straighten my back. "He said he works at the fire station but didn't say his name." I shrug. "Dad had to have hired him, but he hasn't said anything about a new recruit." My father has been Fire Chief since I was a kid. Normally in a town this small, there wouldn't be a fulltime fire department, but we're a suburb of Oakland.

Should I ask him about the mystery man who hates animals and thinks I'm a nuisance? That's a big fat no.

Yes. I do a mental fist pump. I can make big girl decisions. And more importantly, I don't care what he thinks of me.

Chapter Four

Kameron

I jam the gearshift into park. The fire station is quaint and welcoming, like everything else in this town.

I'm used to the fast pace of the city, where we were called out for at least two to three fires a day. Granted, most of our work was helping with medical transports and trying to improve community relations, but Meadow Bay is quiet. Too quiet.

After only a week, the sound of a siren makes me jump. I can't afford to get soft. I'm only here for a few months. Then, I've got to figure out what I'm doing with my life.

I pop the door open, causing the warning ding to fill the space. *Shit. Forgot the keys.* I yank them out of the ignition to make it stop. See? I'm already not fit for city life. No one leaves their keys in their vehicle in Kansas City.

As I hop down from my pickup, Gavin waves and walks across the parking lot. "How was the call?"

"A real clusterfuck." I jerk my sunglasses off and hook them on the front of my shirt. "You should have warned me the biggest action I'd see all day would be a wild duck chase."

Gavin chuckles and crosses his arms. "The park?"

"Yes."

"Gertrude is a known city staple. She's been hatching eggs there for the last several years. We moved her to Boyd's farm for the first two years, but she came right back to the park." Gavin shrugs. "Now, we put up with her antics."

"Wonderful. I hope she keeps a better eye on them this time. One of her boneheaded ducklings fell into a drain, and this little Miss Sunshine character was holding up traffic trying to save the fucking day." I rotate my shoulders

to ease the tension.

I drove around the block three times before stopping while trying to get her out of my head, but I'm not having any luck.

Gavin's nose scrunches. "Reddish auburn hair, a dusting of freckles, green eyes, and dressed like a teacher's pet?"

My skin grows tighter with each descriptive characteristic. "Yes. I take it you know her."

"Layla."

Layla. Even her name is sexy. The desire to see how sweet she'd taste has been coursing through my veins with more strength than I can ever remember a woman wielding over me. I want to find out if she's as pure as she puts on—no one ever is. I'm betting between the sheets she's a hellcat.

"Layla Monroe. My third cousin." Gavin winks. "And the boss's daughter."

Oh, fuck. I cough. Gavin's words are like an ice-cold bucket of water, drenched over my head. You don't mind-fuck the cousin of the first person to make you feel welcome in a new town.

And that's not the worst of it. She's the boss's sweet, innocent little girl. If he knew the thoughts that have been going through my head, he'd castrate me, and I'd be working the graveyard shift at a gas station in the next town over.

"She seems like a nice girl."

"She is. One of the nicest people you'll ever meet. She's always helping someone. Her grandma, my great aunt, is recovering from hip surgery, so she's spending a lot of time there helping her out. Then, there's the nursing home. At least once a week, she stops by there to cheer up the residents."

Is that even real? Who does that? Clearly, she's hiding something by pretending she's perfect. Probably doesn't want daddy to know she likes to get down and dirty with the boys.

Fuck. What's wrong with me? I want to prove she's a filthy girl at heart because I can't accept her being a good person. That's sick. But there's no pretending I'm anything but what I am. A man with a black heart and an empty soul.

"Thankfully, everything worked out. Gertrude got all her ducklings back, and everything's back to normal."

"That's great." He unlaces his arms and punches me on the shoulder. "Welcome to Meadow Bay. Where everything's an adventure."

"Very true. Just not the adventures I'm used to." We turn and walk to the entrance of the fire station. The hot sun has the strong scent of asphalt filling the air.

"You'll get used to it. It's not boring all the time, but it is a slower pace. A great spot to settle down, get married, and raise a family."

"Yeah." I've got plenty to say about the topic, but I'm smart enough to keep my mouth shut. Gavin's a happily married man—for now. I don't want to ruin his vision of the future. My experience is filled with women who fold under pressure.

"Are you settled in?" Gavin opens the door and stands to the side, letting me go in first.

"Finished moving everything last night. Not that there was a lot. Roman left the place furnished, so I didn't have to do much."

"You've got to come over to the house sometime and meet Delaney. You'll love her." *Delaney*. Gavin talks about her all the time. She can't be as perfect as he makes her out to be.

"Sure." I pop my neck. *Damn, I'm tight*. When was the last time I worked out? "We'll have to make plans sometime, but for now, I'm still trying to get the lay of the land." I shake my head. "And get used to how quiet it is."

"Dude, it's great." Gavin beams as we near the other firemen who're sitting around playing cards.

The guys glance up, wave, and return to their game. All of them have

been friendly and welcoming. Again, not something I'm used to.

"I don't know how you handle all the noise." Cole Thornburg frowns and lays down a nine of clubs. "I can't stand all the sirens, smog, and the damn traffic. You're going to learn to love the hum of air conditioners and streetlights. One day, you're going to wake up and realize you don't have tension in your muscles twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

I raise my eyebrows. What does that mean? Doesn't everyone have a stiff neck and what feels like an icepick shoved between their shoulders? Apparently not at twenty-six years old.

The guys joke and throw down cards as the game progresses. Their movements are fluid as if they've done this dance a thousand times.

Cole shoves his hat on backward as he gives Vargas a dirty glare.

"What?" Vargas grins and leans back in his chair with his feet slung out in front of him.

Marco is slouched in his seat with his hands propped on his stomach and cards fanned in front of him. A slight grin pulls his lips upward.

Cole slaps a card down on the table as Gavin slips into the open seat. "Next round, I'm back in."

Am I wound tight? I grab a chair, twist it around, and straddle it. I don't know the first thing about small town living, but I feel that if I stick around here long, I'll get to know it all by heart.

Several minutes later, the siren in the firehouse rings. The guys groan in unison, drop their cards to the table, leaving them scattered in piles, and shove out of their chairs.

My pulse jumps as every muscle in my body goes on high alert. What's wrong with me? When was the last time I reacted to a fire alarm?

"We're on boys." Gavin slaps Marco on the back.

"Wonder what it is this time? Gertrude waddling into traffic, again?" Vargas snickers.

"I hope not. I've already done that scenario today."

Cole laughs as we jog to the firetruck to suit up.

“One alarm fire at the corner of Pavilion Circle and Watkins Drive,” blasts over the intercom.

The guys hurriedly suit up but continue to crack jokes as they get ready. I try and wrap my mind around their response. It’s not that they aren’t serious about prepping for the call, but the anxiety I’m used to in the city isn’t present.

They all have a self-assured ‘we’ve got this shit’ kind of swagger. What’s it like to know everyone’s got each other’s backs, and it’s not an opportunity to stomp on each other to get to the top.

Fire is still fire—that won’t ever change. And I know Gavin’s history of losing his friend and getting injured, but their confidence and comradery is fascinating to watch. Back home, the only guy I was close to was Rich Anderson. I cringe. And that shit went epically bad.

Gavin cocks his head and grins. “You ready?”

“Yeah.” I nod as I slide the oversized straps of my turnout pants over my shoulders and grab my coat off the hook.

“Dude, it’s going to be fine. We don’t have high rises. We have new fire hydrants on all the street corners, so you don’t have to worry about dry hydrants. And we’ve got your back, so load up and let’s roll.”

“Sure thing.” I nod, run to the firetruck, and slide into the backseat as Gavin’s words replay through my mind. What would it be like to stay in a town like this and put down roots?

Chapter Five

Layla

I sniff. “What’s that smell?” *Smoke. It smells like smoke.* I sniff harder and open my front door. I glimpse to the right and then to the left.

Everything in my front yard is the same as it was ten minutes ago when I arrived home. I squint and study the Harper’s house. Their lights are off, and no vehicles are in the driveway.

The smell of smoke grows heavier. *Please, don’t be my house.* I knew I should have gotten rental insurance. I jog to the driveway and survey the one and a half story structure. There’s nothing fancy about the place, but it’s sturdy and in decent shape.

“Damn it, Mabel. I told you not to leave the stove on.” Nelson Gibson’s gravelly voice bellows into the quiet neighborhood.

“I turned it off,” Mabel mutters loudly from their front steps. “At least I think I did.”

I inhale again and shift my attention to my elderly neighbor’s house as Mabel and Nelson shuffle down their front steps.

“Everything okay?” I climb down my stairs and walk across the grass.

“Yes, dear.” Mabel nods and waves her hand dismissively.

“No, it’s not, Mabel. The fucking house is on fire.”

“What part of the house is on fire? Did you call the fire department?” As my gaze darts over to their home, I run the rest of the way across the yard and up their driveway.

No flames lick through the roof in search of oxygen. That’s a good sign. Right? How the heck would I know. I didn’t take Firefighting 101. My dad would crap his pants if I even hinted at doing anything dangerous like becoming a firefighter.

“The damn kitchen.” Nelson shakes his head in disgust. “Mabel left the

burner on again.”

“Did not.” Her narrowed eyes shoot daggers at him, and she crosses her arms.

“Did you call the fire department?” I slow down and say each word clearly. Both are hard of hearing and nearly eighty years old.

“Yes, I called the fire department.” Nelson shifts his irritated gaze in my direction. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

“No, Mr. Gibson. Not at all.” *Lord, help me.* Stupid? No. Senile? Slightly.

Where’s my cell phone? Where did I toss the darn thing? Sofa? No. It’s not there. Table? No. I don’t think it’s there. Refrigerator? Crap. I left it on the top shelf of the fridge when I grabbed a soda.

“Oh, my.” Mabel clutches her chest. The opening of her robe gaps displaying her short nightgown and spindly legs. “I’ve got to get Chester.” She makes a shaky move toward the front door. “The fire’s little. It should be fine.”

“Don’t.” I grab her forearm.

“Don’t worry about the fucking cat. He’s an asshole anyway.” Nelson ambles over to the bench beside the driveway and falls into the wooden seat.

“No.” Mabel shakes her head, and tears fill her eyes. “He’s the sweetest cat. At least, he loves me.”

“He pisses in my slippers.”

“You’re mean to him.” By this point, tears are streaming down Mabel’s cheeks, and the pulse in my temples is banging so loudly, I’m positive the rest of the neighbors can hear it.

“Where does Chester hide?”

“Under the kitchen table.” Mabel’s gray-blue eyes stare in adoration, and she grabs my fingers. “Will you go in and look for him? He likes you.”

“Sure.” I nod and climb the front steps. As I approach the door, I glance

inside for signs of flames and smoke. *Nothing.*

“Oh, God,” Mabel cries out, causing me to jump.

“What?”

“Please, get Chester. Quick.”

The image of Chester frantically crying under the table while flames charbroil him flies through my mind. I shudder forcefully and yank the door open. The sound of sirens fills the air.

The living room is clear of smoke. “This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,” I mutter to no one in particular. The Gibson’s wouldn’t hear me anyway.

I creep through the room. The yellow paint and metal wall decorations are straight out of the 1970s. “Chester?” I pause. “Here. Kitty. Kitty. Kitty.”

The light popping sound of wood makes my skin crawl, but it sounds farther away than the kitchen area. I’ve only been inside the Gibson’s home a couple of times, but I remember the downstairs layout. The kitchen is on the other side of this wall.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

I scream and jump, hitting my arm on the vintage amber table lamp. As it wobbles, I reach out to grab it, but miss. The lamp tumbles to the floor with a crack as the glass bursts.

“Don’t scare me like that.” I slap my hands on my hips and swallow. This is not one of the regular firemen that works for my dad. It’s none other than Mr. Grumpalicious, wearing a full firemen’s suit and looking hot as sin. *Damn it.*

“Scare you?” He rolls his eyes with his helmet perched on top of his head. “You’re the dumbass traipsing through a house fire. What’re you doing? Searching for valuables.”

“Don’t be an asshole. I’m searching for a cat.” The smell of smoke is growing, but the room is still clear.

“I agree pussy is pretty valuable, but not worth dying for.” He steps

forward, lifts me by the waist, and tosses me over his shoulder.

“What. Are. You. Doing?” I stiffen to keep from bouncing against his body. If I don’t, I might start hitting him and never stop. Or groping. Groping from this angle seems nice. *God, I’ve got smoke inhalation.*

“Rescuing you.”

“I don’t need to be rescued. The fire is—” I sneeze and blink as grit fills my vision.

“Getting bigger.” His hand clasps my ass, and I swallow.

My eyes widen. *Did my nipples just tighten? Holy cow. Get a grip. You’re in the middle of a fire with a man acting like a total caveman bossing you around. This is not the time to get all swoony.*

“Don’t you know anything about fires? You’re not supposed to rush into them.”

“I’m not stupid.” I clench my hand into a fist and punch his back. “Put me down. I can walk.”

“And risk you *walking* back into the fire. No, thank you. Your cousin would kick my ass. And then when I got back to the station, your father would take another pound of flesh off me.”

“Where’s Gavin?” Maybe he can get the big brute’s hands off me. Or remind me that I’m not supposed to enjoy it.

Mr. Grumpalicious slams his hand into the wooden door. As he lugs me into the daylight, fresh air fills my lungs. I inhale to clear the gunk out of my nose. There in the corner of the porch is a black puff of fur licking his paw.

“He’s right there, dear.” Mabel points to the missing pet.

Of course. I roll my eyes as I gulp down clean air. *Shit. Why’s he still holding me?* I push at his back. “Let me down.”

“I forgot I let him outside earlier this afternoon,” Mabel continues to babble.

Oh, for the love of God. That’s awesome. The man drops me to my feet.

Chapter Six

Kameron

Seriously? She risked her life for a fat black cat who's already outside and not even her own damn cat.

"Ridiculous." I glower at the cat and grind my teeth together. The cat hisses and runs into the adjacent yard.

"Excuse me?" Her shoulders shoot back, and she wipes her hands on her yoga pants.

"You're irresponsible."

Her eyes flash with anger. "It was a little fire."

"It's stupid to go inside a burning building to rescue a cat." I grab her arm and march her off the porch and into the grass.

The crowd that has gathered, continues to grow, while a parade of vehicles lines the street. Each of the cars move slowly with faces plastered to the glass—another strange phenomenon of rural living. People in the city ignore everything that goes on.

"It was barely burning."

My jaw tics. "A fire is a fire."

The firehose is hooked to the hydrant in front of the house and trails along the side yard to the back of the house. A small amount of smoke fills the air, but there's no evidence of flames shooting out of the roof. The home should be salvageable.

"Thank you, Mr. Smokey The Bear." She cranes her neck and stares behind the house. A broad grin spreads over her face, and she waves. "Hey, Gavin."

Gavin stomps through the yard on his way back to us. "Layla Marie Monroe."

She cringes, and her eyes dart to the ground. “Sorry, Gavin. I wasn’t thinking. All I could picture was Chester’s lifeless body on the linoleum floor.”

“Layla.” He shakes his head and wraps her into his arms. “You’ve got to worry about saving yourself before cats. You know how dangerous fires are. Don’t be stupid.”

“I know.” She snuggles against his chest.

Peachy. I get onto her, and you’d think I was accusing her of espionage, and her cousin just says her name, and she’s meek and contrite.

“You’re lucky Kameron was here to save you.” He pats her back and lets her go.

“Fire’s out!” Cole calls from the other side of the house.

“Excellent. I’ve got to check on the team and evaluate the damage.” He turns to me. “Keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn’t get into any more trouble.” Gavin whips around and rushes behind the building.

“Gr-r-reat.”

“Hey.” Her eyes narrow into two tiny slits. “I don’t want you to be my babysitter any more than you want to do it.”

“Where do you live?”

“Next door.” She hitches her thumb toward the smaller home beside the one that was on fire.

“I’ll walk you home.” I grasp her forearm and step forward, but she doesn’t budge. I sigh and tip my head heavenward. Puffy white clouds float through the sky. I count to ten while trying to ease the pounding in my head. “What?”

“I can walk to my house without getting into trouble.”

“Can you?” I slowly shift my attention to her, and my heart lodges into my throat. Her pink-tinted lips are a perfect bow, and the bottom one juts out into a pout.

Shit. I want to fist her long auburn hair and dive into her mouth. All the blood in my body surges to my dick. *Take her home. And leave. Do not fall under her spell.*

There're too many reasons to count to stay away from Layla. She's reckless. She's irresponsible. She's pretending too hard to be perfect. She's forbidden. But most importantly. I. Don't. Do. Relationships.

"Yes. I can walk to my house without getting lost."

I study her face for several seconds, and then I drop her arm. "Fine. Don't do anything stupid."

"Wouldn't think of it." She straightens her shoulders, snaps her feet together, and salutes.

I twist on my heel. "What a pain in the ass." My voice is low enough that she can't hear it.

When I arrive at the back of the house, the guys are boarding up the window. Gavin waves. "We got lucky. Mabel left her skillet on the stove again, and the grease caught fire. Thankfully, the only damage is the wall between the kitchen and the back porch. And these windows."

"Does this happen often?" I grab a nail and a hammer. After I walk to the other side of the board, I tap the nail into the wood to secure it.

"At least every couple of months. Usually in the mornings after she's cooked breakfast."

My heart thuds in my chest. The last thing I need to do is worry every damn day about Layla. With her living next door, she's likely to toss on her cape and rush to their rescue. Repeatedly. "Shouldn't they be in an assisted living home or something?"

"It's probably about time." Gavin crosses his arms over his chest. "I'll have a talk with them and mention it to their son, Henry. Mabel's getting more forgetful by the day."

I step to the corner of the house and glance down the side yard. A man wearing jeans and a skintight black T-shirt slaps his arm over Layla's shoulders and grins down at her.

She waves her hands in the air as she motions to the house. The guy drops his arm and raises his hand in the air. When they high-five, the pain in my shoulder feels like it's stabbing me.

I drop the hammer. "I'll be right back."

The damn girl doesn't listen to anything. As I weave through the crowd, I ignore the blatant stares from the gathered crowd.

I march up to her, lean down, and growl in her ear, "You said you were going home."

"I'm in my yard." She gazes at me like I'm dense. The dude she was talking to gives me a look like he wants to punch me in the mouth, but he's smart enough not to try.

Fuck. I'm acting like an idiot. Because of her. "Gavin's going to try and convince your neighbors to move to a nursing home or an assisted living facility. In the meantime, don't grab your cape and go in to rescue them. Call me."

"Call you?" She flutters her eyelashes. "Anytime? Day or night?"

"God, you're a pain in the ass." This time I don't mutter it, and my entire body tightens with desire. I can't decide if I want to toss her over my knee and swat her ass or throw her over my shoulder, take her inside, and fuck the good out of her. Adrenaline rushes through me.

Shit. It's both. "Don't be a savior."

She bites her bottom lip, and I twist on my heel. Get the fuck away before you do something you'll regret. She's like all the other females in the world. I can't even trust her to go inside the damn house.

Chapter Seven

Layla

The next day, I try to mind my own business. Ethan Campos called to see if I could grab him some coffee and bring it over to his house, and I politely told him no. I show up on time for my shift. I don't look across the street at the park—Gertrude is on her own today.

As I wipe down the counter, I'm still trying to decide if I have a savior complex. Last night, I stared at the ceiling for hours, debating my past and the decisions I've made. Fine. I spent a few minutes tossing the idea around. The rest of the time, I spent fantasizing about Kameron.

In those daydreams, I know him intimately. You'd think I'd have at least found out his last name before we were locked in each other's arms with our tongues shoved down each other's throats. But for now, he's Kameron—the asshole, who dream-kisses damn good for a grumpy jerk.

When the door dings, I glance up. *Delaney*. I love Gavin's wife about as much as I adore my cousin. I move to the edge of the counter.

Delaney grins and waves. "Layla."

"Hey, girl."

She shakes her head, causing her raven curls to flow around her shoulders. Then, she shakes her blue umbrella. Rainwater trickles down to the ground and lands on the scarred wooden floor.

I skirt around the edge of the counter and speed walk to her. As we embrace, I catch a whiff of baby powder and vanilla. "I'm so happy to see you. How's Gabe?"

"Great. Growing like a weed and worships his daddy." She leans back and surveys me from head to toe. "You don't appear hurt."

"What?" I frown. "When was the last time I got hurt?" I pause for a second. Yeah, I'm kind of a space cadet, so it's not unusual for me to run into a desk and get a bruise or twist my ankle when I'm not watching where I'm

going. “Recently.”

“Gavin said you went into a burning building yesterday afternoon. One of the other firemen was in a tizzy about you getting injured or suffering from smoke inhalation, so I had to check on you myself.”

I roll my eyes and spin in a circle. My long skirt brushes my ankles. “I’m fine.”

“I see that.” She motions with her hand over her shoulder. “Is that booth taken?”

“Nope. It’s slow today.” After Delaney slides into the seat, I tilt my head and pull out my notepad. “What can I get you?”

“Coffee’s fine. You know how I like it.” She tucks her purse beside her and pulls out her cell phone. “Only half a cup.”

I shove the pad into the pocket of my waist apron. “Coming right up.” I wander to the front, grab her coffee, and poke my head into the kitchen.

When I catch my boss’s eye, I beam innocently. “Blanche, is it okay to take my break and sit with Delaney for a few minutes?”

Blanche nods and gives me a thumbs up. “Sure thing. Thanks for checking in. I appreciate your focus today.”

“Thanks.” My face floods with heat at her praise. Despite what it might appear, I do value my job and want to be a good employee.

After I arrive at Delaney’s booth, I set the mug down and slip in across from her. “So, who’s this fireman who’s all worked up over my safety.”

Like I don’t know, but I don’t want to advertise I’m way more than a little worked up over him. Which is stupid. He’s a total bossy jerk. I don’t like bossy or jerks. I prefer wounded heroes. I frown. *Damn it. I do have a savior complex.*

Delaney cups the mug in her hands. “I’ve not met him. He started working at the station last week. I believe his name’s Kameron.”

My entire body stills. *Damn it. I still don’t know his last name.* How can I doodle his name with cute hearts if I don’t know what to put down on

the page? God, could I be any more of a loser? Be cool about it. “Do you know what his last name is?”

“Willoughby. I think.”

Layla Willoughby. That sounds like a Bronte novel character. Nope. Better stick with imaginary book boyfriends. “Well, as you can see, Mr. Willoughby’s wrong. I’m completely safe and injury-free. No burns. No lung damage. I didn’t even fall in my yard on the way to my house.”

Delaney smirks. “What about getting run over while rescuing ducks?”

I bite my bottom lip and give her a goofy look. Laughter wells in my chest until I burst out giggling. Delaney laughs at my expression.

Finally, when I sober, I wipe the tears from my eyes. “The man is a total grump. He doesn’t like animals. He thinks I’m irresponsible and not smart enough to walk and chew gum at the same time—”

“But he’s hot?” Steam wafts above her mug.

“Damn it, Delaney.” I glance around the café to see if anyone’s listening. The closest customer is six booths away, so I should be safe.

“Well....” She arches her eyebrow and stares like she’s challenging me to deny her statement. Which I can’t.

I sigh, causing my shoulders to sag. “Yes, he’s hot.”

“Gavin sensed a bit of a spark between the two of you and sent me here to warn you off.” She winks. “But I’m a hopeless romantic. If there’re sparks, I want to see a fire.”

I tilt my head. “Are you seriously using fire analogies?”

“Yep. Blatantly. I married a firefighter, didn’t I? That gives me the complete right to use the words flame, burn, inferno, and smoke in everyday conversations.”

“Tell Gavin there’s nothing to worry about. Kameron’s good looking. I’d be an idiot not to notice.” A slow smile curves up to my cheeks. “You should see how his jeans hang low on his hips.”

“Cover model good?” Delaney takes a sip of her drink.

“Definitely.” I fan myself. “But looks aren’t everything. We’re total opposites. He’s...” I rack my brain, trying to find the right word. “He’s wound tight.” Yep, he’s two words. “And I’m laid back. We’re like oil and vinegar. Every time he talks to me, he tells me what to do, and I have an uncontrollable desire to tell him where to shove it.”

Delaney chuckles and sets down the ceramic mug with a clank. “Okay. If he’s not the guy for you, let me set you up on a blind date.”

I shudder and raise my hands in defense. “No. I have not recovered from the last one.”

“How was I supposed to know Blake had mommy issues?”

The date with Blake Hardy will go down in infamy as the worst date ever. He picked me up in his mother’s station wagon. How did I know it was hers? She was in the back seat, and he asked her opinion on everything before we did it.

By the time she’d selected our seat by the restaurant window, I’d had enough. I snuck off to the bathroom and called him to tell him my cat died.

Maybe I don’t have a savior complex. If I did, I would have stuck around and tried to fix all his problems.

He’d sobbed and told me all about the cats his mom had in their house and offered to give me one. He was thirty years old, still living with his mom, and had an unhealthy obsession with cats. That’s a lot of shit to fix. Thankfully, I walked away from that train wreck.

Chapter Eight

Kameron

“Kam, how’s the move suiting you?” My dad’s voice booms out of the stereo, and I twist the volume down.

“Good, I’m all settled in.”

“Roman’s place nice? You need any furniture? Or groceries?”

“Dad, I’m twenty-six.”

“So what? A dad can’t take care of his kids after they turn eighteen?”

“I appreciate the offer, but everything’s taken care of.” My dad would give the shirt off his back to any of his kids, but I’d never take advantage of him.

Not once since I turned eighteen, have I asked for a dime. I worked three jobs to keep from needing his assistance. When I left home, he still had four kids to feed and get through school.

“That’s good, son. I’m so proud of you.”

“Don’t get carried away.” My voice drips with sarcasm. I shove the pickup into park and stare at the picnic table. Gertrude and her crew waddle around the white structure as a couple of women jog past them. “You know why I left.”

My dad’s pride is a little misplaced. The last several months have sucked. First, I found out my girlfriend, Tabitha Young, used me to humiliate another woman, Chloe Sparks. And when I say humiliate, I mean humiliate. The bitch was pretending to be me and setting up wagers to use Chloe sexually.

When Tabitha’s plot was discovered by one of my co-workers, Rich, he was livid with me for initiating the bet. A bet I knew nothing about. I dumped Tabitha, but it was too late. My reputation was ruined.

“Son, don’t beat yourself up over her shenanigans.”

“Too late,” I mutter. “It was my decision to date her. I should have realized how conniving she was. How manipulative women are.”

“Son, not all women are—”

“Dad, let it go.” The women I’ve met are not worth the trouble. My mom was the first in a long line of disappointments. She skipped out when I was twelve, leaving behind five kids.

I was the oldest and took on the household responsibilities of getting my four younger siblings ready for school, fed, and homework completed, while my dad worked twelve hours a day at the Ford plant.

Then, between my mom and Tabitha’s betrayal, there was Sadie Milton. I dated her in high school. I caught her on her first day of college sucking my best friend’s dick. They were both tossed from my life.

“Fine,” he sighs. “I love you, son.”

“I love you, too. Tell everyone I said, ‘Hey.’”

“Will do. Be safe.”

I yank the keys out of the ignition and shove them in my pocket. After the phone snaps off, I gaze out the window. Three birds swoop and soar over the park as a bright white cloud creeps across the sky. Everything’s slow here. Even the clouds move at a snail’s pace. “Never going to get used to this shit.”

I yank the door open, slam it behind me, and jog to the front door of the café. I need a shot of coffee to make it through my shift, and I’ve heard this is the closest thing to a designer coffee I’m going to find in this town.

Twenty-four hours of staring at three other dudes as they play cards, talk shit, and snore is going to take a caffeine boost.

The door of the café is bright yellow, and the shutters are painted a pristine white. In front of the picture windows are enormous flower boxes stuffed with purple, blue, and red flowers. It looks like a Skittles factory exploded in it.

Sadly, when I was supposed to be sleeping last night, I was dreaming

about Layla—the woman who’s the poster child for too good to be true. She’s like cotton candy. She looks delicious, but she’s bad for your health. Somebody needs to tell my Johnson she’s poison.

As I pull open the door, a loud chime rings over my head.

“Welco—” Layla’s voice trails off, and her huge smile drops.

Fuck. Of course, she works here. I stop mid-step and force myself not to bolt. I’m not a pussy. I can handle spending ten minutes with her and not gag over her perfect—everything.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and licks her pink painted lips. My dick jumps at the movement. Yeah. Gagging over her is not the problem.

“I need a dark roast. To go.” I stride across the wooden floor as it pops under my feet. Lord, it’s like stepping into the 1960s here. Quaint with a capital “Q.”

“Coming right up.” She spins on her heel and rushes to the coffee maker.

Several seconds later, she returns to the counter and deposits the to-go cup in front of me. “Here you go. I hope you enjoy it.” Her face is full of innocence. Remember, it’s fake. She’s too good to be true.

“Thank you.” I lay the money down for the coffee and she rings it up.

“Where’re you staying?” She leans down and rests her elbows on the counter.

My eyes dart to her cleavage and then back to her eyes. *Is she hitting on me?* She doesn’t move to press her breasts together or bite her lower lip. *No. Dumbass. She’s just doing her job. She gets paid to make idle chitchat with her customers.*

Why do I turn into an idiot when I’m around her? “My cousin, Roman, owns a house on Kennett Avenue.”

“So, you’re related to Roman Clarke?” Her eyes light up, and she straightens to a standing position.

“Yes.”

“He’s the greatest guy. He’s around Gavin’s age, and when I was learning to ride a bicycle, he helped me conquer cycling without training wheels. And he was always so sweet when George Butler would come around.” She frowns.

“George Butler?” I cross my arms and lean my hip against the barstool in front of the register. Someone explain to me why I’m jumping down this rabbit hole? But for some reason I can’t stop the words from coming out.

Her jaw tightens, and she rolls her eyes. “George was a town bully. He tried to trip all the kids in school when they walked down the hall. He was a real jerk.” She shrugs. “Anyway, one day, George was chasing me down the street on his bicycle, and Roman noticed. If it wasn’t for him, I don’t know what George would have done.”

My gut churns at her description of George. He sounds like all the other assholes I’ve known. “How old were you?”

“I was ten or eleven. He was probably sixteen.”

Sixteen? What the fuck?

“What kind of guy picks on little kids?” That’s my brother’s age. If I ever hear of Micah doing something like that, I’ll kick his fucking ass. Of course, he would never force himself on a woman. He was raised better.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. Maybe he was misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood?” Every muscle in my body tightens in anger. “Don’t tell me you’re hellbent on fixing him. Along with everything else.”

She slaps her hands on her hips. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I’m not looking to find him and pour all my love into him. I mean there are usually reasons people act out. He probably had a bad childhood.”

“I’m not going to disagree with you, but I’ll issue you a free piece of advice. You can’t fix people unless they want to be fixed. You should stay away from him.”

What in the hell’s wrong with me? It isn’t shit to me who she hangs with. I don’t even like her. She’s the type that’s too busy getting into everyone’s business. I don’t need any of that in my life. Prying. Talk shit to

death. No, thank you.

Her eyes narrow into slits. “No shit, Sherlock.” Then, she leans forward. “But.... if I wanted to fix him, I would. And I bet I could convince him to change his ways. Men are simple. Press your tits together, pucker your lips like you’re sucking on a lemon, and lead them around by their dicks.” She assumes the pose in question and stares me down.

I’m not being led around by my dick. Screw that. “Have a good day.” I snatch the to-go container off the counter and stomp through the café.

Don’t let her get to you. I lighten my tread.

Chapter Nine

Layla

The warm breeze blows a strand of hair in front of the camera, and I drag it back to its rightful position behind my ear.

Why didn't I put it up? That's a simple answer. The setting sun was perfect for getting some quick photos of the downtown buildings before dark. There wasn't time for anything else but getting the right shot.

As I let go of the camera, it falls to the end of the strap and bounces against my upper stomach. The traffic in the street meanders past as several people wave and call out.

I return Carol Lawrence's greeting. Two cars behind her is Grace Masters with her two girls. Each of the girls hang out the window with their arms sticking out. That would have been a great photo.

I pivot away from the street and study the fire station. The main doors are shut, which is a sign that no fires have occurred today. The sidewalk is new and devoid of weeds. I love the vibe of the building, and my clients are always clamoring for photos of firemen. For some reason, women find firemen sexy.

Cole steps out of the side door wearing jeans and a T-shirt. His biceps ripple under the tight armbands. And that's why. "Hey, Cole. Can I take a quick photo?"

"Sure." He shrugs and grins. Cole isn't the least bit shy about his looks. "You want me to take off my shirt?"

"Of course." I waggle my eyebrows. "You know how Mrs. Thomas loves her some firemen eye candy."

"Does she need a cover for one of her books?" He tugs his shirt over his abs, up to his chest, and over his head. The tattoos that line his chest and shoulder are droolworthy. Except, I've known him my entire life, and he does nothing for me.

“She wanted some images of the fire station for some teasers, but I know she’ll eat up some pics of you.” I raise the camera to my eye and take a test shot. The lighting is perfect, and Cole’s sexy, come-hither gaze is on point.

For several seconds, I shoot in silence. Then, I lower the lens.

When I see Kameron walking from the parking lot toward us, I squeak. *Why are you surprised to see him? He works here, for goodness sake.* I’m going to pretend that’s why I’m on edge whenever he’s around. And that it has nothing to do with how good he looks in a T-shirt. Or how I’d love to see the tattoos under his clothes.

“Hey, man.” Cole waves and works his T-shirt up his arms. “You should see some of Layla’s work. She’s a whizz with a camera.”

“I see.” His jaw works as he glances between us.

“I’ve got a great idea. You should let Layla photograph you. Her client would love your brooding attitude. The woman writes romance novels and would love you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kameron stops in mid-step and cocks his chin out.

“You know....” Cole shrugs. “You’ve got this dark, wounded hero thing going on. Women dig that stuff.”

“Whatever.”

Just ignore him. He’s not going to stick around. Newcomers pass through as fast as they arrive. The second Roman’s back in town, he’ll bail. I frown. So why did my dad hire him? That’s not my business. “Thanks. Cole, I appreciate your help.”

“No problem, Cupcake.”

“Stop it,” I growl. *God, I hate that nickname.* Girls don’t get guys with the nickname of Cupcake. It either makes people think of short and stubby or sweet and innocent.

In my case, it was a combination of both—another reason why I’m a

twenty-three-year-old virgin. That and my father glared at any boy who gave me one second of attention.

“Ah, Layla.” His face falls. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It’s fine.” I wave him off and raise the camera again. Cole heads to the parking lot. I’m not in the mood to deal with Mr. Brooding and Pensive.

I step toward the street corner to get a better angle of the doors to the fire station. At this vantagepoint, I can get the large Station 10 sign and the flag in one shot.

My foot catches on the sidewalk, causing me to stumble into the street. I shriek, and my camera flies up in the air. At the last second, the strap catches on the back of my neck, and gravity jerks it back down, smacking me in the chest. *Fuck.*

“Layla!” Kameron’s sharp tone jerks my attention to him as I hop on my non-sore foot.

“What?”

“Watch out.” He runs toward me and yanks me into his arms. The second I smash into his hard chest, a horn honks and a pickup truck rockets past.

My pulse beats in my ears until I can’t hear anything but it and my ragged breathing. *Holy fuck. That was close.*

My fingers clutch at the fabric of his T-shirt, and his heart thuds furiously against the back of my fingers. “Thank you.”

“For the love of Christ, Layla, can you watch what you’re doing for once? You’re driving me fucking crazy.” His hands skate down my arms, and my nipples pucker. *Shit.* I curve my shoulders inward to keep from advertising my reaction. He’s clinically evaluating me, and I’m thinking about climbing him like a tree and purring.

“I’m sorry.” I shake my head. “I don’t usually act this ditzy.” *It’s only when you’re around.* I bite my lips shut to keep those words from spilling out of my mouth. I unclasp my hands from his shirt, and he squats down in front of me with his fingers working over my ankle, checking for damage.

When he presses on the inside of my ankle, I wince.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes.”

“We should go inside and wrap it.”

My eyes dart to the building. That’s a long way to hop. Before I can say anything, he scoops me up in his arms. “I’ll take you inside. We’ll get it wrapped and find you some medicine to take. If it swells up, you’re going to need something to keep the pain down.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, sniff his aftershave, and moan inwardly. *God, he smells good.*

“Are you okay? I’m not hurting you, am I?”

Fuck. I didn’t moan inwardly. *Fuck my life.* “Yes, I’m okay. You aren’t hurting anything.”

His five o’clock shadow makes his face even sexier. I stiffen, and my face floods with heat. This is so bad. I don’t ever react to men this way. Sure, I like to look at guys and have even fantasized about more than a few. But physically responding without any provocation? Acting like a giddy teenager? That isn’t me.

“Okay, I’ll try not to hurt you on the way inside.” One of his arms cradles my back, and the other supports my legs.

When we reach the door, I scoot higher up his chest and hold on tighter so he can use his hand to twist the knob. My chest is practically in his face, and his eyes dart downward. Then, he jerks his head back up.

As we cross the threshold, I nearly swoon. No one’s ever carried me anywhere romantically. I’ve always envied those storybook princess books where the girl gets swept off her feet and carried over the threshold. It feels amazing, like I expected.

Please God, don’t let my dad be working. Or Gavin for that matter. I’ll never hear the end of this.

Chapter Ten

Kameron

Little Miss Cupcake is driving me up the wall. She ignores her safety. She's reckless and surrounded by chaos. And even worse. She feels fantastic in my arms. It's time to fix that part of the problem.

When I arrive at the kitchenette, I drop her carefully into a chair and search for the first aid kit. The quicker I fix her up, the faster she goes.

I open the drawer where we keep our in-house supply of first aid gear and drag out an Ace bandage wrap, tape, and a bottle of ibuprofen. That should be everything. Shouldn't it. Do I need anything else?

I twist at the waist and look at her. She's pulled out the adjacent seat, propped her foot up on the cushion, and her hair cascades over her shoulder, obscuring my view of her face.

Why does that piss me off? I growl and shake my head. Stop. You don't have the time or the energy to mess around with a woman. This trip is about licking your wounds and steering clear of entanglements.

When I'm satisfied I have all the supplies I need, I slip the drawer shut and return to the table. She tucks the lock of hair behind her ear and glances up at me.

Her green eyes are half-shuttered by her lashes, and her plump lips are moist like she's recently licked them. Blood rushes through my veins and settles in my dick. That's what I get for wishing I could see her face. Karma's a bitch.

"Thank you so much for saving me." Her eyes fall to the floor, and her tongue slips out from between her lips. She licks her bottom lip and then bites down on it.

Son of a bitch. "Just doing my job." I bark out with more force than I intended. Remember your training. You're a fireman. Fix her up and send her on her way.

“Oh.” Her eyes pop open, and her gaze darts to the wall. “Well, thank you for doing your job.”

I squat in front of her, unlace the strings of her tennis shoe, and slip it off—unicorn socks. A brief smile touches my lips. I’ve never met anyone like Layla. Don’t most girls give up the character socks by their teenage years? I slip the fabric off her foot and whistle. Her ankle is red and swollen.

“Is it bad?” She contorts her body until she can see around me.

The curve of her cheek and her perfume’s scent are hell on my libido and nearly dissuade me from my mission. “It’s going to be black and blue.” I rub the most swollen part and twist her foot in different directions. “I don’t think anything’s broken, but if the pain gets worse, or you can’t put weight on it in a couple of days, you’ll need to get X-rays.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.”

As I straighten her foot to point her toes to the ceiling, she tenses. I stop and let her foot fall back to its resting position. “I’ll wrap it for you.”

I grab the bandage and lace it around her foot and ankle. When everything’s secure, but not too tight, I cut two strips of tape and secure the end of the bandage to keep it from unraveling. “You should be good.”

“Thanks.” She presses her hands on the cushion of the chair she’s resting on and shifts her weight to sit taller. “I appreciate it. Whether it’s your job or not.”

I stand and place my hands on my hips. “Do you need some medicine?”

She nods slowly. “Yeah, I think so. It’s going to be a bear to get back into my vehicle.”

“I’ll get you a glass of water.” *Do we have any crutches?* I think back to all the nooks and crannies, trying to remember if I’ve seen any.

I’d gladly carry her to her vehicle, but if I do, I’ll end up taking her home and starting something I can’t afford to finish. She’s not the kind of girl you take home for a one-night stand, and I’m only here for a few months.

Chief Monroe. The muscles in my back tense. *Shit.* He could have

walked in on us and thought something was going on.

As I wait for the tap water to get cold, I snatch a plastic cup out of the cabinet. “I hope you don’t mind plastic. We aren’t big on fine China at the station.”

“Water tastes the same in plastic or glass. It’s still water.”

Obviously, Layla and Tabitha didn’t go to the same school of thought. Tabitha would have instantly shot her nose in the air over anything that wasn’t fancy. Funny, considering, she worked as a waitress at a *Cheesecake Factory*.

“Here you go.” I set the glass in front of her and stand back as she grasps the bottle of pills and twists open the childproof top. She shakes the bottle until two round brown tablets fall into her hand.

After she swallows them down, I shove my hands into my pockets. Now, what? I should let her rest for a couple of minutes and then make sure she gets to her car okay. What do we talk about?

“You should go.” She nods her head toward the doorway. “I’ll be fine. I’ll wait about ten minutes for the medicine to kick in and then slip out.”

My eyes narrow, and the muscles in my shoulders tense. Is she being polite, or does she want me gone? Hell, why do I care? Ten seconds ago, I wanted to get away from her.

“I’ll wait.” I pull out the chair across from hers and settle into the cushions. Once I’m ready for the long haul, I cross my arms over my chest. “So, you grew up in Meadow Bay?”

“Yes. I’ve been here all my life. I went away to San Francisco for four years of college but returned on the weekends to work and see my family. I permanently moved back a few months ago.”

“What did you study?” I’d wanted to go to college out of high school, but that was fool’s gold. My father was on his own after my gestational carrier left. There wasn’t money to afford college.

“Business and fine arts.”

“Nice.”

“I would love to open my own photography studio.” She frowns. “Someday. How about you?”

“No college for me. Well....” I shrug. “I’ve taken some online classes but not in a brick-and-mortar school.”

“That’s admirable.” She beams with twinkling eyes, and my stomach does a slow roll. “Anyone who can work full-time and go to college is awesome in my book. I only worked ten hours during the week and then on Saturdays and struggled with that.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her I’ve been taking four classes a semester, carrying a 3.9 GPA, and working 70 plus hours a week. I bite my tongue until I can taste the copper of my blood.

Damn it. She’s worming her way in through compliments. My back bristles. Anything that appears to be too good to be true—is. This isn’t bare your soul time.

“Well.” I slap my hands onto the tabletop. “You should be good now to get to your vehicle, but if you’re worried, I can get with Gavin and see if we have crutches.”

“I’ll be fine.” Her eyes fill with disappointment, and then she lowers her lashes to keep her emotions from me—a pang of regret slams into my chest.

Don’t. It’s better if she finds me abrasive and rude rather than approachable and awe-inspiring.

“Cupcake?” A loud booming voice bellows from behind me.

Chief Monroe. I close my eyes. *Perfect.*

“Daddy.” Layla’s eyes light up as she pushes her way upright.

“What happened?” His eyes rake over her and then land on me. “Kameron?”

My jaw flexes. I don’t like the implications that I’m somehow to blame for her injury. “Layla was taking photographs outside the station and twisted

her ankle.”

“I’m fine, Daddy.” She grips his forearm and leans against him.

The man is large and burly. He’s the epitome of a man’s man. With years of hauling firehoses around, his biceps bulge under his T-shirt. It’s never good to date the daughter of a man that looks like him. What’s wrong with you? You aren’t dating his daughter.

“Kameron managed to save me from being run over and doctored my ankle.”

“You don’t say.” Chief Monroe’s jaw is tight. It’s clear he doesn’t care if I saved her or not. I’m not on his *You’ve Been Good* list for Christmas gifts.

“Dad.” Layla’s eyes narrow slightly. “Don’t be overprotective. None of this is Kameron’s fault.”

“If you say so.” His eyes dart to mine. “I heard he was carrying you inside, and you were all snuggled up next to him. It didn’t sound as innocent as you’re making it out to be.”

“Listen.” I raise my hands in defense. “I was only helping Layla out. I kept her from getting hurt and made sure she had proper first aid care. That’s my job, and I was only doing my job. Nothing else.” *Shit. Why are my hands sweating?* “I’m only here for a few months, and I have no intention of pursuing a relationship with anyone. Especially your daughter.”

“Thank you for doing your job.” Layla’s eyes are vacant as she turns toward her father. “Do you think you could help me to my car? It’s way past time for me to go.”

As Layla shuffles toward the door, Chief Monroe turns his head around and meets my gaze. “My daughter is off-limits. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir, I understand.” My heart thuds in my chest as heat crawls up my chest.

“Good. Because it was against my better judgment to offer you a job. If it wasn’t for your cousin, I wouldn’t have.”

“Point heard and understood.”

Why am I freaked the fuck out that I’m going to ignore what he said and do something epically stupid? Why? Because that’s what I do. Dumb shit.

“Dad.” Layla stops and slaps her hands on her hips. “That’s enough. I’m not a baby who can’t make her own decisions. If I want to date someone, I will. Not Kameron, of course.” Her nose wrinkles in disgust. “But someone else, and you don’t get a say in it.” Her eyes dart to mine. “Neither of you do. I’ll make my own way to my car. Thank you both for your kind hospitality.”

“Layla.” Chief Monroe follows behind her as she hobbles out of the room.

“Dad, I’m serious. Stay out of my business.”

There’s no need to worry that breaking my word to him. Layla won’t give me the time of day again.

Chapter Eleven

Layla

I wave at my best friend, Harbor Slater, from across the Whiskey Moon Bar. She jumps up and down and runs across the wooden floor to meet me. A couple of guys we graduated with laugh at her and dodge out of her way.

“I’m so glad you’re in town.” I wrap my arms around her.

“Me, too. It’s great to see you.” We hug for several seconds before we step back. She’s wearing blue jeans and a silk top with a long gold necklace and a locket pendant hanging between her breasts. She looks classy, as usual.

“Come on to the bar.” She nods her head toward the main bar area. “I saved you a seat.”

“Thanks.” I walk gingerly on my foot. It’s healed well over the last week, but I don’t want to tweak it and re-start the recovery process.

“Are you feeling, okay?” Harbor arches an eyebrow and gives me a quizzical look. The overhead speakers blast an old rock song, and some of the regulars rush to the dance floor.

“Shit.” I slide onto the stool beside her. “I forgot to tell you about my ankle.”

“What did you do this time?”

“Quit it.” I hit her in the upper arm with my elbow. “Don’t make it sound like I’m always hurting myself.”

“You are.” She motions the bartender with a flick of her finger.

The salt and pepper haired man with prominent wrinkles around his eyes grins and nods that he’ll head our way. Graham Nunez is neighbors with my parents, so I’ve known him my entire life.

“Ladies.” He slips a white cloth over his shoulder. “What can I get for you?”

“Graham, I’ll take a Blue Hawaiian.” Harbor tilts her head waiting for my order.

“I’ll take a Strawberry Lemonade Vodka.”

“Good choices, ladies.” He nods and heads over to the liquor bottles to make our drinks.

“Spill it. What happened?”

I fill her in on everything from the duck fiasco to the fire, and finally, to the twisted ankle outside the fire station, but I leave out how Mr. Grumpalicious makes my head spin and my heart sputter.

In the middle of my rendition, the bartender drops off our drinks and moves on to another couple.

“Wow. That’s quite a story.” She places her elbow on the table and leans toward me. “Now, tell me the good stuff.”

My heart skips a beat. “What good stuff?”

“The stuff about the guy. Kameron Willoughby. What does he look like? Has he kissed you? What does he look like without a shirt on? Do you have a phone number for one of his friends?” She takes a sip of her drink after her laundry list of questions.

I laugh and shake my head. She can read me like an open book. There’s no reason to pretend I don’t feel a zip whenever he walks by.

Except, he blew me off. Apparently, he’s not into the kind of girl that’s sweet and innocent. I sober. Yeah, he’s the kind of guy who likes his women fast and loose. And even if he was interested, my dad all but pissed on me to warn him off. It’s ridiculous. I’m an adult woman. I understand he wants the best for me, but I’m tired of being treated like a kid.

“He’s good looking. And no to everything else. I’m not his type.” I shrug. “You win some, you lose some.”

Her eyes flash in anger, and she slams her hand on the counter. “That’s bullshit. Why do some guys have to be such pricks? You’re a beautiful, amazing woman. He’s a fool not to see that.”

Harbor has a protective streak a mile long. If you're her friend, she's ready to fight toe-to-toe with anyone for you. I miss seeing her every day. When we graduated from college, she decided to get a job in San Francisco and stay. She claims it's because she likes the fast pace of the city over the slow crawl of Meadow Bay, but it has more to do with Cole.

I enjoyed the city, but I'd rather be in Meadow Bay any day.

"Why don't you think you're his type?" She rests her elbow on the counter and cups her chin with her hand. "Did he say something, or did you assume?"

"He made it clear." I raise the glass and take a sip out of the straw.

Once I swallow, I return the glass to the hard surface. I'm not much of a drinker, so I'll likely spend the evening nursing this one drink. "The only time he wasn't rude and bossing me around was when he carried me into the station. For a second, I thought there might be some spark, but he instantly shut it down. He couldn't wait to get rid of me."

"That's ridiculous."

"And then my dad showed up and made a scene."

"Perfect." Harbor gives a half-hearted laugh which sputters to a stop. Her eyes widen. "Oh, my God. There's George Butler. I haven't seen him for years. I heard he moved back to town."

I twist slightly in my seat and glance over my shoulder. I don't want it to appear obvious I'm scoping him out. George is talking with a barely legal girl in a short skirt while standing at the edge of the dancefloor.

The shakes shakes her head, causing her ponytail to whip from side to side. He grips her arm, and she rips it out of his grasp. "Looks like he's as charming as always."

"He's such an asshole. I can't believe he always thought he was God's gift to women." Harbor snorts and grabs her drink. Her red fingernails tap against the glass. "Shit." Her eyes widen. "He's coming our way."

"Crap." I cringe and stare at the wooden grains of the bar top. Maybe if we stay completely still, he'll move on to the next unsuspecting victim.

The overwhelming scent of booze, bar soap, and cigarettes fill my nose. Nope. We aren't that lucky.

Harbor arches an eyebrow, scrunches her nose, and mouths, "Hit him in the nuts?"

"Stop." I giggle and grab my stomach.

Harbor's way to solve all man problems is to hit them in the junk. I'm not sure that's what her parents wanted her to learn while growing up with four brothers. But that's the skillset she gained.

George drops his arms over our shoulders and sways. "Fancy meetin' you two here. What ar' you ladies doing tonight?"

"Having a drink." Harbor's voice is laced with sarcasm.

"No, shit?" George's eyes narrow as he drops his arm off Harbor's shoulders but keeps me in his embrace.

Lucky me.

"George, can you step back?" Harbor glares at him like he's a pesky gnat she's about to swat.

"Why?" He massages my shoulder, and I fight the urge to vomit. He's just as disturbing now as he was at sixteen.

Only now, he's moved from trying to get female attention by knocking girls down to trying to get into their pants with his smooth moves. Both ways are getting him the same results.

"Because Layla has chlamydia. I think you can get it through clothes." Harbor gives George a sad look like she's concerned about his health.

He jumps back and drops his arm to his side. "She's lying, right?" His eyes are wide open as he gapes at me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him the truth, but I'm not stupid. I hate lying, but I have no desire to spend the entire evening fending him off.

"I'm sorry." My eyes drop to the floor by his feet. Who wears black tennis shoes? "I found out this morning. I should have told you when you

approached, but I was too ashamed. The whole thing is humiliating.”

“You’re disgusting.” He glares at me like I’m a rotting diaper in the middle of a landfill. “If you can give it to others so easily, you shouldn’t even be out in public.” He twists on his heel and marches off.

I groan, “I’m going to hell.”

“Live a little.” Harbor rolls her eyes. “It was a tiny white lie to save you from having him hanging on you all night. You know he lusted after you when you were in middle school. That’s fucking creepy.” She sticks a finger in her mouth and fake gags.

“You’re not wrong.” It was scary as hell the way he followed me around everywhere when I was a preteen. It only got worse in my teen years. Eventually, my cousins cornered him and threatened to beat his ass. That was the end of his stalking. At least, that I caught him doing.

Chapter Twelve

Kameron

The bar is packed at ten o'clock. From the parking lot I can hear the screeching of guitar notes. When I open the door, the music and customer chatter bellows out into the night. It's like stepping into a kaleidoscope of colors, movement, and sounds. One thing they do big in Meadow Bay is Friday night.

On the dance floor, bodies jump and shake as the DJ switches to another song. I was going to meet Cole for a drink, but he ditched me at the last minute. I'd debated staying home, but the twelve hundred square foot house was starting to close in on me. And I need a drink.

All the tables and booths are full, so I weave my way through the crowd to the bar. When I'm a couple of feet from an open stool, I stop. Auburn hair cascades down the back of a woman as she laughs at something the female sitting next to her says.

The curve of Layla's cheek when she smiles causes my heart to clench. *Fuck.* I grab my chest and inhale a sharp breath.

Don't die of a heart attack. I shake my head. *You're not fucking dying. Stop being dramatic.*

The two women jerk their heads around and gawk. Layla's eyes are soft as her gaze darts over me while her friend pokes her in the ribs with her elbow and gives me a leering once over.

"Hey, Kameron." Layla's face reddens to match her hair.

A man with dark hair and a bushy beard takes the open spot I'd been eyeing.

"Layla." My voice is gruffer than I expected, so I clear my throat.

"Hello, handsome." The other woman stands and offers her hand. "You must be the gorgeous new fireman Layla was telling me about."

“Shit.” Layla’s eyes shrink into little slits as she shoots imaginary daggers at her friend.

“I’m Harbor Slater. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She licks her red painted lips and leans closer. “Take my seat. I have to go to the ladies’ room, and this place is packed tonight.”

“I can stand.”

“Take my fucking seat.” Her jaw clenches as her eyes turn into miniscule slits.

“Ah, sure.” *Lord, she’s a feisty one.*

Once she leaves, I glance at Layla out of the corner of my eye. “Your friend is....”

She arches an eyebrow. “Bossier than you?”

“Yeah.” Layla and Harbor seem to be night and day different. Layla’s soft and gentle, and Harbor’s the kind of girl who grabs life by the balls. Those kind of women are too abrasive for my taste. While Layla is....

Stop thinking about how perfect she is. You aren’t staying for the long haul, and you know that no one’s that good.

“Take a seat.” The corner of her mouth tilts upward. “I don’t bite.”

“Fine.” I slip into the open space and wave the bartender over. Seconds later, he plops the draft beer in front of me. The head of foam is deep and thick.

“Harbor’s the middle child with two older brothers and two younger brothers. She doesn’t take shit from anyone.”

“Ah.” I nod. “That explains it. I’m the oldest, and I only have one sister. She’s second to the youngest. She’s tough as nails herself.”

“Do you miss them?” She adjusts her top to de-emphasize her assets. She doesn’t seem the type to operate in the ‘look at me’ category of women.

I shrug. “Sure.”

Before I can say any more, the DJ switches to a louder song, and I lean

closer. Big mistake. My nose fills with her scent, and my brain goes haywire along with the rest of my body. Ignore it. You've been around attractive women before.

She cocks her head, and her eyebrows raise. "Why did you move here?" Her voice is hard to hear over the music.

Does she want to know, or is she killing time? "Bad breakup." I'm not here to tell her my sob story. I take a large drink of beer and let the cold liquid drain down my throat.

"I'm sorry." She places her delicate hand on my forearm, and it feels like a raging inferno branding me.

"It's fine. We weren't meant to be." *She wasn't who I thought she was.* I cringe. Who did I think she was when I started dating her?

Even before I knew of her betrayal, she wasn't the nicest person. She was obsessed with her appearance and having the best.

What did I see in her? She was easy. I hate to admit I was shallow, but it's the truth.

She was easy on the eyes. She didn't require in-depth conversations. And she put out. Well, at least in the beginning. The last several months of our relationship, neither of us was interested in a physical relationship. Truth be told, I'm pretty sure she was seeing someone else by then.

Classy. Kameron. Classy.

"Was it an ugly breakup? Did she cheat on you?" Her eyes are distressed as if she's experiencing an imaginary breakup on my behalf.

Lord, she's something else. Are there people this open and willing to experience emotions? Her feelings are leaking all over her and threatening to get on me.

I straighten my shoulders and lean back to put distance between us. "No. She didn't cheat on me, and yes, it was ugly, but I don't want to discuss it."

"Oh..." She drops her hand to her lap and rubs it on her skirt's fabric

while a flash of hurt skates through her eyes.

Way to go, jackass. Now, you've hurt her feelings. Again.

“Listen, Layla. I’m not trying to be a dick. Even though I know I’m across like one. A woman violated my trust and used me, so I’m taking a breather from relationships and trying out new scenery. It’s nothing more than that.”

“Okay. That’s understandable.”

She has no idea what a bitch my ex was, but I’m not in the mood to toss my dirty laundry up in the middle of the bar top and stare at it with everyone. “Anyway, my cousin had a place, so I’m here for the fall while he travels around Europe.”

She worries her bottom lip and twists in her seat to face me. “Where will you go when he comes back?”

I lift the beer. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far ahead. Meadow Bay’s nice, but it’s not the place for me.”

“It’s a family-friendly place.” She wrinkles her brow as if she’s trying to figure me out. Hell, if I’m not careful, she will. It’s not like I expected to tell her all my secrets when I walked into the bar.

I guzzle the rest of my drink and set the empty mug down with a clank.

“You didn’t mention your parents. Are you close to them?”

The muscles in my neck and back tighten. “I’m close to my dad. My mother’s dead.”

Her eyes widen. “What? I’m –”

“She’s dead to me. She walked out on us when I was twelve and never came back. I’ve got no use for her.”

“Kameron, that sucks.” She places her hand on my arm again, and goosebumps pop out on my flesh. “How’s your dad?”

Damn her. A tiny piece of my armor cracks and falls away. But damn it. I don’t want it to.

She knows all the right words to say. She's validating my feelings, expressing her empathy, and asking about my dad. She's evil. "He's good. Better off without her."

Chapter Thirteen

Layla

By the time I've shared my favorite things about growing up in Meadow Bay, I feel like an over-the-top tour guide trying to sell a time-share. I need a shower and a spatula to scrape off the thickness of my sliminess.

What am I doing? Kameron made it clear he isn't sticking around. This is stupid. But I can't stop my mouth from moving. I love Meadow Bay, and Kameron's like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle I want to tear apart and put back together.

"Are you sure you didn't get a social work degree with a minor in sales?" Kameron smirks and lifts his drink to his lips.

My face heats, and I want to slink off the chair, sneak off to the bathroom and crawl out the window. "I'm sorry. I got carried away." I scan to the left and right searching for Harbor. Where in the hell did she go? I'm screwing this up.

"It's fine." He rubs my shoulder. "You're a sweet girl."

"Thanks." The word is thick in my throat.

Fuck. Sweet girl? God, I fucking hate that shit. The words are like someone stomping on my heart and smashing it into the dirt. I lift my drink and turn away from him. Then, I yank the straw out and guzzle the remaining liquid. It stings my throat as it goes down.

After I return the glass to the counter, my eyes narrow. How did I get three drinks? And how're they all gone?

"Hey?" His face is filled with concern as he studies me. "Did I say something wrong?"

"I hate being called a sweet girl, cupcake, or anything else which makes me sound like a sap. And I'm fed up with my dad interfering in my relationships." I swivel the stool. Relationships? What a joke. But I'm not about to tell him that. I don't need another reason for him to feel sorry for

me. “Why can’t I be sexy and make guys want to ravish me?” I place my hand on his thigh and hop down from the barstool. The muscles under my fingers tense.

“I –”

“You don’t have to answer that. I know. Layla’s sweet. She takes care of everyone. She’s irresponsible and flighty. She’s never the woman who leaves a guy breathless and unable to think straight.”

Kameron stares like I’ve lost my mind. Maybe I have. I’m tired of being little Miss Sunshine. I want to have a good time.

Someone bumps into my back, and I land in Kameron’s lap. My mouth is inches from his, and his hands grasp my waist to hold me up. His eyes fill with heat, and he leans down as if he’s going to kiss me.

My entire body floods with warmth as my heart thunders in my chest. What would be wrong with taking a ride on Kameron? He’ll be gone in a few months. People have meaningless hook-ups all the time. Why can’t I?

He’s nicer than I thought. He’s smart. He’s sexy as fuck. I’m sure he knows what to do with a lady. *He’s perfect.*

His mouth settles close to my ear. “Layla, you’re too good for me. I would suck you down into the darkness. Don’t hate the light you bring to the world. It’s a rare and beautiful thing.” He pushes me back, stands, and walks away without a backward glance.

Tears fill my eyes until I can’t see the people in front of me. *Do not cry. Not here.* I blink furiously. *Get to the bathroom, now.* George steps in front of me.

“What did that asshole say to you?”

“Nothing.” I wrap my arms around my chest and scan the room for Harbor. *Damn her.* Of course, she’d leave me high and dry.

George waves to the bartender. “I’ll buy you another.”

I don’t need another, but I’m too tipsy to drive, Harbor’s nowhere to be found, and it sure beats the hell out of dancing with him. “Fine.”

He bristles, and the muscles in his neck bulge. “You don’t have to act so excited about it.”

“I’m sorry. I have a lot on my mind.” The last thing I want to do is piss George off and cause a scene.

“Sit down.” He places his hand on my back and helps me onto the stool. “You lied earlier, didn’t you? You don’t have a sexually transmitted disease, do you?”

“No.”

“I figured as much. I should take you over my lap and discipline you.” He leans closer. “You’re a naughty girl.”

Oh, I’m going to hurl. Does he think he sounds sexy? If Kameron said it, my entire body would go up in flames. When George says it, I need to scrub the grossness off.

“That’s a cute trick to keep the boys away, but it doesn’t work on us men. And you need a real man in your life. One who can teach you all the tricks in the bedroom.”

My head spins. Someone pinch me and wake me up from this nightmare.

“Uh...” I groan inwardly and move to the opposite edge of the seat. Why is it that the only guy I’m interested in thinks I’m a little girl and won’t sleep with me? And this pervert wants to sleep with me because he thinks I am a little girl. Karma is laughing her ass off today.

“Who was that guy?” George jerks his head backward in the direction Kameron went. By now, he’s probably left the bar and on his way home.

“Kameron Willoughby. He’s new here in town. He’s staying at Roman Clarke’s house for the fall.”

The bartender brings us new drinks, and I stare at mine. God, I should go home and crawl into bed. All my bravado has disappeared, leaving me as weak as a ragdoll.

“Are you dating him?” George’s hands ball into fists.

“No.” I shake my head. “That’s never going to happen.”

“Good.” He grins like I’ve announced I’m his woman.

Down boy. That’s not at all what I meant. If Kameron walked back into the bar and said he wanted to date me, I’d jump at the chance, but I don’t want to burst George’s bubble. Not until I find a way out of here.

I glance toward the bathroom. *Where in the hell is Harbor?*

“What time do you want me to pick you up?”

“What?” *Is he asking me out?* If so, that was the most awkward invitation ever. I grab my drink and gulp. *Too much.* My head spins again, and I cough as I drop the nearly empty glass on the counter. Maybe if I can’t talk, I can’t answer him.

“A date.” George runs his hand over my arm. “We’ve always had a connection. You and me. When you were twelve, I knew I had to have you.”

He leans in, and his hot breath burns my skin. *Fuck. Disgusting.* “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Say, yes.” His lips press against the curve of my jaw, and I jump out of my seat.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“Not yet.” His beady eyes stay glued to me, and his hand grips my upper arm. He reeks of whiskey. “You need to answer the question.”

“Sure.” I stumble backward, trying to get away from him but not make it obvious. I don’t want a fight to break out. “Get with me, and we’ll talk about it.”

Never going to fucking happen. The second I get out of here, I’m calling Gavin. My cousins will set him straight—again. Then, I’m hunting down Harbor and kicking her ass.

“That’s better, sweet girl.” His hand grips my hair and tips my head back. “I’ve always wanted to bury my dick deep in your pussy. Now’s my chance. You’re still a sexy little thing. You’re a virgin, aren’t you? I love virgin pussy. Wear pigtails to make your freckles pop and a schoolgirl’s

uniform.”

Oh, fuck me. My heart thuds in my chest as bile fills my throat. This guy is a total pervert. “I’ve got to go.” I jerk away from him and run to the bathroom.

Chapter Fourteen

Kameron

I shove the door open and step into the dark night. The music and chatter from the bar are muted, leaving my ears ringing. Being around Layla has my head spinning in all directions.

I want her physically, but I don't want to ruin her. She's a forever kind of woman, and forever with me would snuff out her bright light.

That doesn't mean my skin isn't on fire, or my dick isn't pissed the fuck off at my moral victory. I run a hand over my face and walk around the side of the building.

My pickup is parked under a streetlight. Even in a small town, I'm not able to forgo the precautions I learned through years of city life.

Chirp. My cell phone buzzes in my back pocket. Who's calling this late? I drag it out and study the screen. *Rich?* My jaw tightens, and my pulse picks up. What does he want?

I nearly shove my phone back into my pocket and ignore the call, but I'm not a coward. "Hello?"

"Hey, bud. What's up?" Rich's booming voice penetrates the quiet of the parking lot.

"Leaving a bar." I lean against the side panel of my truck.

"What are the bars like out there in sunny California?"

"About the same, really. Lots of people, music, dancing, drinking. The regular stuff." There's no way he called to find out the destination spots. What does he want?

"Are you enjoying the move?"

"Sure." I shrug even though he can't see me. "The view's nice. It's quiet for the most part. Everyone's friendly and helpful." That fits Layla to a 'T.' A slow smile curves up to my cheeks. She's kind of the Meadow Bay

mascot.

“How’s the station?” The sound of a bottle top twisting comes across the airwaves.

Rich isn’t a big drinker, but we hung out several times—before Tabitha. The fact he hasn’t beat the shit out of me is surprising.

If someone bet Layla’s virginity on a dare, I’d kick their ass. My heart pangs against my chest. Not Layla’s—anyone’s.

“The station’s great. We work twenty-four-hour shifts. We’ve only had two fire calls this week. A couple of rescue calls. Last week’s highlight was a duck round-up.” I chuckle quietly as I envision Layla directing traffic with her hair blowing in the wind.

“A duck round-up? Dude, what in the hell?” He makes a scraping sound. I recognize the sound of the chair legs in the kitchen of the station. Rich must be on call tonight. The bottle opening must have been a soda. None of us were irresponsible enough to drink on the job.

No wonder he called. Waiting for a call is excruciatingly dull if you don’t find a way to pass the time.

I walk to the back of my pickup, let down the tailgate, and sit on the end. “Apparently, a resident duck lays her eggs in the park every year, and the citizens play crowd control to keep them safe.”

Rich laughs. “That’s a riot. I can’t wait to tell the guys you’ve given up the city life to lasso ducks.”

“Nice,” I groan as I envision the future shit the guys are going to give me.

“How’re the women?”

“I’m not here to get laid.” The crunch of tires comes from the right as someone drives into the lot.

If I were, I’d be inside with Layla draped all over me on the dance floor. As I imagine her in another man’s arms, the tension between my shoulder blades feels like a letter opener has been shoved into the muscles.

“What exactly are you there for? I told you I don’t hold you responsible for Tabitha’s actions.”

“I was dating her.” A car door slams shut, and giggling voices fill the air.

“We’ve all done stupid shit. Stop beating yourself up. You walked the second you found out.” The sincerity in his voice rings as true today as it did months ago when he first said it. I should be relieved, but it only makes me feel like a bigger prick.

They’re too forgiving. I couldn’t be that good of a person. I sure the hell am not forgiving Tabitha and Jim Ferguson for what they did. Not that either of them would ever think to ask.

“Thanks, Rich. I appreciate the support from you and Chloe. I do. You two have been terrific, but I needed to get away for a while.” Until people forget I ever dated Tabitha.

“Permanently?”

I sigh, “I don’t know. My cousin will be back in the winter, so I’ll have to move on. Where I go afterward is hard to say.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“Yeah, you, too.”

As I get ready to click the ‘off’ button, Rich yells, “Shit!”

“What?”

“I forgot the reason I called. How far is San Francisco from Meadow Bay?”

I wrinkle my nose and squint. “I don’t know. Maybe a little under two hours.”

“The team’s playing there in two weeks. Chloe and I are going to watch Tony play. We’d love to catch up with you.”

Tony Timmerman is Rich’s best friend, and he plays football for our hometown team. They’re well on their way to an undefeated season. “I’ll

think about it.”

“It would be fun. Bring one of those hot, tan, long-legged blondes to the VIP suite. She’ll love it.” It would be fun to get together with the guys, but the ideal stereotypical California woman does nothing for me.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

The only part of the description that fits Layla is hot, and I’m trying desperately to keep her in the too sweet to touch category.

Taking her to the city. Spending hours with her in a vehicle. Then, spending all day with her drinking beer and cheering on my team would annihilate the box I’m putting her into—for her own safekeeping.

And mine. Her dad and Gavin would beat my ass. They’re waiting for the perfect guy to come along and sweep her off her feet, ask her to marry him, settle down in small-town America, and raise 2.5 kids in a little house with a white picket fence.

That guy isn’t me and everyone knows it.

Chapter Fifteen

Layla

I lay my head against the cool metal doorframe and wait for the world to stop spinning. *Lord, I shouldn't drink this much.*

After grabbing my cellphone out of my purse, I swipe it to Harbor's name.

Me: Where are you?

Seconds later, she responds.

Harbor: The music was too loud, and you seemed to be hitting it off with Kameron, so I went to eat with Eliza Hawkens, at Ruby Paradise.

I groan. So much for help from my best friend.

Me: Not hitting it.

I giggle uncontrollably until I snort.

Me: Tapping it. Or anything else remotely sexual.

I sober and glare at my reflection in the mirror. I'm pretty. Aren't I? I pirouette to the side and study my profile. I have curves in all the right places. So why am I a pariah to everyone but the psycho child molester back at the bar?

Harbor: That blows. You want me to come back?

Me: No. I'll get a ride. Have fun.

Ruby Paradise is across town. If I wait for her, I'll have to hang out with George. Gross. I'll call a cab and get out of here. I can always get my car tomorrow.

"Layla." Someone taps on the door to the bathroom, and my heart lodges in my throat. I hope, the fuck that isn't George. I roll my eyes.

No, dumbass. It's a woman.

Bang. Bang. Even though it is a multi-stalled bathroom, I wasn't about to leave an opening for George to follow me, so I locked the main door. "Layla? Are you in there? George asked me to check on you."

Oh, my God, I've got to get out of here. I stumble to the window and study it with my heart pounding in my chest. The paint is caked on and cracking. Please, don't be nailed down. I twist the lock quietly to avoid whomever George sent to be my search party from hearing.

Snap. The loud sound causes me to cringe. Surely the music is noisy enough to drown my escape attempt. I push on the edge of the window, and it slides open smoothly to reveal a decent size hole to sneak out of. How many women have used this escape route? All of them, if they're being hit on by George. I snort.

I lift my skirt to my knees and tuck it between my thighs. The last thing I want to do is get the fabric caught on something and lose the bottom half of my outfit. I use my arms to boost myself up to the opening. Thank God I'm on the bottom floor.

After I slip through and step on the other side, I swipe my hands together like I'm knocking the dust off. Crisis averted. Now to get a ride.

"Layla. You shouldn't have done that."

I screech and loop around toward the voice. *George.* His eyes flash with anger, causing my heart to lodge in my throat. I stand motionless like a deer staring into the headlights of a freight train. Which way do I move to avoid the impending crash?

"Tsk-tsk." George swaggers forward and places his hands on either side of me, pressing me against the brick wall. "I don't like cunts who play hard to get. What're you trying to prove?"

"Nothing." My voice catches as I say the word. "Get away—"

His hand slaps over my mouth. Not that it probably matters. The parking lot's quiet, and we're in a corner where there're no lights.

With his other hand, he slides between my legs and yanks my skirt up to my thighs. I thrust forward, trying to get away from him, but he's too big.

“You won’t deny me this pretty pussy of yours. I’ll take it anyway. I like to hear the screams. They make my dick hard.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. *Holy fuck. What am I going to do?*

He lifts his hand off my mouth, grasps my hand inside his, and slaps it over his erection. Bile floods my mouth as I bite on the inside of my lip. I boost my leg and aim for his balls, but he dodges at the last second.

“Get your fucking hands off her.” Kameron yanks George’s arm, and he drops my hand.

I run behind Kameron with my breath coming out in ragged gasps, and pain shoots through my ankle. I jerk my injured foot off the ground.

Oh, my God. Oh, my god. What would have happened if Kameron hadn’t seen us? Holy motherfucker.

“Pussy,” George spits out at Kameron and steps into his space, meeting him chest to chest. “She’s my date tonight.”

“Didn’t look like it to me. I distinctly saw her climbing out of a window as you waited a few feet away in the dark. If I’d realized that was the bathroom you were lurking outside of, I would have called the police sooner.”

“Fuck you.” George raises his arm back and punches Kameron in the gut.

Kameron laughs. “Thought you’d never do it.”

I watch in awe as Kameron punches George in the stomach with his left hand and in the mouth with his right. The movements were nearly simultaneous.

George doubles over as blood pours out of his mouth. “You broke my fucking tooth.”

“You were trying to rape a woman. You’re lucky I don’t rip your tiny dick off and make you eat it.”

As the tension leaves my body, I clutch my belly and giggle erupts. *Tiny dick. How did Kameron know his penis was tiny?*

Fuck. A whimper escapes my lips, and I press my hand to my mouth to keep from breaking down.

George ducks his head and runs toward Kameron. Kameron sashays to the side, grasps his arm behind him, and keeps ramping up the pressure until George drops to his knees and tears stream down his face. “You’re going to break my arm.”

“I’ll stop before the ligaments are destroyed.”

“Cocksucker.”

Anger floods my veins until it feels like my head is going to pop off. *What a fucking asshole.* I stomp in front of him and kick him in the nuts. “Fuck you.”

Sirens blare in the distance as the sky lights up with red, white, and blue streaks. My hands shake uncontrollably. I cross my arms over my chest and clasp my upper arms to keep from shattering to pieces on the gravel. This night has sucked ass.

Chapter Sixteen

Kameron

Every second of the police questioning me is like getting my flesh cut by broken pieces of glass. Not for myself. I can do this standing on my head, but for Layla. The roller coaster of emotions that has swept through her is on display for everyone to see and making it more difficult by the second for me to watch.

“Okay. I think we’re through.” The older male officer who introduced himself as Officer Roberts nods. His eyes are somber belying what I already know. “If you hadn’t been here, we both know what would’ve happened.”

I swallow over what feels like a rock lodged in my throat. “Yeah, we do.”

My hands ball into fists. I should have fucking killed him. Fucking asshole sits pretty in the back of the squad car as a handful of patrons gawk at the show. Well, he’s not exactly pretty. He has a busted mouth and probably some cracked ribs, too.

As Layla looks up at me, her shoulders shake. I inhale to steady my nerves before I knock someone else out. “Can I go over and check on Layla?”

“Sure.” Officer Roberts pats me on the back of the shoulder. “You’re her hero. I’m sure she’ll want to thank you.”

If I were a hero, I wouldn’t have left her alone at the bar in the first place. *Way to go, asshole.*

I’ve heard enough of her responses to the officer’s questions to know the guy is a total freak, and she’s damn lucky he’s going to jail. I crack my knuckles. Make that—he’s damn fortunate because if I catch him alone again, he’s going to be a eunuch.

“I’ll call Owen to take you home.” Officer Anthony snaps her notebook closed and tucks her pen into the breast pocket of her uniform shirt.

I’ve never met Owen, but I know Gavin has two brothers, Owen, and

Carson. And if I remember right, Owen works for the police department.

“No.” Layla’s eyes widen as she grabs the officer’s hand.

What the fuck? My heart skips a beat. She’s going to get arrested for assault on an officer.

“Now, Layla.” The officer shakes her head. “You’ve had too much to drink. You can’t drive home.”

“I know, but not Owen. I’ve got a raging headache, and I want to go to bed. If Owen comes, Gavin and Carson will show up, and I won’t get to bed until morning.” She stands and hugs Officer Anthony. “Gracie, I promise I’ll talk to them in the morning.”

Ri-i-ight. I forgot we weren’t in the city. Of course, the officers all know her. I roll back on my heels.

“Fine,” Officer Anthony sighs and pats her back. “But I can’t let you drive.”

“I’ll take her home.” I shove my hands into my pockets before I find myself in the middle of a hug fest.

She cocks an eyebrow to her bangs and scans her eyes up and down my body. “Have you been drinking?”

“One beer.” I glance at my wristwatch. “About three hours ago.”

“Okay.” She shifts her attention to Layla. “Is that fine with you?”

“Yes.” She nods vehemently and turns to me. Her eyes are filled with hero worship or some crap like that, or the streetlight is making her eyes glisten. It’s hard to tell from this angle.

As soon as the officer leaves, Layla jumps up and wraps her arms around my neck. “Thank you.”

Yeah, hero worship. Undeserved hero worship. I stand stiffly, afraid to do anything. This is the huggiest group of people I’ve ever seen. She’s not letting go, and I look like a dumbass. I wrap my arms around her and close my eyes.

The vision of her climbing out of the window right into the asshole's path is burned into my retinas. I ran as fast as I could, but since I was a good one hundred yards away, I didn't make it before his fucking hands touched her.

I inhale the scent of her shampoo and cigarette smoke from the bar. I want to drag her to my place and encase her in bubble wrap, so she stops getting into harm's way. My fingers dig into her back. "You're taking years off my life."

She giggles softly against my chest and then sobs. Another chink in my well-constructed armor shatters, causing me to hold her tighter. Her tears coat my T-shirt, leaving it clinging to my skin.

I don't want to ever let her go, which is precisely why I must. I clear my throat, loosen my embrace, and step back. "I'll drive you home."

"Thanks." She follows me to my pickup.

When we get there, I click the lock open and help her inside. Once she's safely fastened in, I sprint to the other side as if hell's hounds are after me. I'll never get over this night.

I hop inside and twist on the ignition. "Music?"

She shakes her head. "Silence."

"Okay."

She closes her eyes and rests her head against the headrest. "Kameron?"

"Yes?" I swallow.

Her eyes slowly open but remain partially covered. "Thank you for rescuing me. George is a nasty person." Her bottom lip quivers. "I can't believe he almost raped me."

"I'm so sorry, darlin'." I grab her hand. "Is there anything you need me to do? Someone I should call?" Hell, does she have a boyfriend? I didn't even think to ask.

I've been so busy pretending I don't care about her. But I do. Too

much. Too much to leave us both unscathed. One of us is going to be destroyed, and it's likely to be me if she belongs to someone else.

Stop. You can't go there. You're leaving before winter. Don't destroy both of you.

“No. I'll get with everyone tomorrow. I want to go home and forget.”

Chapter Seventeen

Layla

When the fluid motion of the vehicle jerks to a stop, I lurch forward, and my eyes snap open.

Where am I? I repeatedly blink until my focus returns. Home? How did I get here?

I twist to survey the driver's seat, and everything collides in my brain at once. *Kameron. George. The bar. Outside the bar. The police.* I shudder forcefully and take a deep breath.

Kameron shuts off the engine and studies me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I was disoriented for a second. Thank you again for bringing me home. My cousins would have been all up in my business, and I don't want to rehash the whole thing again tonight."

"I understand."

I glance at his dashboard, but the clock display went off when he turned off the vehicle. "What time is it?"

Kameron lifts his arm to scrutinize his wristwatch. "Five minutes after two."

"No wonder I feel like I've been run over by a Mack Truck." I rub my forehead. "I don't usually drink or fall out of windows."

He smiles briefly and then glances down at the console between us. "I'm sorry I left. If I had stuck around, this wouldn't have happened."

I place my hand on his forearm, and the coarse hairs brush against my fingertips. "That has nothing to do with it. George is a sick man. If it wasn't tonight, it would have been another night. At least this time, you were there. Another time, I might have been alone." I shut down all thoughts of what could have happened.

Nothing happened. I'm fine. And now, he's in jail. Where he belongs.

“I still need to say, ‘I’m sorry.’”

“I accept your apology. Now, don’t bring it up again.” My fingers burn against his heat. I want to throw myself in his arms and forget everything, but I’ve already had a craptastic night. I don’t want to add his second rejection to the list. I remove my hand from him and place it in my lap.

“Thank you.”

“I’m going in and passing out. I’m so exhausted.” I yawn and grab the door handle.

“Do you need help getting inside?” The deep rumble of his voice skates down my spine, causing my heart to beat erratically.

His eyes are shadowed, but I catch the sharp intake of his breath. *Fuck.* My mouth is so dry. I lick my lips. Neither of us move as the muscles in his jaw twitch. The urge to invite him in is so strong, I can barely deny it, but he’s leaving town soon, and I’m going to fall harder for him than I already have.

I’ve been saving myself for the man I want to marry, and Kameron doesn’t believe in happily ever afters. “I should be okay.” The words hurt to say, but I’ve got to protect myself from getting hurt.

He leans back and nods. A flash of something that could be confused with hurt moves across his face before his emotions disappear.

I yank the door open and hop down to the ground. *Ouch.* “Shit.” Pain shoots from my ankle and up to my thigh.

“What is it?” His voice is full of panic as he snaps open the door and exits the vehicle.

“My ankle.” Tears spring to my eyes, but I hold them at bay. I can’t afford another waterworks display. He’s going to think all I do is cry.

He rounds the front of the pickup and lifts me into his arms the same way he did at the station. “I’ll get you inside and take a look. You must have re-injured it falling out of the window.”

“It hurt on impact, but it didn’t on the way to the pickup when we left.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and lay my head on his shoulder.

I'm so fucking tired.

I bounce lightly against him as he carries me up the front steps. "It must have swollen while you were sleeping."

I stiffen. "Did I snore?"

"Maybe a little. It was cute."

"Fuck my life," I groan, dig my hand into my skirt's pocket, and hand him my keys.

"I'm serious." He chuckles. "It was adorable."

I slam my face against the crook of his neck and wait for him to open the door. He smells like musk and spice. I sniff again. He stops. *Shit. He noticed I was sniffing him.* Lord, save me from my endless embarrassing actions.

The door shuts behind him, and my heart thunders against my ribs. The light on my end table is the only illumination in the room. The tension in my body flows to his, and I can't hear anything but my pulse beating in my ears.

When I finally get the courage to look up at him, his eyes glow under the lamplight. The flash of awareness in his eyes from when he was at the bar is now replaced by a raging volcano.

Holy hell. His mouth is inches from mine, and I sense his barely contained control as it radiates through his muscles. My nipples tent against my bra, and I whimper.

"Fuck, Layla. Don't do that. I'm trying to be good here."

"Don't." I shake my head and place my lips against his.

"Shit," he mumbles against my mouth and swipes his tongue into my depths. A kaleidoscope of colors flash against my eyelids as I drag my fingertips over his skull. The sensation of the strands of hair against my fingers has my blood boiling.

He slowly lowers my legs toward the ground, but instead of following

his lead, my body has a mind of its own. I wrap my legs around his waist and groan into his mouth.

My head spins as I exhale. He sucks my need down like he's dying of thirst, clasps my ass, turns, and presses me against the wall. The sensation of the hard wall on one side of me and his muscular body on the other is erotic as fuck. I thrust my tongue against his and grind my pelvis against his erection.

No one's ever kissed me like he does. I ache to strip myself bare and let him explore every inch of my flesh. I've never been with a man who made me lose control. Our mouths and tongues dance against each other as if we can't get enough.

As his rigid cock presses against my clit, I wiggle closer. *God, it feels good.* My swollen lips are slick with my desire as if my body has already decided he's the one. I place my hands on his face, and the stubble from his five o'clock shadow pricks my fingers.

"God, you taste so sweet," he murmurs against my mouth, and then, he slides his lips along my jawline until he connects with the sensitive spot between my jaw and throat.

"Kameron?" My breath comes out in a giant heave as I try to suck it back into my lungs. I want him to be the one who takes my virginity. Maybe it would only be once, but it would be out of this world. If this is what I've been missing, I was a fool to wait.

"Yes?"

"I need to tell you something."

"What?" He bites my flesh, and I quiver forcefully.

"I..."

"Yes," he growls as his hand slides under my shirt and across my stomach. When he reaches my bra, my eyes fill with so much heat, I can't make out the sofa from where we're standing.

"Make love to me." When his hand cups my breast, I gasp.

“I thought you’d never ask.” He takes one step toward the center of the room when loud footsteps clop across my front porch.

“Layla!”

“Fuck,” I groan and drop my head to Kameron’s chest.

His entire body stiffens. “Is that who I think it is?”

“Yes. It’s Gavin.”

“Fuck.” He drops me to the ground.

When I wince, his face flames. “Sorry. Listen, I should go.” He swallows and looks like a guppy out of water. “This shouldn’t have happened.” My eyes narrow into slits. “It was....”

“I get it. It was a mistake.” I straighten my shoulders and yank the doorknob. “It never happened.” I swing the door open and plaster a smile on my face. There’s no way it reaches my eyes. “Gavin, come on in.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” He stomps through the threshold, and eyes Kameron up and down. “You should have called me.”

“Ignore him. He has nothing to do with this. He’s the equivalent of an Uber driver. Pretend he’s not here.” I run my tongue over my top teeth, making a smacking sound as I dismiss him. *Asshole.*

Chapter Eighteen

Kameron

So, this is what it feels like to be on the wrong side of little Miss Sunshine. I'm surprised she didn't wave her hand in the air and say, 'Bye. Bye, Felicia.'

Gavin studies her. "I heard he saved you from George Butler."

"Yeah." She shrugs. "He did."

"Don't you think you should be a little more thankful."

Her chin tips out, and my heart slams into my throat. Is she going to rat me out? Wonderful. Gavin's going to kick my ass. The muscles in my back tighten in anticipation of a gut punch. George punches like a pussy. There's no way Gavin does. And then, he'll tell the chief, and he'll castrate me for letting this entire night happen.

"I've thanked him enough."

"Fine. As long as you've thanked him." He shakes his head and grabs Layla by the upper arms. "You could have gotten hurt. What were you doing climbing out the window in the first place?"

"To get away from George," she sighs. "He cornered me at the bar after Kameron left."

His eyebrows arch together. "Kameron left?"

"Yes, I was talking to Kameron, and he got up and left."

"Were you drinking?"

"Yes."

Gavin drops my arms and spins around. "You left her alone at the bar drunk?"

"Hey, I didn't say I was drunk." She crosses her arms over her chest. "Don't you dare make this about anyone but George. He's a total fucking

creep. It wasn't because I was drinking, and it wasn't because Kameron's a pussy."

"What?" Gavin jerks backward, and his eyes shift between the two of us.

Fuck. She went there. She smirks as I squirm. Gavin thinks of Layla like his little sister. His pure, sweet sister. The one who's never been tainted by the bad boy. And she knows it. She's intentionally trying to get my ass kicked.

I should be pissed, but I deserve it. I promised myself I'd stay away from her. And what did I do? The first time we were alone, I ravished her.

She deserves someone better than me. What do I have to give? My mom—she left. My dad's second marriage lasted two months, and she skipped too.

Gavin's hands ball into fists as if he's finally reading the room's tension and is ready to explode. "What's going on?"

"He wouldn't play me in a game of pool."

"Pool?" Gavin glowers. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Yeah." I shrug. "I suck at pool." I can't believe she saved my ass. Gavin wouldn't want someone like me sniffing around Layla.

"Whatever." Gavin rolls his eyes. "You two play your games, but Layla is a classy woman. You 'hit it and quit it,' and I'll kick your ass. Along with my two brothers." He arches his eyebrows. "And when my uncle finds out, he'll lose his mind. Do you understand?"

"It's not like that." I raise my hands in defense. "We... It's not like that."

"Nothing's going on." Layla grabs Gavin's arm and leads him to the sofa. Her limp is more pronounced as she walks. "Kameron was kind enough to drive me home, and now, he's leaving."

"You need to sit down and rest your ankle." I glance toward the kitchen. "Where's a towel I can use? You should ice it before it swells too

much.”

She falls into the cushions and tosses her sore foot on the coffee table. “I thought you were leaving.”

“Not before you’re taken care of. Now, where’s a dish towel?”

“In the first drawer by the sink. There’s ice in the dispenser.” She closes her eyes and places her hand on her forehead. Her face is etched with exhaustion.

What’s wrong with me? I tried to fuck her brains out after she was almost raped, had too much to drink, and is clearly not feeling well. Classy move, asshole.

I growl as I move through her kitchen. Gavin and Layla’s voices are low and muted as I gather the supplies to address her re-injured ankle.

When I return to the room with a homemade icepack, Gavin stands and shoves his hand out. “Thank you, man. If you hadn’t been there, it would have been an entirely different situation.”

I grasp his hand in mine as a shudder quakes through my body. I would have never been able to live with myself if Layla had been raped. “Thank God I was there.”

His face is somber as he releases my hand. “Layla, you’re not off the hook. Owen and Carson will want all the details as well.”

“Not tonight.” She yawns and snuggles deeper into the cushions.

“I’ll tell them to leave you be until tomorrow.” He nods at me. “I’m going to get out of here. Get some rest.”

“Okay.” Her voice is muffled with sleep as if she’s struggling to stay awake.

When the door snaps shut, I sit on the coffee table by her foot. “Let me take off your shoe.”

“Whatever,” she mumbles. “Get it over with and leave. I want to be alone.”

“Damn it, Layla. You shouldn’t be alone.” I work her shoe off and study the swelling. The blue and purple bruise over her ankle is splotchy where it’s healing. When I push on her flesh, there’s a slight resistance as the swelling returns. “I’ll stay here tonight.”

“No. You won’t.” Her eyes pop open, and she yanks the make-shift ice pack out of my hand. “You made your intentions clear.” She plops the towel on her ankle. The sadness and anger in her eyes cut me to the core.

“Layla.” It rips at my heart to see her hurting, and it’s my fault. All of it—from leaving her at the bar, to George accosting her, to shoving her away when her cousin came.

“Stop. Don’t placate me.”

I stand and cross my arms. “Damn it. I didn’t want this. I don’t want to hurt you. I’m not in a place where I want a relationship, and you’re the relationship kind of woman. Like Gavin said, you aren’t a ‘hit it and quit it’ kind of girl, and that’s all I have. I’m only here for a few months, I have tons of baggage, and I’m not the kind of man suited to be a husband and father.”

“Who said I was looking for a husband and father?” She wrinkles her nose. “It’s still years away before I want to settle down. I know you’re leaving town. That’s why you were perfect.”

My jaw tics. “What does that mean?”

“I was looking for a ‘hit it and quit it’ kind of guy. If that’s not what you are, then I’ll have to look somewhere else.”

“Layla,” I growl as the image of her with someone else floods my brain. Anger surges through my chest and out to my fingertips, leaving me ready to fight but with no outlet. How do I fight off an invisible force?

“Go.” She flicks her fingers toward me.

I swallow. I can’t leave. If I go, she might find someone else to take her to bed, and I want it to be me. “I’ll stay.”

She opens her eyes. “Get out of my house before I call the police.”

“Fine.” I shake my head as defeat settles on my shoulders. “Promise me

you won't do anything stupid.”

“Like kissing you?” She nods. “Yes, I can make that promise.”

Perfect. I stomp to the door as if I'm a pouting three-year-old. Way to exit on a sexy vibe. Every woman wants a toddler in her bed.

Chapter Nineteen

Layla

Harbor leans against the brick wall and puts on her best come-hither expression. Before I can snap the shot, she giggles and doubles over at the waist.

“Harbor,” I growl. This is the tenth time today she’s laughed uncontrollably. Thank God I don’t have to go to work. I’d never get there in time.

“I. Can’t. Help. It.” Each word is interrupted by giggling. Finally, she coughs and wipes her face. “Damn it, my mascara is probably ruined.”

I arch my eyebrows and study her tear-streaked face. “Yeah, we’re done here. I’m going to need to stick with the landscape today.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.” She rubs her cheeks in a gallant attempt to remove the marks. “Did I get them?”

“Sure.” I smirk. The building down the street from the fire station is perfect for the nostalgic look that Mrs. Thomas loves for her romance covers.

“Bitch.” She rolls her eyes and flips me off. “With friends like you, who needs enemies.”

“I could say the same for you. I’ve spent all morning trying to get one cover shoot done, and you keep laughing.”

“I can’t help it.” She pops her bottom lip out. “Do you forgive me?”

“Sure.” Like I can stay mad at her. She’s been my best friend since third grade.

“Hey, Layla!” Cole yells as he exits the fire station.

I raise my hand and wave. “Hi.”

“Oh, fuck.” Harbor scrubs her face even harder. “Is he coming?”

“Yep.” I grin and take great joy in her discomfort. Harbor has had a

crush on Cole for years, but he's never given her the time of day. Why? She's his best friend's little sister. The bro code and the clichéd annoying pesky little sister of his best friend have been in effect for years.

The crazy thing is she's full of sass in everything she does until Cole shows up, and then, she turns into a bashful twelve-year-old.

She slaps her cheeks and shoves her hair behind her ears. "Hey," she squeaks, and her face flames bright until there are splotches on her chest. She doesn't come any closer.

As his eyes travel over her body, he stops in mid-step. She's wearing a red leather skirt and a black leather bikini top with three-inch stiletto heels and fishnet stockings. He swallows hard.

Oh, my God. Great idea. I beam at Harbor, and her eyes go round. Panic oozes out of every pore in her body as if she can read my mind. She needs a little nudging. Let's see if we can get her to unfreeze around him. I walk over and put my arm around his waist. "I've got a proposition for you."

"What?" His eyes still haven't left Harbor.

"How about I do a photoshoot of you and Harbor? It'll be perfect."

"I..." His face reddens.

Yes. I fight the urge to pump my arm in victory. I knew it. He has a little crush on Harbor as well.

"Listen." Harbor crosses her arms over her chest as if she just now realizes she's standing on the street corner looking a tad bit overdressed for the occasion. Or underdressed, in this case. "That's not a good idea."

"Why not?" Cole frowns.

"I..." She shakes her head. "I don't know."

"It's a great idea. Mrs. Thomas will love it. I'll call her this afternoon and find out what type of poses she'd want." I smile innocently at Cole. "Of course, knowing her, it will be a bunch of shirtless photos with Harbor rubbing oil on your chest."

His entire body stills, and I fight back a giggle. This is so much more

exciting than dealing with my imaginary sex life. I jump up and wrap my arms around his neck. “This is going to be so much fun.”

“Layla. This isn’t a good idea.” His face is overheated and filled with dread.

“Why?”

“Because her brother will kick my ass.”

“Pft.” I pat his shoulder. “You’re a big boy. You can handle your own.”

“I don’t know.”

I grab his shoulders and stare into his blue eyes. “Don’t make a big deal about it.”

He glances at Harbor, who’s picking up her gear and tossing it into her bag while conveniently pretending we’re not here. Like we’re a mirage. She pulls out a cardigan and throws it over her outfit.

“I can’t not make it a big deal.”

My heart flutters. I love happy endings. “I’ll call you when I get the specifics. Don’t be a chicken.”

“Damn it, Layla. You’re a fucking pest.”

“Yep.” I grab his face and kiss his cheek. “That’s why you love to pose for me.”

“Yeah. That’s it.” He rolls his eyes. After I let go of him, he still doesn’t stop watching Harbor. I should have considered this months ago.

After he leaves, Harbor jogs over to me. “What were you doing? Did he ask you out?”

“Really?” I slap my hand over her forehead. “You’ve had a crush on Cole as long as I’ve known you. Do you honestly think I’d put the moves on your man?”

“He’s not mine.”

“Give it time, sister. I think he will be.”

“Yeah, ri-i-i-ght. Even if he were interested, he would back off because of Connor.”

“Your brother can get a life.” Connor has always treated her like a baby. That’s one of the main reasons she’s decided to stay in the city. That, and Cole’s always dated one woman after another. He doesn’t have a serious bone in his body. Or does he?

“Keep an open mind and be ready for the photoshoot.”

“Fine. I’ll keep an open mind about it.” She tilts her head. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. George has been in jail for a week. His arraignment went off without a hitch, and the charges should keep him off the streets for years.”

Owen filled me in on all the details. I wasn’t in the mood to attend. It’s going to be hard enough to get on the stand if he doesn’t plead guilty. Owen promised the prosecutor wouldn’t give him too much slack.

“Good.” She wraps her arm around my shoulders. “So, tell me all about Kameron.”

“There’s nothing to tell. He’s a great kisser, but that’s it.”

“Do you want there to be more?” We walk side by side to the park bench where her items are stashed.

I sigh and fall onto the wooden planks. “Yes, I do. I like him, but it’s not going anywhere.”

She stands with her legs braced apart and slaps her hands on her hips. “Then, take your own advice. Make something happen.”

My heart slams into my throat. Could I push him for a no strings attached one-time fling? Do I want to?

Chapter Twenty

Kameron

With each step toward the fire station, the buzzing in my ears grows louder. Seeing Layla with her hands all over Cole was a blow to the gut. It only got worse when she kissed him.

My hands are fisted so tightly, I can feel the nails digging into my flesh. *Fuck. I want to kick his ass.* I even waited twenty minutes in my pickup hoping to cool down, but deep breathing and the air conditioner on full blast did nothing to dilute my anger.

I yank open the door and stop in my tracks. Gavin and Cole are kicked back at the table talking with Chief Monroe standing behind them. The comradery between them deflates what the cold air couldn't. I don't stand a chance with Layla. Cole's been in her life since the beginning. They know each other. Their families know each other.

Cole says something, and Gavin cuffs him in the arm while laughing. Chief Monroe shakes his head over whatever antics they're discussing. He's got the seal of approval, and I'm just the dude passing through. They're probably talking about Cole planning to ask Layla to marry him so they can live happily ever after. Peachy.

Chief Monroe nods at me as he walks past. "Kameron."

"Hey, boss."

"You're late." His eyes rake over me. When he found out I saved Layla from George the other night, he was appreciative. But his gratitude won't save me from my tardiness or my obsession with Layla. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. Sorry I was late. There's no excuse."

"Good answer." He smiles and squeezes my shoulder. "I like a man who takes responsibility for his actions. You're a standup man for a city boy."

That's all I'll ever be. The city boy who doesn't belong in Meadow

Bay.

After he retreats to his office, Gavin glances in my direction. “Hey, Kam. Come here.” He lifts his hand and beckons me toward them.

Great. I’m not in the mood to congratulate Cole on his wonderful life with Layla. Although I’ve never prayed for a call, the temptation to send up a wayward duck call is an impulse I can barely ignore.

“What’s up?” I brace my shoulders for the news.

“What’re you doing tomorrow night?” Gavin leans back in the seat. It creaks under his weight.

“Nothing.” Which is pathetic. I came here to lay low and re-group, but each day is like living in hell. I can’t stop thinking about Layla, and I’m miserable.

Watching TV is boring as fuck. I don’t want to hang out at the bar because every conversation seems pointless. And I sure the hell don’t want to see her making out with some random dude. A stab of pain shoots through my head. Only, it’s worse. It’s Cole.

“You should come over tomorrow night for a BBQ. I’ve invited the guys over.”

“That sounds fun, but I’m—”

“You’re not busy.” Cole snorts.

“How would you know?” My shoulders ache as I envision dropping his ass to the ground and punching his teeth in.

“Remember? I live at the end of the next block over from you. I can see your back yard from mine. You aren’t doing anything.” Cole cocks his head back as if to dare me to disagree.

“Fine. I’m not doing anything.” A little guy starts hammering nails into my brain. I don’t want to walk out on my back deck and see Cole’s white ass plastered to the window as he fucks my girl.

My girl? My eyes widen. What in the hell has gotten into me? I can’t...

What? What can't I do? Why can't I date her? That's simple. She's dating Cole, and her dad forbade me from seeing her.

"Then, come over. We'll eat some burgers and dogs."

Gavin nods. "And while we're at it, we'll coach Cole here to prep him for his next photoshoot with Layla."

I yank out the chair. The feet scrap against the cement with the movement. "Big date planned?" I pray my expression doesn't give anything away.

Cole shrugs. "I don't know when it'll be."

"Layla's got the cupid bug. She's invited her best friend, Harbor, to be a part of the poses."

"Gavin, let it go. I'm not Harbor's type." He shifts his attention to the wall behind me.

My mouth dries. Harbor? She's trying to set Cole up with her friend. Thank God.

"She's not a girl anymore. Stop treating her like one." Gavin tents his fingers together on top of the table.

"Her dad hates me."

"Bullshit. You aren't eighteen anymore. He was just afraid you'd ask her to marry you, and you'd end up living in their basement with three kids, a dog, and a cat."

"Shut up." Cole laughs and shakes his head. "Harbor is not interested."

"Whatever." Gavin leans against the back of his chair and crosses his arms while studying the both of us. "You two are pathetic. Don't even know when women want you."

What the fuck? "I know when a woman wants me."

"Right," he scoffs. "You walked in here with flames coming out of your ears."

"I did not."

“Bullshit.” He grins. “What did you think? Layla has her eyes set on Cole. You did, and it had you raging mad. Now that you know that isn’t the case, what’re you going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” *Fuck*. I wasn’t expecting Gavin, of all people, to call me out on my bullshit. It’s a little out of left field.

“Layla’s right. You’re a pussy.”

“Screw you, Gavin.” I glare at him. I’ve never been a pussy.

“How long are you going to be in Meadow Bay?”

“Two more months.”

“Then, make them worth your while.” He slides his chair back and stands.

My mouth gapes. He’s giving me his blessing to pursue Layla. “What happens when I leave?”

“None of us know what tomorrow brings. For once, do something ballsy, open your mind to the possibilities. Go with your gut. Two months might be all you ever have, or it might be the beginning of forever.”

“And what about Chief Monroe?” I glance over my shoulder to make sure he can’t hear our conversation.

“Don’t tell him anything.” I whip my head back around to see if he’s serious. His facial expression is somber. “First, get to know her better and find out if you’re interested in something more than a one-nights stand.” His eyes narrow into slits. “Because that’s not good enough. She deserves more than that. And if there’s no spark there, there’s nothing to worry about. And if there is, you can cross that bridge later. Chief Monroe is a bigger softy than you think.”

“No, he’s not.” I shake my head. “He was very clear when he told me to stay away from her.”

“Shit.” Gavin leans forward, dropping the feet of his chair back onto the cement. “He sought you out and told you stay away from her?”

“Yes.” I rake a hand through my hair.

“Damn.” Gavin chuckles. “That’s classic.”

Shit. I’m screwed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Layla

As I arrive at Gavin and Delaney's house, I question the sanity of my decision making. When Delaney called yesterday afternoon, she made it clear Gavin invited all the off-duty firemen, including Kameron. She made a special emphasis on Kameron's name.

Do I pursue a physical relationship with him or continue going about my boring, celibate life waiting for Mr. Right to show up and sweep me off my feet? *How's that working out for you?*

Cold and lonely.

I shift my Kia Optima into park, open the door, and swing my legs out of the vehicle. After my sandals slap on the concrete drive, I suck down the scent of freshly cut grass. It's a beautiful, sunny, no clouds in the sky, kind of day. Nothing could be sweeter.

As I navigate the driveway, I walk past several vehicles I recognize as Gavin and Kameron's co-workers.

A breeze blows my hair away from my face, and my stomach growls. *Burgers and hot dogs. Yum.* At the end of the driveway closest to Gavin's garage is Kameron's lifted, black pickup truck. My heart slams in my chest, and I stop. My fingers shake, and I make a U-turn. *I can't do this.*

"Layla Marie," Delaney's soft lyrical voice calls from the side yard. "Get back here. I need some estrogen to counter all this grunting and dick measuring."

Wonderful. "Coming." There's no escape. I slap on a bright smile like I don't have a care in the world and march my ass to the backyard.

When I enter the space, Delaney wraps her arms around me and squeezes. "You look gorgeous today."

"Thank you." I hug her back. I'm not about to admit I tried on ten outfits before deciding on a knee-length yellow skirt which flutters against

my knees when I walk. I paired it with a white top that shows off my tan. *Fine—my freckles. Red hair and tanning is really—original or extra crispy.*

My gaze drifts to Kameron who's standing behind the grill with Cole and Gavin. Gavin uses an industrial-sized spatula to flip the burgers.

Delaney steps back and rolls her eyes. "You'd think they were in their teens instead of adult men."

"I heard that." Gavin leers at her and points the spatula. "I'll show you an adult man later tonight."

"Promises. Promises." She giggles as we walk toward the men.

When Kameron's eyes meet mine, my mouth dries, and butterflies swirl in my belly. The little flying things seem like they've strapped themselves into rollercoaster seats and are looping and twisting on the ride of their lives.

Nope. I can't do this. I avert my gaze to a less dangerous specimen and wave at Cole. "Hey, I've got some news for you."

Cole swallows, and his Adam's apple bobs. "Okay."

Kameron's eyes narrow as if he's irritated I'm ignoring him. He's the one who blew me off. Not the other way around. I want to taste the excitement, but I know deep in my gut the result will be a slap in the face. I've already been down that road. The butterflies are on their own tonight.

I move over to Cole as the rest of the guests continue to chat. "I talked to Mrs. Thomas last night. She'd love to have some photos of you and Harbor together."

He shakes his head. "I can't."

"It's just some pictures. Don't be dramatic. You've done dozens of shots for me."

"I know, but never with someone else."

"It's not a big deal. It's some harmless photos. What could go wrong?" My face heats, and I fan myself. He's going to flip his lid.

“Layla,” he growls. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I swallow and lick my lips. “She wants some BDSM shots.”

“What did you say?”

“BDSM.”

Everyone stops talking in mid-word and stares at us with open mouths.

“Pick someone else. I can’t do those types of shots with Harbor.” He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Don’t be a baby.” I shake my head in disgust. “Never mind. I’ll get Axel to do it.” Axel Crosley is one of the guys Harbor and I graduated high school with.

“What?” His eyes round as he sputters, and the muscles in his jaw tic. He’s staring at me like I’ve sprouted wings and am flying over the crowd sprinkling fairy dust.

“You heard me. I’m changing the shoot to Axel and Harbor.”

“No, you aren’t. Connor will kick his ass. Everyone knows he’s a total player. He’ll take advantage of Harbor.”

“I’ll do it.” Kameron shrugs.

“You’ll do what?” My mouth drops open.

“The shoot. I’ve done a couple of photoshoots back home. It’s not a big deal.”

“With women?”

“Yes, I’ve done poses with women.” He tips the bottle of beer to his lips, and I want to slug him in the mouth.

This was supposed to be about getting Cole and Harbor together. It’s not supposed to be about my best friend forever, and the guy I can’t get out of my thoughts getting all hot and bothered as they pose with whips and chains.

“Fuck, I’ll do it,” Cole growls and stomps off to stand at the patio’s edge.

“Thank you.” Gavin beams from behind the grill as Delaney walks up to him, places her arms around his waist, and rests her face on his back. “That wasn’t so hard, was it.”

“Nope.” Kameron guzzles the rest of the beer and tosses it into the trash.

I’m as ridiculous as Cole. We’ve both been played. Cole can’t stand the thought of Harbor with another man any more than I want to see Kameron slapping a crop over some woman’s ass.

Kameron ambles over to me with a cocky grin. “Jealous?”

“No,” I grind out between gritted teeth.

His face sobers, and his eyes bore into mine. “We need to talk.”

“Now?” My eyes dart to everyone milling around the backyard—no one is paying attention to us.

Yeah, ri-i-ight. Everyone is pretending not to care what we’re doing, but they’re staring out of the corner of their eyes and whispering. God, small towns.

“Let’s go inside.” He nods his head to the backdoor. “I feel like we’re being taped for an episode of *Big Brother*.”

“Delaney?”

“Yes?”

“Is it okay if we go into the kitchen for a minute?”

“Of course.” She winks and waves her hand to the door. “Make yourself at home.”

“Not that at home.” Gavin smirks. “I don’t want to find ass prints on my island or used condoms in the trash.” He glares at Kameron. “And you will use a condom.”

My head spins as everyone gawks at us. *Lord, I’m going to pass out. This is so fucking embarrassing.*

Kameron punches Gavin in the upper arm. “I would never go in

without a raincoat.”

Oh, for the love of God. I twist on my heel and march to the door. I don't want my family to know everything I do, and I sure haven't agreed to do it. Heat floods from my core to my chest and up to my ears. I fan myself. It's hot out here.

Kameron grabs the door handle before I can yank it open, which is probably safer for my cousin. I might have ripped the handle off.

“After you.” When his dark eyes meet mine, my heart skips a beat. Holy batshit Robin. He's looking at me like I'm someone special. Has Mr. Grumpalicious gone soft? I bite my lips to keep from giggling. I'm pretty sure that part of him would not be soft.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kameron

My hands sweat as I shut the door behind us. I've spent a week denying it, but I can't any longer. I don't know how wise it is to pursue a relationship with Layla. I can't commit to staying here, but I also can't deny I have feelings for her. Gavin's right—we don't know what tomorrow brings.

Layla leans against the island and licks her lips. My eyes stray to her perfect mouth. Pouty and bow shaped. Ever since our first kiss, I haven't been able to think of anything else. I want her in my arms. In my bed. Whatever tomorrow brings is tomorrow.

“Did you want to do a photoshoot with Harbor?”

“No.” I shrug. “Not that I wouldn't. I've done shots with beautiful women before and not had a reaction. Not everything leads to erections and sex.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Between me and someone else.” I step forward and place my arms on either side of her, effectively pinning her in place. “Between us, it's an entirely different story.”

Her eyes zone in on my mouth, and the pulse at the base of her throat throbs. “Is it?”

“Yes, it is.” I lean down until there is only an inch between our lips, but nothing else is touching. I can feel the heat radiating off her body, and I inhale her scent. She smells like vanilla and musk.

My dick throbs in answer. I want her more than anyone else I've ever been with. I crave her light even though I know in the end she'll burn me when I walk away. And right afterward, her father is going to beat my ass.

Maybe we should keep this between ourselves. I cringe. No. I'm not that big of a jerk. If I'm doing this, I'm doing it. No matter how epically it blows up in my face.

“Layla, I can’t promise you anything. My time here is limited.”

She nods. “I know.”

“When we first met, I hated your sunny, over-the-top personality,” I growl as I raise my hands and cup her face.

She grins and gives me a saucy look. “And now?”

“Now, I fucking crave it.” My mouth lands on hers as I steal her smile and drop my hands to her waist. I need all of her. I need to soak in her goodness and wash away some of the ugliness that’s tinged my world. I’m going to hate myself for it, but I can’t stop.

She wraps her arms around my neck and nestles her leg between mine. When her knee brushes my aching balls, my eyes pop open.

Damn it. I want her right here. Laid out bare before me to feast on her goodness. But that can’t happen. We’re making out in her cousin’s kitchen. I lean back before I unravel and can’t put the strings back together.

As my mouth leaves hers, she arches forward and follows me, blocking my escape. Her tongue slips between my lips and dives inside. *Oh, hell.* I close my eyes and groan. *I can’t stop.* I suck down her breath as if I need her in order to live.

She jumps up, wraps her legs around my waist, and grinds her pussy against my dick. The sensation takes my breath away. I pull back, heaving as I try to regain control. I shake my head and stare into her lust-filled eyes. “Not here, Doll. There are people outside, and I’m not going to insult your cousin like that.”

She nods. “Okay.” A slow grin curves up to her cheeks, leaving her eyes twinkling.

God, I love that. Her joy is infectious. Panic wells in my chest. *No. Not love. I enjoy her happiness.* It reminds me of the good in life. At least for some people.

I rest her ass on the island. “What’s the smile for?”

“I couldn’t stand you either. You were so full of doom and gloom.”

“Life isn’t all sunshine and rainbows. At least not for everyone.” The dark clouds of my past ease in to dampen some of the joy which had seeped into my soul.

Her hands cradle my face. “What happened?”

I jerk back, shove my hands into my pockets, and pace the floor. It’s like she can see into my soul, and I don’t want her there. I don’t want her sympathy or her pity.

“My mom left when I was twelve. She took off to live the good life.” The muscles in my neck tighten until every part of my body aches. I embrace the comfort of pain. This is what I know.

“I’m sorry.” Her eyes are filled with sorrow for me. I rebuild the wall that was cracking around my heart. If nothing gets in, nothing can hurt me.

“Don’t be. It was just the way it was. She left. My dad took on extra hours at work, and I helped raise my siblings.” My response is robotic and clinical, like I’m reading off a news report.

“Kameron?” She hops down and places her hands on my upper arms. “It’s okay to—”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m not getting all mushy about it and crying the blues. It is what it is. She left, and it was my first lesson in the lies women tell.”

“Not all women are like that.” Her expression is sincere as if she believes what she’s saying.

“Maybe in your world.” It wasn’t what happened to me.

“Kameron, it doesn’t have to be that way.” A tear slips down her cheek.

I swipe the tear away with the pad of my thumb. “I’m not the right man for you. The one who will sweep you off your feet and promise you forever.”

“Don’t promise me anything.” She places a hand on my chest. “I’m not looking for forever. I’m still young and want to experience life before I settle down.”

“Good, because I can’t walk away from you. I need to be near you. To

feel what it's like to see the good in everything." I swallow. "But I can't do that if you can't promise me you won't fall in love with me. Always remember, I'm broken and will destroy you if you let me."

"I promise." The tears in her eyes disappear. "I want a purely physical relationship with you. Two months. Nothing more. When you leave, we both walk away unscathed." She wiggles her eyebrows as the happy-go-lucky part of her personality comes back in full force. "As long as, you, promise never to fall in love with me."

I take everything in at once. Her glitter-filled eyes. Open smile. Gorgeous auburn hair that falls in waves down her back. The sprinkle of freckles over the bridge of her nose. I can't speak.

My mouth descends on hers. I need her promise. Not mine. I already know I'm going to shatter into a thousand pieces that can never be put back together.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Layla

“Dude, I said not to be fornicating in my kitchen.” Gavin slams the screen door with a bang.

“Crap,” I squeak and jump out of Kameron’s embrace. *Shit*. My cousin caught me with my tongue down Kameron’s throat. Heat floods my chest and radiates up my neck and toward the roots of my hair.

Kameron loops his arm over my shoulders, completely unabashed by the interruption. “Man, if we were having sex, you’d know it.”

Gavin chuckles and hitches his thumb over his shoulder. “Come on, we’re ready to eat.”

“That’s what she said.”

I arch an eyebrow. References to *The Office*. Really? He raises his palms in the air. “What?”

I grab his hand. “Come on.” My feet barely hit the ground on the way out. I’ve never been this happy—except there’s a little voice in the back of my head yelling, ‘You’re doing something stupid, and your dad is going to snap.’

I ignore it. Why can’t I enjoy the moment? Every relationship doesn’t have to end in a happily ever after.

‘But that’s what you’ve always wanted,’ the little voice whispers.

Not now. The side of me that loves his kisses and the feel of his strong arms wrapped around my body growls back.

Once we settle at the picnic table with our food, Kameron places his palm on my thigh, and my entire body buzzes. The sun has set in the west, leaving the backyard cast in shadows.

Rows of grapevines line the hill behind the house. Outside of the lit patio, the only illumination comes from the streetlights and the solar lights scattered around their backyard making it appear like a runway for

hummingbirds.

I glance around the yard. “Where did Cole go?”

“He skated.” Dixon grabs his beer. “He said he had a call.”

“A call?” Kameron’s eyebrow arches. “A fire?”

Gavin chuckles. “Nah, man. He’s a pussy. He’s had a thing for Harbor for years, and everyone’s pushing it to come to a head. He’s running scared.”

I prop my elbow on the wooden tabletop. “Do you think so?”

“Sure.” Gavin shrugs. “He can only lie to himself for so long.”

That would make my heart so happy if it were true. I’ve always suspected he had feelings for Harbor, but something scared him off. Whatever it is, I hope he’s ready to confront it head-on.

Gavin settles to my left and drags Delaney down on his lap. “Thank you for joining us tonight. We have some exciting news.”

A baby. Please be a baby. My chest swells with happiness. I love my cousin and can’t wait for him to add to his family.

“Delaney’s pregnant.”

“Yes,” I squeal, jump up, and knock Kameron back in the process. Then, I embrace them both.

Dixon and Vargas tip their beers to them and offer their congratulations.

“How long have you known?” I sit back down and lace my fingers through Kameron’s.

“Four months.” Delaney smiles as Gavin rests his hand on her belly. “We’ve only told our parents and siblings before tonight. We’re so excited to have a sibling for Gabe.”

“Good job, man.” Vargas stands and slaps Gavin on the back back. “I’m going to snag another dog.”

“Go for it. There are plenty left over.”

Kameron lets go of my hand, and for a second, I'm scared he's going to withdraw, but instead, he places his palm on my back and rubs it in small circles. "Your family is something else."

"Are none of your siblings married?"

"No." He shakes his head. "My dad is an only child, and we don't talk to the other side of the family. When my mother skipped town, her parents blamed my dad for her leaving."

My face scrunches. How does a whole family implode like that? Who leaves their kids? What grandparents abandon their family? "Where exactly did she go?"

"She went to Vegas and became a stripper."

My mouth pops open, and I'm surprised a fly doesn't dive in for a landing. "She became a what?"

Kameron's hand stills. "She became a stripper. She worked at a casino in town, and some guy filled her head full of lights and big money."

"Holy hell." I slap a hand over my mouth. "Shit. Sorry." I glance around to see if anyone's paying attention. They're too busy telling war stories about the station to hear a word of our conversation. "I'm so sorry."

"Layla, you didn't do it. It's not your fault." He drops his hand and grabs his hot dog.

"I know that."

"Then, don't apologize for something you didn't do." His eyes are hard for a second before he drops them to his plate.

"Okay." I nod as a large knot forms in my gut. I don't want to fight with him, but the things that happened to him at a young age kind of sucked. If I had a magic wand, I'd get rid of them, but I have a feeling that would piss him off. It's strange, but he seems to cling to those hardships as a shield to keep himself safe. What happens if he lets those walls down?

He lifts the bun to his lips. "Eat."

"Right." I grab mine and bite off a piece. My mind drifts as we eat. Can

I have a no strings attached relationship with him? No chance. I'm already tied up in strings and bows. The question is, how tangled in knots will I get when one of us unravels?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kameron

Gavin and Delaney have gone inside to either clean the kitchen or make out. With their son gone for the evening, I'm betting on the latter. Everyone else has left.

I grab Layla's hand and pull her up from the picnic bench. "Let's take a walk."

Her eyes dart around the yard. "It's not that big."

I waggle my eyebrows. "I beg to differ."

"That's what she said." Layla laughs and settles against my side.

The fact she gets my reference to one of my favorite television shows makes another small chink in my armor. I've spent the last few weeks binge-watching the show when not on call.

"Are you going to go out with me?" I nuzzle my chin against the top of her head.

"I would think that's pretty obvious at this point." She gazes up at me. I can barely make out her expression under the streetlight, but it appears to hold more than lust. It would be easier if that were her only emotion, but I'm afraid I'm playing with fire.

"Where do you want to go for our first date?" I stop and pull her into my arms.

"How about dinner and dancing?"

"Sounds perfect." I can't say I wasn't hoping for that answer. I want the opportunity to hold her in my arms and not need an excuse. What's my reason right now? Because I fucking want to. "How do we handle your father? He's my boss and isn't exactly excited about us being together."

"He's not excited about me being with anyone. But I told him in no uncertain terms that he needs to stay out of my personal life. I'm an adult

with a college education. I'm no longer a little girl."

I arch an eyebrow. "And he agreed?"

"He agreed enough." She stands on her tiptoes, wraps her arms around my neck, and presses her lips against mine. Lord, save me. She's bad for my health, but I don't care.

When her tongue flicks against my lips, I growl. It's too soon to take her home and have sex with her, but I want to.

Her fingers dig into the flesh at the base of my neck, and my dick goes on full alert. I trail kisses along her jaw until I reach her ear. "Doll, you need to stop before I take you right here."

She convulses against me, and my entire body screams to take her. I haven't been this desperate for a taste of heaven since I was in high school. And if I don't get control soon, I'm going to make a total fool of myself.

I glance around. We're in the shadows and far enough from the house that we can neither be seen nor heard easily. The porch light has been turned off, leaving us in darkness. Adrenaline shoots through my veins. I'm going to hell.

I skate my hands up her thighs, dragging her skirt with them. "I want to feel you. Do I make you wet?"

"God, yes." She moans and surges forward, pressing her center against me.

Blood pounds in my ears until I can't hear anything but the sound of my pulse thumping like a drum. "I can smell you, and it makes my blood boil."

She whimpers. I slip my fingers inside her panties and run the tips over her swollen lips. *Heaven*. I swipe some of the juices and growl in her ear. "So, fucking wet."

Her clit is tight and hard under my fingertip. The instant I touch it, she gasps and jumps. Her responsiveness has me on fire. I gather more of her desire and return my attention to her clit.

I need more room to move, but stopping at this point is out of the question.

“Oh, my God,” she coos, and I repeatedly flick against the tender nerve. The way her breath hitches and comes out in wild huffs, makes my chest swell with pride. I lick the flesh between her ear and her throat as she grinds her pelvis against me.

“Kameron.” The overwhelming desire in her voice is fucking hot. I want to yank down her panties and plaster her against the outdoor playroom that Gavin built until she’s screaming and crashing over me. Yet somehow, I find the willpower to keep from rutting her like a wild animal. “Don’t stop. Right there.”

“Yes, baby. Tell me how you want it.”

She pants, and her fingernails pinch down into my skin, triggering my desire to amp up another notch. “I can’t talk.”

“Baby, fucking come on my fingers. I want to feel your body convulsing because of my touch.”

“Oh.” She shudders violently in my arms, causing me to both laugh and growl at the same time. *So, hot.* I’m surprised a coyote hasn’t started howling. Do they even have coyotes in California? Who the fuck cares?

I claim her mouth and thrust my tongue in and out of her depths as I work my index finger along her slit. I collect each moan as a trophy to display on my mantle. I ache to worship this woman and take every ounce of goodness she has and drown in it.

As she nears her climax, I leave her molten pussy and tug on her clit. “Oh, fuck, Kameron,” she yelps and shatters around me.

“That’s it, sweet girl.” I slowly remove my hand from her panties and lick my fingers. “Delicious.”

Her eyes widen at my actions, and I frown. “Has no one ever talked dirty to you? Or told you how sweet you are?”

“No.” She shakes her head.

Damn. This girl is too much. I raise my mouth into a half-smile. “Then prepare to be educated. I’m going to blow your mind with sweet nothings and dirty fucking words. Then, I’m going to drive you wild with endless orgasms.”

Fuck. Two months with this woman is not going to be enough. Do I dare hope for more?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Layla

When my cellphone rings, I smile. *Ethan Campos*. “Hello, Mr. Campos.”

“Hello, dear.” His frail gravelly voice rings into my ear. “How’re you this fine day?”

“I’m wonderful. And you?” By this point, I’m grinning ear to ear. I love Mr. Campos. He was my music teacher in elementary school. He retired after my fourth-grade year, but no one else replaced him as my favorite *Farmer in the Dell* impersonator.

“I could be better. My sciatica is acting up today. That’s why I called. Would you be interested in driving me somewhere on Saturday?”

“Of course.” Crap. Here I go again. Speaking before thinking. Do I work on Saturday? I pause for several seconds as I mentally go through my work schedule. “Mr. Campos, if I remember correctly, I’m off at two o’clock that day. I should be able to come over at four o’clock.”

“That’s great, dear. Dress nicely.”

“Yes, sir.” I chuckle as I hang up.

What quirky or zany thing does he have up his sleeve this time? The last time I offered to drive him somewhere, we ended up at the senior center, where he danced the evening away with a couple of little old ladies.

They were adorable with their tight grey curls and giggles as they worked the room. Mr. Campos must have been one fine Casanova in his day.

Speaking of Casanova. My heart jumps in my throat. Kameron will be here any second. I glance in the mirror and study my reflection. *Not bad*. I press my lips together and twist to study my backside. The skirt sways as I move, and it kisses the back of my legs.

I shiver as memories of his hands caressing my flesh flood my entire

body with heat and need. I haven't seen him for two days because of our work schedules, but I can't stop thinking about him.

Gu-u-urll, you're in trouble. I shake my head and sigh. There's no way I'm not going to fall for his cocky charm. I can say with as much bravado as I want that it's purely physical, but its more than that.

The sound of crunching tires interrupts my musings. Kameron's pickup pulls into the driveway, and I run out the door without a care in the world. Why worry about tomorrow when you can enjoy today?

He jumps out of the driver's side, and his eyes rake over me. "You're gorgeous."

"Thank you." My cheeks heat as he rounds the front of the pickup and stalks toward me.

"I missed you." He grins and wraps his arms around me.

When his mouth lands on my lips, I fist his T-shirt and moan. His tongue dives inside and swipes against mine. He mimics the movements his fingers took as he explored my sex just a few nights ago, and my clit throbs in anticipation. I place my leg between his and rock into his growing length.

When he growls against my lips, I nearly drop my panties right then in front of my neighbors. It's insane. No one has ever turned me on like he does.

I can say I was saving myself for marriage, but that's not entirely true. I was waiting until I found someone who lit my world on fire—someone who drenches my panties with one flick of his tongue. I break free and heave as I try to catch my breath. "Do you want to come inside my house?"

"Fuck, no. I want to come inside your sweet, tight pussy." He bites his bottom lip, and my brain short circuits. This is the look I've dreamed about all my life. Lord, where's the air conditioner? Or a bag of ice I can dump in my panties.

I quiver. "We don't have to go out."

"Yes, we do." He pulls back and grabs my hand. "I promised you dinner and dancing. Then...." He waggles his eyebrows. "Then, we'll come back here, and I'll put you to bed."

“O-okay.” He opens the door and helps me inside his pickup. Once I have the seatbelt fastened, he leans inside and kisses the corner of my lips. “One last taste so I can make it to the restaurant.”

After he slams the door shut, I drop my head against the cushion and swoon. Is this for real? This guy’s not the one I met three weeks ago. Which one is the real Kameron Willoughby?

He climbs into the vehicle and starts the engine. “Are you okay with Mexican?”

“Sure.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to say, ‘I’m good with anything as long as it is with you,’ but I don’t want to scare him off. My heart dives to my feet. I’ve got to remember this is temporary. He’s leaving in a couple of months.

When we near my neighbor, Jenny Bowman’s house, she’s standing on the corner by her mailbox with her hip angled out and her tits so far in the air, I’m surprised she doesn’t tip over backward. Why is she at the mailbox wearing a miniskirt and three buttons open on her top?

As we drive past, her mouth drops open. Ah, she’s seen Kameron around town and thought she’d get her claws in him. I clasp my hands together to keep from flipping her off.

I graduated with Jenny, and she thought her shit didn’t stink. Not this time. He’s mine, big tits. God, when did I get so petty? Right, about now.

I’m quiet as we drive the rest of the way to the restaurant. The music from the stereo is a soft jazz number, but it does little to settle my nerves. What if I’m making the biggest mistake of my life? Stop it. What if I’m making the best decision I’ve ever made?

When we get to the restaurant, he helps me out of the vehicle and lays his arm over my shoulders. “How was work?”

“I was busy. There’s never a dull moment at the café.” I wrap my arm around his waist and lean into his side. I inhale his cologne, and my knees wobble. “I even caught a sighting of Gertrude. The ducklings are growing up.”

He smirks. “Thanks to you. She almost lost a couple of them if you wouldn’t have intervened.”

“I knew you were a closet duck lover.” I giggle as he opens the door and waits behind me until I enter.

“You’re right. They were adorable, but not nearly as sexy as you.”

I roll my eyes. “You thought I was a pest.”

“No.” He stops and cups the back of my head, causing my body to heat from head to toe. Several tables of customers turn to stare, and my heart thuds in my chest. “I thought you were perfect, but I don’t believe in perfect, and it pissed me off.”

“No one’s perfect.” My voice is husky as if he’s stolen all the air in the room.

“I’m beginning to think you’re as close as someone can get.” His eyes bore into mine, and the butterflies roll in unison like a team of synchronized swimmers. Lord, I’m going to drown.

He leans back and drops his hand. “Let’s eat and dance, so we can get to the good stuff. I want to taste all of you at once.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kameron

After the waitress takes our dessert order, I study Layla. She's a stunning creature. Her auburn hair surrounds her face unless she's swiping it back and tucking it behind her ears. Her hair is like the rest of her—free and open.

It's like she doesn't question the consequences. What does that feel like? Even sitting here with this gorgeous woman, I question what I'm doing. Is it a mistake to trust her? What happens if she proves to be no different than any other woman I've known? Can I pick up the pieces if she destroys me?

"Why did you become a firefighter?" She places her hands in her lap, and I fight the urge to knock the table over and grab them. Do I crave her touch that much? Yes, I do.

"When I graduated from high school, I needed something quick. I'd already been working three jobs while going to school, but they were mostly odd jobs or mowing. I didn't have a nest egg to go to college, and even if I did, I wouldn't have gone. I started working for a construction company doing the manual jobs that none of the older guys wanted to do." I pick up my fork and tap it on the tablecloth.

Her eyes soften, but I'm not looking for her sympathy. "Must have been a lot of hard work."

"It was, but it helped me grow stronger and paid good money. I was able to pay my rent and utilities and give my dad some money." I straighten my back and crack my neck. "I'm proud of all the work I did growing up. I had to become a man at a young age. First, helping with my siblings when I still lived at home. Then, when I moved out and was working full-time, it was the same hours as my dad, so no one was home with the kids. I made sure someone was there to help them with their schoolwork and to get to bed on time."

She stares in awe. "Wow. I can't imagine. I had it so easy as an only

child with my parents providing everything for me. I kind of feel like a leech at this point.”

“Don’t. Don’t feel bad for having a childhood most people should have.”

The waitress brings our dessert, and her eyes light up. “Yum. This looks delicious.” She takes a bite and groans, causing my dick to press against my zipper. “Although, I have no idea how I’m going to eat an entire piece of cake.” She clutches her stomach.

“You can save it for later. You’ll need your energy.” My voice is huskier than I intend, but when her eyes go dark, and she hitches her breath, I don’t regret it.

“Maybe I will.” She moves the plate of chocolate peanut butter cake a few inches away from her. I grab her hand as I’m not about to waste an opportunity to touch her, and she laces her fingers between mine. “That still doesn’t explain the firefighting.”

“After a couple of years, I was getting burnt out from all the heavy lifting and saw a friend from high school, Rich Anderson, he was working for the fire department and told me about an opening.” I shrug. “The rest is history.”

“It must have been nice working with a friend. Harbor and I worked together at the café all through high school and weekends in college. We had a blast together.”

Her face is wistful as she seems to drift off in her memories. Were there guys that chased after her in college? There had to have been.

The thought of another man touching her causes my free hand to ball into a fist. I unclench my fingers to keep from stabbing my nails into my palm—nothing like ruining a date with a trip to the ER for stitches.

“Things were good at the station for a long time.” I don’t want to talk about my ex. I run my finger over the back of her hand. When her pupils grow larger, adrenaline zips through my body, and I want to stroke all of her. “Are you ready for that dance?”

“Yes.” She licks her lips, and I nearly fall onto the floor and beg her to do it again. I crave all the good she has to give.

When I reach her side of the table, I grab her hand and pull her to her feet. I inhale the scent of chocolate, peanut butter, and vanilla, and then, I claim her mouth until she whimpers with desire. I don’t care if other people are watching us. I’m that desperate to have her.

Fuck. I pull back. One taste is never enough, and two will destroy me.

“I’m not that good of a dancer.” She wobbles on her heels and clutches my side. Thank God I’m not the only one impacted by our chemistry.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.” I lead the way to the dancefloor where the other couples sway together to a classic slow song and wrap my arms around her waist, pressing her against my body.

For several seconds, I stand motionless with our bodies plastered together from chest to thigh. Her heart thuds against me while her soft belly cradles my aching cock. “I’ve never wanted anyone with as much desperation as I want you.” I should be running for the hills, but I can’t move.

“Me, too,” she sighs, laces her arms around my neck, and runs her fingernails along my scalp. “Every time you look at me, my skin tightens with need.” She stands on her tiptoes and leans in. “I want your tongue on my clit like your fingers were.”

Holy fuck. My eyes roll back in my head, and I force myself not to drag her behind the restaurant and mount her like a wild animal.

The desire rushing through my veins is the most intense sensation I’ve ever experienced. Layla’s like a drug and being with her is a high I’m going to chase the rest of my life.

Her eyes dart to the ground. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I growl. No one else in the restaurant exists as I move her body with the music. “You’re perfect. However, I need you to not say another sexy thing until we’re back at your place because if you do, I’m going to fuck you right where we stand. And I’m not looking to get arrested.”

A slow smile curves up to her cheeks until the familiar glow fills her

eyes. She bites her bottom lip and rubs her thigh against my aching balls. “I want to suck your hard—”

“Wench.” My mouth captures hers before she can say the word. Either way, I’m doomed. My dick is clamoring to fulfill her fantasy. Luckily, that fucker hasn’t learned how to undo a zipper.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Layla

The second the door to my house is shut, Kameron grabs my thighs and hoists me up until I wrap my legs around his waist. Our mouths never leave each other as we thrust and lunge our tongues together.

The last note of the song was barely played before he'd paid the bill and dragged me outside to his vehicle. He'd made me promise to stay on my side of the pickup so he could concentrate and not get a ticket. It was the hardest thing I've ever done.

His hands massage the flesh of my thighs as he braces me alongside the door. My nipples strain against the fabric of my bra. They feel chaffed and ache for his touch.

I should be scared, or, at the very least, nervous about what we're about to do, but I'm too excited to worry about any discomfort. The need between my thighs is too strong to ignore as I grind my pelvis against his hard stomach.

"God, I want you so bad," he growls against my lips. His hands work under my skirt. When he grabs the elastic strap of my panties and it snaps, I gasp. "I'll buy you a new pair. The last ones got in my way."

He slides me down his body, drops to his knees, and lifts my skirt. The burning glow in his eyes makes my knees go weak, so I grab his shoulders to keep from falling. "Baby, is this what you want?"

"Yes." I nod erratically as his mouth moves closer to my sex. The intensity of the moment is enhanced by his eyes never leaving mine. I've had someone finger my sex before him, but I've never had someone's mouth on me. My heart bangs in my chest.

When his tongue flicks over my clit, my head thumps against the door, causing the wood to vibrate against my back. *Oh, my God.* I suck in ragged pants as he repeatedly lashes against my swollen nub. *Amazing. Holy cow. This is amazing.* I dig my nails into the fabric of his shirt.

“Such a sweet tasting pussy,” he growls and then slips his tongue against the length of my slit. “I love that you’re so wet for me.”

“Gawd.” My eyes roll back in my head. I don’t want him to ever stop. His tongue snakes between my lips and dives into my opening. *Sweet heaven. Harder.* I whimper and thrust my pelvis at his face. *Why did I wait so long?*

Why? That’s easy. The other guys I’ve been with were boys. They didn’t have substance. They didn’t look at me the way Kameron does. He’s the most amazing man I’ve ever met. His gruffness is a shield to protect him for all the bad shit in the world, and once he lets his guard down, all the sinful sexiness of the man oozes out, and I’m melting like a puddle of ice cream on a hot day for him.

I want more. I want to take away all the ugliness he’s experienced and show him life can be beautiful. It doesn’t have to be filled with heartbreak and sadness. Sometimes people stay. I want to stay for him.

I grab his face, pull him backward, and stare into his lust-filled eyes. “I want to make love to you.”

He stands to face me. “Are you sure this is what you want? I don’t know where I’ll be in a few months, and I don’t know the first thing about a good, committed relationship. They’ve all blown up in my face.”

“I won’t. You don’t have to make promises you won’t keep. Just give us a shot and see what happens. I don’t have any experience with relationships either. My last boyfriend dumped me when I wouldn’t give it up, but I know about loving relationships that last. Meadow Bay is filled with them, and my parents have been together for thirty years.”

When he doesn’t speak, my heart clamors in my chest. Is he going to leave? Please, don’t go. Instead of begging, I steady my shoulders and wait. This must be his choice.

He slowly raises one side of his mouth into a cocky grin. “Where’s the bedroom?”

Laughter bubbles through my chest and then fills the room. I feel like I’m floating on air. He may not have said the words, but his trust that I won’t fuck him over has me feeling like I’m riding a tilt a whirl at a carnival. Bring

on the cotton candy and snow cones.

“Follow me.” I wink. “If you can keep up.” I run full speed down the hallway, but before I can make it to the bedroom, he grabs me and swings me into his arms as we cross the threshold.

Without asking, he fulfills my wish from the day at the fire station. I so desperately want to keep this man. How am I going to prove to him we’re meant to be together?

Once he reaches the bed, he scans the room. “I expected unicorns and teddy bears.”

I punch him in the upper arm. “Seriously?” I roll my eyes. “I’m not a ten-year-old.”

“Oh, baby, I hope the hell not.” He cringes. “The things I’m going to do to you would land me in prison if you were.” He tosses me in the middle of the bed and kicks off his shoes as I laugh uncontrollably.

When his shirt lands on the floor, the laughter stops. *Holy hell. His abs have abs.* “Well.” I sober. “All that hose lifting has done your body good.”

He waggles his eyebrows and pops his pecs. “Thank you.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I crawl on my hands and knees to the side of the mattress. “Speaking of hoses. Let’s see what you’re packing.” I grab the edge of his jeans and pop the button open.

My fingers shake as each zipper tooth slides open. *Now you get nervous. Hold it together.*

My mouth waters as his cock jumps into view. *No underwear. Whoa.* I lean back and fan myself. Should I tell him I’ve never done this? I bite my bottom lip and make a calculated decision.

I’m not about to do anything that turns him off until it’s too late. I don’t want him to back off because of some moral high ground that states I must save my virginity for some magical man who doesn’t exist. I want Kameron to be my first. And if I’m brutally honest—my only. Forever.

I gulp and lean forward. *You can do this. You’ve read books. Hell,*

you've watched porn. I slide my tongue along the head of his dick, and it bobs toward me. My eyes widen. *Just stick it in your mouth. It can't be that hard. Hard.* I chuckle and engulf his cock into my mouth.

As I work my tongue tentatively over his hot flesh, I inhale his musky scent. It feels like all the blood in my body rushes out of my head, leaving it spinning. I dig my nails into the flesh of his hips, open my mouth, and repeatedly take in and release his stiff shaft.

When he groans and twists his hands into my hair, I increase my efforts. *This is hot as fuck.*

He tugs the strands of my hair and mutters, "So fucking good, babe. Suck my cock just like that."

As I take him farther into my mouth, my clit twitches, and wetness floods between my thighs. I gag and stiffen. *Shit.*

"Fuck," he growls.

Huh? Guys do like deep throating. Hell. I figured that was a porn thing. I do it again, and when I gag this time, I don't flinch. It doesn't feel dirty. It feels fucking powerful.

I grasp the base of his dick, which causes his thighs to tighten. As I work up and down his flesh with my hand, I wiggle on the mattress. I want his hard length deep inside my core. Pounding into me. I want to experience all the highs of sex because so far this has been lights out amazing.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kameron

The muscles in my back and thighs quiver as her hot mouth works over my pulsating flesh. The sucking sounds she makes as her small hand jerks up and down my cock has me heaving like I've run a marathon.

It's not just that it's been months since I've had sex. It's her. She touches a part of my soul I haven't let another person close to since before my mom left. I don't want to hold her at arm's length. I don't want to expect the worst. For the first time, I want to believe in the good. To clamor for the happy ever after that's always been out of my reach.

When she clasps my balls, I pull back. "Stop." I don't want to waste my first time with her. I want to get lost in her eyes as I make her forget every man that came before me.

"Why?" Her eyes fill with worry, and all the armor I've carried around my heart shatters.

"I've got to be inside you. Feel your body against mine as I pleasure you." I snag my wallet out of the back pocket of my jeans, pull out a condom, and lay it on the end table.

Once I have what I need, I kick my jeans off my feet and climb onto the bed. Before I can grab her, she grasps the hem of her shirt and tosses it over her head.

"Damn, I wanted to do that." I clasp her hands and move them down to her sides.

She smiles as I lay her back and remove her bra. When her perfect tits emerge to the room, I can't help but taste what she has to offer. The puckered nub tightens harder under my tongue as I squeeze her other breast under my palm. She moans and arches against my touch.

As she rubs her thigh and knee along my flesh, I inhale, and the hairs on my body stand. With my dick nestled at her juncture, it feels like we're in

our own universe. One where no one else exists. Only us.

Reality swoops in to claw at my gut, causing my head to ache. We can't stay here forever. I have to go to work in less than seven hours for a twenty-four-hour shift.

I run my tongue over her stomach and around her belly button. Her body quivers under my touch. Is this what love feels like? To only want to be with one person. To not want to spend one second apart. I'm not sure I'm ready for the answer.

As I crawl up her body, I suck and nip at her flesh. Each convulsion of her body makes my heart swell. I want to beat on my chest and shout to whoever will listen that I'm the one that does this to her.

When I reach her jaw, I place my lips against her and lightly pepper kisses until I connect with her lips. She's soft and welcoming as we hungrily greet each other. With my hand, I spread her knees to the mattress and settle between her legs. My cock rubs against her sex, and her eyes pop open.

The wariness in her eyes is a stark contrast to every other move she's made. My heart pangs against my ribs. "What is it?"

She bites her bottom lip and studies the ceiling.

"Layla, you can tell me. If you don't want me, I'll leave." Fuck. I don't want to leave. But the concern in her eyes has panic crawling through my chest.

"I want to, but I'm afraid you'll leave."

"I'm not leaving unless you tell me to go." The pulse in my temple jumps.

Her eyes finally meet mine. "Promise?"

A lump swells in my throat. "I promise." The words aren't as hard to say as I expected. I've never promised a woman anything.

"I'm a virgin."

I close my eyes and swallow. *Shit.*

“See.” Something pounds on the mattress beside me. “I knew you’d freak out.”

I open my eyes and stare at her. *She wants me to be her first.* This is an honor I prayed for but didn’t really expect to be true. I don’t have to imagine junk punching every guy who’s fucked her. I’m the only one she trusts enough to give her body to. “Babe, I’m not leaving.”

Her mouth drops open. “You’re not?”

“No. I’m happy. No, actually, I’m ecstatic. I want to be the only man who’s been in your bed.” I grin. “And then, in your kitchen.” I waggle my eyebrows. “Maybe even in my pickup.” I lean down and claim her mouth as she comes alive beneath me.

Her hands clasp my ass as she grinds her pussy against my length. It’s like we’ve both been waiting for this moment.

“I need you more than anything I’ve ever needed. I promise not to cause you too much pain.” Two promises in less than a minute. Wow. I’m breaking records here.

I raise my hips and slowly enter her center as we gaze into each other’s eyes. Her eyes never flinched as I pushed through what remained of her hymen. Her mouth opens, and she licks her lips.

“That’s it, sweetheart. From there, it won’t hurt.”

She nods and adjusts under me. Even though she’d barely tensed, I wait until her muscles loosen before I move.

“That’s it, relax.” As her knees fall to the mattress, I kiss her lips. I move in and out of her at a breathtakingly slow pace. I’ve never been with a virgin, and I don’t want to hurt her.

“Kameron?”

“Yes.”

“Harder, please.” Her voice is raspy as she whispers.

“As you wish.”

“You’re going to quote *The Princess Bride*?” She grips my biceps.

“Yes.” I grin as her fingernails push into my flesh.

“Get to blowing my mind with orgasms and woo me with movie quotes later.”

I chuckle but follow her command. Each thrust of my hips toward the mattress is met with a reciprocal lunge of her pelvis as she takes me deeper and harder.

Her mouth is open while she gasps for air, and small guttural moans fill the room. She moves her hands to my ass and grinds against me. “Please.”

“Please, what?” I lean down and clasp my mouth over one of her breasts. As I suck down on the tip, she lurches forward. *Fuck, yes.* I hold my breath to keep from losing control.

“Fuck me.”

Fu-u-uck. I shudder. Her loss of control has me on edge, but I keep my pace steady as I ride over the tight muscles at the top of her sex.

She wraps her legs around my waist and jabs her heels into my thighs. “Don’t stop. Right there.”

My heart soars as her orgasm nears. I want it to be good for her much more than I care about my own release. Next time will be even better. Holy hell. “Your pussy is so tight, baby. It feels so fucking good.”

“Oh, my God.” Her eyes slam shut as she quakes under me and squeezes her thighs around me like a vice clamp digging into wood.

“That feels so fucking good.”

“Yes-s-s,” she hisses as her pussy sucks my dick, causing me to spill my seed deep inside her. I collapse on the bed beside her and drag her into my arms.

“Holy shit. That was amazing.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Layla

Several hours later, I stretch, roll over, and stare at the dark ceiling. The only light is from my bathroom, but the door is partially closed. I smile as memories from the night before slip through my mind like a beautiful cinema reel.

After making love, Kameron brought me a warm washcloth to clean up, not that there was much blood. The whole experience was nothing like I expected. All the horror stories of pain and blood were way exaggerated. There was some slight pain and then an earth-shattering climax. Next time, there will be no pain—only pleasure.

I twist to study him. His mouth is slightly open as he lays flat on his stomach, sprawled on his side of the bed. He's gorgeous—all 5'11" of him with his dark hair, high cheekbones, and five o'clock shadow.

He groans and reaches out toward me but misses. His eyes open, and then, he glowers. "What're you doing all the way over there?"

"Watching you."

"Humph." He grabs my hip and pulls me to him. "Don't go so far away."

"Yes, sir." I giggle, snuggle closer, and inhale his scent. I'll never smell the scent of his cologne again and not want to have sex with him. It's my curse.

He runs his hand over my cheek. "Do you feel okay?"

"Never better." There's a small dull ache, but I'm sure it will disappear throughout the day. When can we have sex again? My nipples pucker and rub against his chest, making my breath hitch.

"Doll, don't go getting any ideas. We need to wait. I don't want to hurt you." He places his hand on the back of my head and kisses me with enough pressure to cause the dull ache to spiral into a raging inferno. I slide my knee

between his legs, and his fingers fist my hair. “You’re playing with fire.”

“I want you. I need to feel your hard body pressing into me.” I thrust my sex against his thigh, and his cock jumps alongside my belly. “I don’t want to wait.”

He rolls on top of me and ravages my mouth. His tongue grazes mine, and I respond with a ferocity I’ve never experienced. My tongue thrusts against his as if I’m trying to lead our lovemaking, which is a total joke since I have no real idea what I’m doing—yet. But I’m eager to learn.

Seconds later, a beeping sound, vibration, and bright light fills the space around my night table.

I blink. “What is that?”

Kameron groans, rolls off me, and hits his head on the pillow. “My alarm. I’ve got to go to work. I didn’t realize it was so late. Early. Whatever. I’ve got to get to work.”

“Shit.” My bottom lip pokes out. *Stop being a baby.* I roll my eyes. Adults work. It’s not his fault the station shifts start early in the morning. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be selfish.”

“It’s okay.” He grins. “I like that you don’t want to be away from me.” He stretches over me and grabs his phone.

When his entire body stills, I glance over to the nightstand as the phone continues to bounce and shake on the wooden surface. “Is something wrong?”

“Um. I don’t know how to tell you this.” He grabs a small package and lifts it up.

The condom. Oh, no. My throat constricts. *We didn’t use a condom.* Shit. It’s not like I’m on the pill or anything.

“I forgot to put on a condom.” He rolls off me and sits on the edge of the bed. As he swipes the screen on his phone, the buzzing stops. “I don’t suppose you’re on the pill.”

“No.” I shake my head. Not that he can see as he’s staring at the floor

like it will somehow open and save him. “I’m not.” I bite my bottom lip to keep it from quivering.

He glances over his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

“Me, too.” I nod and use my arm to push into a seated position. My hair sticks out in all directions. *Oh, my God.* I use my hand to smash it down to my head. *Do I have bad breath to add to my bedhead?*

“I know we just started seeing each other, so the timing is way off, but...” He turns and trails off.

My heart breaks a little bit at his forlorn expression. Crap. I’m falling in love with him, and he’s already planning his exit game. “Don’t stress over it.” I wave my hand dismissively. “I’m about to start my period, so there’s no reason to worry about getting pregnant.”

“Okay.” He nods, and the muscles in his back relax. “Is it okay if I shower? I have some extra clothes at the station.”

“Sure. It’s fine.” I drop my legs off the mattress on the side opposite of where he’s sitting. The thought of lying around naked has lost its appeal.

I grab my T-shirt and shorts and slip them on as I hear the water from the shower hit the porcelain bottom. *What am I going to do?*

I run my hands over my face. My period was less than two weeks ago. I should be right in the middle of my cycle. Just because I haven’t had sex before doesn’t mean I’m not up on fertility. I took health in school. I even took human development in college. I shiver. If I’m pregnant, it’s clear I’m all on my own. Kameron’s not sticking around to play pattycake and coach t-ball.

My eyes sting, and I slam them closed. Don’t freak out. Lots of women try for months, sometimes even years, to get pregnant. What’s the likelihood you’re going to get knocked up the first time?

My luck or someone else’s? Yeah. My luck is not good.

Kameron’s phone buzzes. Then, it stops. Seconds later, the vibration and buzzing start again. *Shit. He hit the snooze button.* I round the end of the bed as the water switches from a full stream to a random trickle.

I grab his cellphone off the mattress and frown. *Which way do I swipe?* The screen lights up again and buzzes. The circle showing which way to open the phone lights up.

As I swipe my finger over the screen, Kameron yells out from the bathroom. “When do you work?”

“I work later today. I get off at three o’clock.” I glance up as he stands naked in the doorway with water trailing down his abdomen. My heart slams in my chest. *He’s gorgeous.* “Can I photograph you?”

After my gaze reaches his face, I jerk backward. His eyes glisten with anger, and his jaw is so tight, it looks like it might break. The muscles in his neck and all the way down to his fisted hands are rigid.

“Give me my phone.”

“What?” I stare at him like he’s got a horn growing out of his ass.

“My phone. Give me my cell phone.” He stalks toward me and then grabs the device out of my hand. “Don’t touch my phone.”

I jerk back like he smacked me square in the face. “What’s your problem?”

“Just when I thought you were different.” He stomps to the bathroom and slams the door behind him.

My entire body floods with heat, and my knees shake. Is he screwing around on someone? Is he married? Oh, my flipping God, I’m the other woman. Does he have a family back in Kansas City? Kids? Bile floods my mouth.

No wonder he doesn’t want a baby with me. That would be kind of hard to explain to his wife.

My hand flies to my mouth, and I groan as hot tears fill my eyes. I thought he was someone special. I thought I was someone special. What a joke. He’s right—not everything is sunshine and rainbows. I shove on my shoes and head out of the room. He can find his own way out. I never want to see him again.

Chapter Thirty

Kameron

The sound of the scanner as it cycles through radio frequencies is the only noise in the room. The other guys are outside cleaning one of the firetrucks. I opted to stay inside and listen for any calls. Not that anyone wanted to be around me anyway. I've been biting everyone's head off for the last nine hours.

I lean back in the chair, stretch out my legs, and will the throbbing in my head to dissipate.

When I stepped out of the bathroom and saw Layla with my cell phone in her hand, I saw red. The betrayal of my trust cut through to the core, leaving me weak and angry.

Layla seems sweet, nice, naive, and innocent. I growl. But it was all a lie. Women can't be trusted.

"Hey, dude. What's up?" Cole's voice penetrates my self-inflicted pity party.

"Nothing, man. I'm not good company today." I leave my eyes shut in hopes he'll take the hint.

Chair legs scrape across the floor, and the sound of his big body slumping into the seat proves that wishful thinking is a waste of time. "Woman troubles?"

"Nothing I can't handle." I pop one eye open and study him. He's near my age, but his eyes don't carry the same weight mine do. I straighten and cross my arms. I guess we're going to do this.

"Listen, Layla's a great girl."

I cock an eyebrow. "Yeah?" Not from my side of the bed.

"I don't know what happened, but she's one of the most open and honest people I've ever met. Whatever occurred must have been a

misunderstanding.”

“What makes you think something happened?”

He tips his chin up and gives me a look like I’m treading on thin ice. Shit. Maybe I am. “You came in here the other day singing with a sappy smile on your face. This morning, you’re stomping through the place like Attila the Hun. No one else will come in here and talk to you.”

“You drew the short straw?”

“The shortest fucking one we could find.” He lays his forearms on the table and waits.

“Fine.” I unlace my arms. What could go wrong if I tell him the whole story? Heat fills my face, and I clear my throat. Not sharing all the details. As angry as I am with her, I’m not spilling everything for the five o’clock news. “This morning, I caught her on my phone.”

“So?”

“You don’t get it.” I shove my seat back and stand. “Awhile back, I was seeing a woman. We were compatible. We went out on the weekends.” What did we do together? The relationship was dying a slow death until I found out about the bet. As I pace the floor, I forget anyone else is in the room. What did she even mean to me?

Nothing. Basically, she was someone to hang with. Why was I so bent out of shape over her? Our connection was nothing compared to what I feel with Layla.

It was—embarrassment. That’s all it was. She used me to hurt someone else, and I hate being used. Manipulated.

“And?”

“Shit.” I trip over my shoe and twist to stare at Cole. “Sorry. I was lost in thought.”

“I see that.” He chuckles and crosses his arms. “I’ve got all day. Well, at least until a call comes in. I may not be the best guy to spill your guts to, but I’m from here, so I know all the players, and I have nothing else going

on.”

I rest my hip against the counter. “Cole, I appreciate it. I moved here over some shit with an ex-girlfriend. She used my old cell phone and pretended to be me. She made a bet with one of my co-workers, pretending to be me, to humiliate another woman.” I shake my head in disgust. “Why? Because she was jealous of something that happened back in high school.”

“That’s stupid. Who cares what happened back in high school?”

“Apparently, Tabitha did. She’d been jealous of this woman, Chloe, and her best friend, Jenna, for years. She told this guy she’d pay him money to screw her. When he did the deed, he would get five hundred bucks for pretending to care about her. Then, he was supposed to dump her and tell her about the bet.”

“The guy sounds like a real asshole, too.” His fingertips tap on the tabletop. “Did he win?”

“No. One of my friends, Rich, who had liked Chloe for years, found out about it, told her about the bet, and now, they’re together.”

“No harm, no foul.”

“That’s what my friend, Rich, keeps saying, but it was...”
Heartbreaking? Hardly. Devastating? Not really. More of a relief that I could end things with her. “Humiliating.”

He stands and scoots the chair under the table. “It sounds like she’s a shitty person, and the guy is a real cocksucker, but why are you projecting that onto Layla? Did she do something to violate your trust besides pick up your cell phone? Why did she have it? Did you ask?”

“I didn’t ask.” I swallow. Fuck. Now I look like the cocksucker. You’d think the way my life’s been going, I’d have dropped a fucking mirror on the floor and shattered it.

Did it ring? I rack my brain, trying to remember what I heard from the bathroom. *Buzzing.* I roll my eyes to the ceiling and stare at the fire suppression system. *Buzzing.* My alarm was going off—again.

Fuck. I pushed her away because she didn’t want to hear my snooze

going off. *Way to go, dumbass.*

“Maybe you should apologize.” He presses his lips together.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “You’re probably right about that.”

He waves and exits the kitchenette. A lot of good that’s going to do me. She hates my guts. When I finally had balls enough to exit her bathroom, she was nowhere to be seen. Dude, you’ve got some major groveling to do.

Chapter Thirty-One

Layla

I grab my strappy sandal and hop on one foot throughout the living room while trying to work the strap around my ankle. Before I can get it fastened, my cell phone rings. I growl under my breath. I don't have time for this. I'm already late. I'm always late.

Instead of racing to the phone, I continue with my mission. Whoever it is can wait. I need to be at Mr. Campos' house in ten minutes. There's no time for distractions.

I weave the material through the hook and lock it in place. Once I have both shoes on, I twirl in a circle and let the fabric brush against my legs. Not bad for a night out on the town with an almost eighty-year-old man.

The phone rings again. Who in the hell won't leave me alone? *Kameron?* My heart thunders in my chest. Nope. No way am I talking to him.

I run to the coffee table and snatch the rectangular device into my hand. *Harbor. Damn it.*

You're full of shit. If he called, you'd drop everything and listen. You can pretend all you want that he hasn't been on your mind all day.

No—I'm not a homewrecker. I straighten my shoulders and lift the phone to my ear. "Hey, Harbor."

"What took you so long to answer?" The irritation in her voice rings through the air. "You went out with Kameron last night, and then, all I get is radio silence."

"He's an asshole," I mutter and fall into the sofa. A light coating of dust flips into the air, causing me to sneeze.

"Gesundheit. Did he force himself on you?"

I scrunch my face together. "I said he was an asshole, not a rapist. He was gentle and caring."

“Tell me more.”

I sigh and prop my feet up on the coffee table. “We went to *La Masa’s*. It was perfect. We came back here and had sex.”

“Oh, my gosh. I can’t believe it. I’m so happy for you.”

“I was too, until this morning.” The pulse in my temple jumps. “Everything was great until I picked up his phone to turn off his alarm, and he snapped.”

“Why? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does if he’s married, and I’m the other woman.” I’m not about to tell her we had unprotected sex. It’s horrible enough I had sex with a married man.

She gasps. “He said that?”

“No. Why would he?”

“Layla Marie Monroe. Stop jumping to conclusions. I can’t believe you think he’s married and didn’t even ask him.”

My face heats. “You think I should ask?”

“Yes. You should ask. Maybe there’s a perfectly good explanation for why he flipped out when you touched his phone.”

“Like what?” I roll my eyes. “It’s a family heirloom, and he was afraid I’d drop it on the floor and break it.”

“Yeah. That sounds completely logical. As logical as he’s married with a family in Kansas City and sleeping with you behind this amazing woman’s back.”

“Fine. Make me sound like I’m overreacting.” I smile for the first time all day. Maybe there’s a rational excuse. “Hey, I’ve got to go. I’m picking up Mr. Campos in less than five minutes.” I lift my arm and look at my watch. “Actually, I’m five minutes late already.”

“Where’re you taking the silver-fox tonight?”

“I have no idea. He said to dress up but wouldn’t give me any details.”

“This should be interesting. I can’t wait to hear about your adventure.”
Harbor giggles.

As soon as I hang up, my phone beeps. *Seriously? Grand Central Station.*

Kameron: We need to talk.

Me: I can’t right now.

My phone rings. *Lord, I can’t get a break.* “Yes?”

“Are you coming?” Mr. Campos’ gruff voice bellows into my ear.

“Yes, Mr. Campos. I’m on my way.”

“Don’t leave me hanging. I’ve got a date with Evette tonight.”

I arch an eyebrow as I try to place Evette. The man’s a total lady’s man. I have no doubt in his younger years he dipped his wick in more pools than I can count. “Who?”

My phone beeps, but I block out my curiosity over what Kameron wants.

“Evette. The lady from the nursing home. We danced together at the senior center.”

Oh, right. One of the blue-haired ladies. “I’ll be there.”

“Hurry up. My Viagra will wear off in three hours. I already took the pill.”

Oh, flip. I did not need that visual. Too late. The image of Mr. Campos’ hang down at full salute with his lady friend riding him on one of the hospital beds invades my brain. *Don’t go there.* I smack my forehead.

Kameron: When can we talk?

Kameron: I need to explain what happened.

Kameron: Give me a chance to explain and then ditch me.

Shit. Now he thinks I’m ignoring him.

Me: I can’t right now. I’m late.

Kameron: Okay. When will you be available?

How long will it take to pick up Mr. Campos, deposit him with his lady, wait for the Viagra to kick in, and then take him back home?

Isn't there something about going to the hospital if an erection lasts more than four hours? I glance at my watch. It's four fifteen.

Me: I should be home by eight o'clock.

Kameron: I'll see if I can get off early.

I've got to go before Mr. Campos gets a boner in my car. I drop my cell phone into my bag and run to my car.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kameron

After retrieving the wayward kitten from the tree in Mr. and Mrs. Lee's front yard, I lift it in the air. "Little guy, you need to stay away from heights."

Now I'm talking to animals. The yellow furred feline mews. I roll my eyes. Next thing I know, I'll be rescuing ducks on my lunch hour. I cradle the cat in the crook of my arm and walk up to Mrs. Lee. "Here you go, ma'am."

"Ma'am." She beams. "You're the sweetest guy. Isn't he a doll, dear?" She grasps her husband's upper arms.

"Yes, dear. He is." He studies her like she's the moon, sun, and stars to him. What's that even like?

I clear my throat. The couple must be in their eighties. "How long have you two been together?"

"We were high school sweethearts." Mrs. Lee reaches out her feeble hand and takes the kitten from me. Her knuckles are swollen from arthritis so she's careful not to bend her fingers.

"Wow. I can't imagine." My parents were together for twelve years and one month. I was the product of a screw behind the bar, and the next four kids were the result of other drunken bouts of sex.

What would it be like to marry the love of your life and want to be together? Not have to be together. My father's second marriage was no better. He also met her at the bar, and she looked like my mom. My dad had a type.

"Son." Mr. Lee grabs my forearm. "You will know when you find the woman who lights up the room when she walks in." His hand shakes as he holds it out. "The world is full of hardships. You need someone who balances you out." He let's go and steps back as his eyes fill with moisture.

The love between these two is inspiring. Layla's just what he describes—her smile brightens the room.

I drag my cell phone out of my back pocket. Nothing. Okay, the last time I spoke with her was ten minutes ago, right before I shimmied up the tree to retrieve the kitten. I shove my phone back into my pocket and cross my arms over my chest. “How did you keep it together all these years?”

Mrs. Lee hands the kitten to her husband and pats his back. “You make a conscious effort every day to stay true and to remain in love. It takes work. There were rough days, but I don’t ever regret making the decision to make our relationship a priority.”

“And.” Mr. Lee waggles his bushy white eyebrows. “You never go to bed angry and make lots of whoopie.”

Pink dots emerge on Mrs. Lee’s cheeks as she glances behind me. “Now, dear. He doesn’t want to hear about our lovemaking.” Seconds later, her eyes narrow. “Oh, there’s Layla. She’s the sweetest girl.”

I spin around and watch as Layla’s vehicle pulls into the driveway next to Mr. and Mrs. Lee’s. *What’s she doing?*

She steps out of the car, and my mouth dries. She’s dressed in the skirt she wore when we made out at Gavin’s house, and her hair shines under the beaming sun. She’s stunning—for someone else. My gut churns, and anger flashes through me.

“I bet she’s here to go out with Ethan,” Mrs. Lee sighs.

What the fuck? She’s going out on a date. Last night she was all over me, making it seem like I’m the only person she cares about, and the next night she’s going out with someone else.

“I can’t wait to hear the details.” Mr. Lee chuckles. “Ethan is so full of himself. The man’s such a lady’s man.”

There had better not be any details to tell. My teeth grind together. “I’ve got to go. If you need anything else, please let us know. And keep Whiskers here on the ground before he gets stuck again.”

“Thank you so much for all your help. You’ve been so kind.”

I swing around and go before I hear the rest. I need to set Layla straight before she goes on her date. I stomp down the sidewalk.

When she sees me, her face flushes, and she waves weakly. “Hey, Kameron.”

“What’re you doing?”

“I’m going out.” She frowns and steps backward. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“That’s bullshit.” I grab her upper arms and stare into her eyes. “Didn’t last night mean anything to you?” My heart thuds against my ribs. How could she have sex with me, give me her virginity, and it not mean anything?

“Yes, it did.” Her eyes fill with tears. “Until you acted like an ass this morning. Now, leave me alone. I’m late.”

“Now you’re going out with someone else?”

“What does it matter to you?” Her nostrils flare as she steps back, causing my hands to drop to my sides. “You screwed me last night when you have a family back home in Kansas City.”

“You know I have family back home. What does that have to do with anything?”

“You’re disgusting.”

I jerk backward like she slapped me. Being with me was disgusting? I suck in air, trying to catch my breath. Screw that. “And I’m not fucking someone else’s sloppy seconds.”

“Fuck you.” She grinds out and stomps up the sidewalk.

The door snaps open, and a 5’7” man in his eighties steps out the front door. “About time you got here. I told you to hurry up. Now, I’ve got an erection, and by the time we get to the nursing home, it’ll be gone. Evette’s going to be disappointed.”

“Sorry, Mr. Campos. It couldn’t be helped.” She glares as I stand there with my mouth gaped open. “Some asshole was bothering me.”

The man shifts his attention to me, and he straightens to his full 5’8” height. His eyes move up and down my body. “Do I need to call the police?”

“No.” She shakes her head and grips his arm to help him down the stairs. “But feel free to call the trash collector.”

Fu-u-uck. I close my eyes and fight the urge to bang my head against the pavement. Layla’s the last good woman in the world, and I’ve totally screwed it up. Again.

Fuck. I’m an idiot.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Layla

After I drop Mr. Campos off from his romp at the nursing home, I finally let everything sink in. My head aches from the argument with Kameron.

Why am I worried about it? He's not who I thought he was, and the person he is—is not someone I want to be around. I pound on the steering wheel and slowly back out of Mr. Campo's driveway.

My heart hurts as bad as my head, and it's not listening. I need a distraction. I snap on the radio. For several seconds, I try to find a station that isn't playing a sappy slow song that rips my guts out. Finally, I settle on a rock station and blast the volume.

I'm only a few blocks from home, so before the song's over, I'm flipping on the blinker and turning onto my street. The neighborhood's quiet as darkness falls, and my vehicle is the only one out on the road.

When I approach my driveway, I slam on the brake. Kameron. What's he doing here? My fingers shake and sweat pops out along my upper back. Who cares why he's here? Let him say his piece and go.

I press on the gas, slide into the driveway, and put the car into park. There's no way I'm going to block his exit and give him an excuse to insult me again.

After I slam the door shut, he hops down from the cab of his pickup. "What do you want?"

"I need to apologize." He moves quickly toward me and stops. Then, he thrusts his hands into his pockets. "I was wrong."

"Okay." I glare at him and cross my arms over my chest. *I'm not about to fall for your shit. You're a womanizer.*

"Listen." He glances toward the house. "Can I come in?"

“Fine,” I sigh and drop my arms to my sides. “As long as it gets you gone sooner.” I march to the front door without looking to see if he follows me. I don’t care if he does. I shudder. *Yeah. Right. You took one glance at his tight T-shirt and low-hung jeans and nipped out.*

Focus. That’s so not important. There’re tons of drool-worthy guys in the world. Except none of the others have given me orgasms.

I yank the door open and move across the room. The more space we have between us, the better off I will be. “What do you need to say?”

“I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.” He snaps the door shut and paces the floor. “About a lot of things. It was uncalled for to get upset about your date. Even though it wasn’t a date. Fuck. We aren’t together, so you can go out with whomever you want.”

“You’re right about that.” I slap my hands on my hips. “Would you be so gracious if Mr. Campos was forty years younger?”

“No.” He stops in mid-step as his teeth grind together. His eyes are filled with barely restrained anger.

“Why would you care?” Stop it. Why are you fishing for information? You should be shoving him out the door. Not stupidly praying the whole thing was a misunderstanding. Idiot.

“I care.” He steps toward me, and I slide sideways.

My heart might be acting like a twelve-year-old with a crush on the bad boy of the block, but the adult side of me is going to stay strong. No matter what it takes.

“I’m sorry.” He steps back and holds his hands up. “I was an asshole this morning. When I saw you with my phone, it took me back to my ex. She used my phone to screw with a nice person by pretending she was me. It was a big mess, and I lost....” I shrug. “Nearly lost a good friend over it.”

I blink. “I don’t understand.”

“Shit.” He rubs his face. “It’s a long story. I let my ex, Tabitha, use my old cell phone. She pretended to be me and set a five hundred dollar bet with a jerk at the fire station to have sex with this woman, Chloe. One of my

friends, Rich, found out and told her what was going on before the guy could follow through with the bet. Tabitha wanted the guy to pretend to like Chloe, screw her, and then publicly dump her.”

“That’s disgusting. Who would do something like that?”

“A bitch. As soon as I found out, I broke up with her.” He shrugs. “We hadn’t been dating for long, and it was pretty casual.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Like us?”

“No.” He closes his eyes for several seconds and then opens them. The vulnerability in his expression takes my breath away. I steady my shaking hands.

“It wasn’t like that at all. When I found out she was using me, I was angry, but chalked it up to another female letting me down.” He walks forward, and my knees buckle. “When I saw you holding my phone, I was devastated. I didn’t want to believe you would do anything to hurt me. You’re not like anyone else I’ve ever been with. You make me feel like there’s goodness in the world. That not everyone is like Tabitha. Or my mom.”

My heart skips a beat. Coming from him, this is the highest compliment. I don’t know his whole story, but what I’ve heard tells me he has feelings for me. At least I hope so.

He grasps my upper arms, and his eyes well with unshed tears. “Layla, I would like to date you. Exclusively. I don’t know what the future looks like, but I need to be surrounded by your goodness. To believe there are relationships that last. That everything isn’t a bullshit lie.”

My head swirls with emotions. I’m falling for him. Hard and fast. I straighten my back. I can’t do this without getting a clear answer about his ties back home. As much as I want to throw my arms around him and block out the world, I can’t. “Are you married?”

He pulls back with a scrunched face. “No. Why would you think that?”

“Just making sure. When people freak out about someone touching their phone, it’s usually because they’re cheating. I can’t be the other

woman.”

“You aren’t the other woman. I’m not dating anyone else. I’m not married. I’ve never been married. I don’t have a secret family back home outside of my dad and my siblings. It was just me being a dumbass.” He licks his lips and expels a big puff of air. “Have I destroyed our chance to see what this is?”

He had me at ‘you aren’t the other woman,’ but I don’t let on. He deserves to squirm a little bit for ruining what should have been a beautiful day.

When I don’t respond, he drops his hands to his sides. “I’ll go.”

“Fine.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll give you another shot.”

A slow smile curves up to his cheeks, and the butterflies in my stomach do the tango. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” I laugh and hurl my body into his arms.

As he embraces me, my heart swells. Home. He feels like home. Even though he can’t promise me forever, he’s where I belong. It’s only a matter of proving to him that his past doesn’t have to dictate his future. Not all people who love him will disappear, destroy, or manipulate him.

His lips claim mine, and I relax against his broad chest. I’m not falling for him; I’m already a goner.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Kameron

Layla grabs a skillet out of the bottom cabinet in her kitchen and sets it on the stovetop. “Do you like taco salad?”

“Sure, but you don’t have to cook. We could go out. Or I could cook.” The fact she’s giving me a second chance is starting to sink in. I don’t want to screw it up by making her feel like she needs to serve me. I know how to cook, clean, and take care of myself. One bonus point from having a disappearing mother.

She twists on her heel. “I’m tired. It’s been a long day, so how about we cook together?”

“That sounds great. Where’s the hamburger meat?” I’ve never done the whole domestic bliss thing with someone I dated.

After I find the meat, I put it in the skillet, and she hands me a spatula. “You cook the meat, and I’ll grab everything else.”

“I can do that.” I take the utensil from her and yank her close. “But first, I want to kiss you again.”

“Who am I to complain about that?”

As I claim her mouth, she places her hands on my chest and rises on her tiptoes. Her breasts press against my chest, and I force myself not to take advantage of what she’s offering.

There’s little doubt I could strip her bare right here and she’d eagerly indulge my fantasies. But it’s been a shitty day, and by the sound of her stomach when we were in the living room, she’s starving.

I pepper her mouth with a couple of sweet kisses, wink, and step back. “Let’s get the food going before I forget I’m a gentleman.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “What if I want you to be a bad boy?”

“Oh, you’ll get your wish, but first, you’ve got to eat.”

Her bottom lip pokes out. “But....”

“Darlin’, I will worship your sweet body when your stomach isn’t growling. I’m not an animal.”

Her cheeks flood with heat as her eyelashes flutter shut. “Okay.”

The desire to sweep her off her feet and shower her with everything she’s ever wanted while giving her a lifetime of orgasms hits me square in the chest. The air sucks out of the room as I rest my hip on the stove. Am I in love with Layla? How could it happen so fast?

Her eyes flutter open, and I stare speechlessly into her green eyes. She’s beautiful.

Crap. What am I going to do? When my time’s up, I don’t think I can walk away. Hell, I don’t want to walk away. Can I make a home here in Meadow Bay with Layla?

She laughs and twirls on her heel. “You won’t believe Mr. Campos’ story from tonight.”

“Yeah?” I twist on the stove knob and break the meat into smaller pieces for browning.

The refrigerator door opens, and the hum of the appliance kicking on fills the air. “I’ve been taking him places for months. Never thought a thing about it until tonight when he was complaining about me being late.”

“I’m guessing from his comments he took a little blue pill.”

“You’ve got that right.” She giggles, and the sound of glass bottles coming to rest on her counter tells me she’s getting the condiments ready for our meal. The scent of hamburger meat fills the air, leaving my mouth watering.

“Tonight’s hookup was at the nursing home with Evette. She’s a little old lady with blue hair and tight curls. I would have never suspected for one second, they were still having sex at their age.”

I flip the burner’s temperature down a couple of notches, so I don’t burn anything if I happen to get distracted by thoughts of all-night love-

making sessions. “Did he make it in time?”

She slices through a tomato and transfers the diced pieces into a bowl. “Despite all his muttering about my lateness, we made it in time.” She grins. “And he was much less judge-y when he came back out.”

“I bet.” I move to the island and grab an onion off the counter. “Does he require your escort services frequently?”

She shudders. “Don’t say that. I’m not sure after I know what he’s doing on these visits that I’ll ever be able to transport him again.”

“It’s sweet.” I grab the knife from her and slice through the ends of the onion.

“Sweet?” She snorts. “Little innocent me driving old people around to get their nut off?”

Laughter wells up in my chest and I drop the onion and knife on the counter. ‘Getting their nut off’ coming from Layla’s mouth is one of the funniest things I’ve heard. “I’m not sure you qualify as innocent now with that dirty mouth of yours.”

She steps to the stove and snaps off the burner. “We can eat later.” Her eyes darken as she stalks toward me. “I can’t concentrate when you’re in here.”

“You want me to go?” My entire body tightens in anticipation. I want her as much as she wants me.

“That’s completely the opposite of what I want.” Her hands clasp the front of my T-shirt and tug on the material. “I want you to come.”

My cock jumps at her words. “I’ve created a monster.”

She shrugs. “I’ve discovered an affinity for dirty talk. Hearing it makes my panties drenched and speaking it out loud makes me want to climb you like a tree and screw your brains out.”

“Shit.” My entire body convulses. “You’re a damn quick study, and I have to admit, I love it. It turns me on.” I grab her hand and place it over my swollen thickness. “Having you talk dirty makes my dick hard enough to

hammer nails.”

She licks her lips and bites her bottom lip seductively. “I’d rather you hammer my pussy with your hard rod.”

I laugh, grab her thighs, and pull her up my body until she’s wrapped around me. “You’re giving me ideas for the nursing home when we’re old and have nothing else to do but have sex.”

“Oh. Stop.” She smacks my chest. “I don’t want to picture Mr. Campos stuffing Ms. Miller with his summer sausage.”

I run my tongue along the column of her neck until I reach the hollow between her jaw and ear. “Would you rather picture my salami filling you with high fructose porn syrup?”

She throws her head back and laughs until tears stream down her cheeks. Then, she snorts and laughs harder. “Oh, my God, I’m going to pee myself.”

Fuck. I’m in love with Layla. I love making her laugh. I need her joy in my life. And I’m beginning to want the future that being with her would bring—love, laughter, and family. My gut clenches.

Family. I don’t know the first thing about sticking around. Being a husband. Raising kids. God, she deserves someone so much better than me, but I’m starting to think I’m not going to give her the choice.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Layla

The instant he lays me on the bed, all humor evaporates. His dark eyes devour me, causing my nipples to tighten. That says nothing for the growing ache between my thighs. I rub them together to ease the throbbing.

I can deny it all I want. I spent the entire day wishing his hands and mouth were on my body. Thank God he's not married, but I hadn't known that at the time. At this point, I question my moral compass when it comes to Kameron. The glass is shattered, and the arrow might even be missing.

"No. You don't," he growls and grasps my knees. "I want you begging for release. This time is going to blow your mind."

I whimper under his firm touch. "Please, don't make me wait."

"Only long enough to make it feel that much better." He smirks. Then, he releases me and grabs the bottom of his T-shirt.

My eyes devour his firm stomach and abs as he reveals his flesh. Once his shirt is tossed on the floor, he studies me. "You're too good for me. You know that? I don't know how I'm lucky enough to be in your bed, but I'm not walking away."

I wish there was a magic wand I could wave over him to make all his past hurts disappear, but I'm not a fairy Godmother, and life isn't a fairytale. I grab his hand. "You're perfect."

His eyes are hooded, so I can't read his emotions. However, the tightness of his shoulders shouts that he doesn't believe me. "Not by a longshot." He squeezes my fingers, and then let's go. "Sit up. I want to take off your clothes."

My mouth dries as a massive lump of fear makes it difficult to swallow. I'm not scared of him, but I'm terrified I'll do something wrong. I ease up on my elbow, sit, and wait as he removes my shirt. I immediately cover my breasts with my arm.

“You’re so beautiful. I want to see all of you. Don’t hide from me.”

I lick my lips and drop my arm, giving him a view of my pink demicup bra. He grips the button of his jeans. “I can’t wait to suck on your sweet tits.”

My eyes widen, and I jerk them to the ceiling. *Oh, Lord. He’s dirty.* He makes me feel like I’m getting caught by my mom reading a smut book.

“Does that embarrass you?”

“A little, but it’s so hot.”

At the sound of the first zipper tooth opening on his jeans, I gawk. His cock bounces against him like it’s even more eager to join me than he is. He climbs onto the mattress, and it dips under his weight. His fist grasps the edge of my skirt, and he pulls it down my legs. The speed of his movements leaves me stunned. “That’s better. I like your panties.”

I glance down and groan. *Unicorns. Again.* Lord, my face floods with heat as I clap my hand over the cartoon figure. “I wasn’t planning on anyone seeing them.”

“That’s good.” He lays down beside me. “Mr. Campos would have had a coronary.”

I laugh until I snort and then grab the pillow and shove it over my face.

He yanks the pillow off and cups my cheek. “This is how I see you. Laughing and enjoying life. Sex doesn’t have to be serious. We can take pleasure in each other any way we want.”

My heart swells until it can barely be contained inside my ribcage. I love him. There’s no pretending otherwise. “God, I don’t know why you don’t think you’re perf -”

His mouth lands on mine and effectively cuts off the word. I wiggle against him, relishing the feel of his hard body alongside my soft curves. The hairs on his legs brush against my flesh, making my clit twitch in anticipation.

Our tongues slide and thrust against each other as his hand cups my breast. I hold my breath, and he slips the fabric off to expose my nipple.

When his mouth sucks the tight nub between his lips, I arch into him and grind my pelvis against his dick. He growls, and the vibration causes an electric current to shoot through my body.

I need more. Now. I scrape my nails up his back and grasp his shoulders. When he pulls back, his eyes bore into mine. We stay like that for several seconds. When it doesn't become awkward, I smile.

"That's better." He grins. "I love how greedy you are. It makes me feel like a warrior claiming his princess."

"Fuck." I roll my eyes. "Pretend all you want that you aren't a romantic. I call bullshit."

"I'll give you bullshit," he grumbles as he slides down my body, yanking off my Sunday underwear, which I'm trashing the second I get up.

He grips my legs and drops my knees to the mattress. "I need to see all this sweet, wet pussy."

His tongue flicks slowly along the interior of my thigh, and I wiggle my ass on the comforter. *Please, get to the good stuff.* I grab handfuls of his hair and try to angle him over my clit, but he doesn't budge. "Damn you."

"What?" I can feel his smile against my skin as he peppers kisses in the hollow between my thigh and my sex.

"Eat my pussy." I suck in a sharp breath and still. *Did I say that?*

He chuckles, licks my sex from asshole to clit, and back to my core. The vibrations from his laughter send me into overdrive.

"Holy shit." I grind my pelvis against him to keep his tongue where I want it. He responds by thrusting inside my sex and repeatedly lunging at my opening. *God, that feels so fucking good.* My legs quiver as I ride the onslaught.

When he leans up, I whimper in irritation, but I don't have to wait long. He rests his elbow on the bed and uses his free hand to thrust two fingers deep into my aching pussy. "Oh, God, Kameron. That feels so good," I pant and arch into his movements.

“That’s nothing yet, babe.” He clasps his lips over my clit and rhythmically sucks the flesh between his teeth and his fingers flutter and pierce over my G spot. Every inch of my body is straining for orgasm, but I can’t decide whether to seek the release I so desperately want or enjoy his overwhelming devouring of my sex.

I dig my heels into the mattress and spread my thighs as wide as I can. As if he senses my frustration, he shifts to his knees and lifts my legs over his shoulders to feast on my core. I look into his eyes. I can see every movement as I’m splayed in front of him. Instead of being embarrassed, I’ve never been more turned on.

He stops for a second. “I want to watch you squeeze your nipples.”

I convulse but follow his command. My breasts are heaving as my hands knead them and stretch the tips. The addition of pinching my nipples is dragging me closer to the edge.

Just when I think it can’t be any better, his tongue repeatedly laps from my sex to my clit, and I fly over the edge into a smattering of bright lights behind my eyes. “Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Kameron

The next morning, I wake up with my hand on Layla's ass and a rock-hard erection. When my dick rubs against her belly, I wince. Is that rug burn?

I fall back against the mattress. How's that even possible?

That's a stupid question. I fucked her like a wild man trying to prove that no one else will ever give her as many orgasms as I can. I smirk. I would hazard a guess that she's not going to find another guy who could give her five orgasms in one night.

She shifts on the mattress and stretches. My eyes narrow into slits as I watch her. There'd better never be another man trying to get into her panties, or I'll knock the dude the fuck out.

What happens when I leave? My gut clenches. My family's back in K.C., so at some point, I need to lick my wounds and go back. Don't I? Would Layla go back with me?

Her face is cast in shadows, so I can't make out much, but what I can see makes my heart sputter in my chest. I can't imagine living without her. Hell, I was only surviving before I met her. Being around her is like having shooting rainbows filling the sky. It's impossible not to be happy around her.

Her eyes flutter open, and she slams her hand over her mouth. "Hey."

"Good morning."

"Good morning." She talks through her hand.

"Kiss me." I grab her hip and haul her on top of me.

"No." She laughs and continues to clasp her fingers over her lips.

"Morning breath."

"So what?" I roll my eyes. "I can handle a little morning breath. I want to kiss my girl."

“Fine,” she sighs dramatically and puckers up as if she’s staged and ready.

I lace my hand in her hair and fist the strands. When she gasps, I claim her mouth. Her eyes slam shut, and she moans. I suck her needy response down like it’s my last meal.

Even though my dick hurts, and I need to go to work, I’m struggling to remember why I can’t spend the day indulging in another round of her riding my cock. Which is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. Layla in all her glory with her tits bouncing as she glides up and down over my dick. I shudder from head to toe. I’m never going to get enough of her.

I clasp her face and lean back. “I’ve got to get ready to go to work. Vargas filled in for me last night, so I need to take part of his shift.”

“Okay.” A flash of sadness covers her face, and like an asshole, I want to cheer.

“You want to come to my place tonight?” I waggle my eyebrows. “Heavy on the come.”

She bats at my upper arm. “Are you sure you’re up for it?”

“Yeah.” I grab her hand and place it over my cock. “I’m ready.”

“No.” Her face grows serious. “I mean, are you sure you aren’t sore?”

“Isn’t that a guy question?”

“Well, it might be, but I kind of remember your face scrunching up as I galloped on you like I was riding a horse, and I don’t think it was in ecstasy.”

“God, I l....” I pause and swallow the L word. It’s not something I toss out lightly. Okay, I’ve never said it to anyone but to family. Hell, I’m pretty sure I never said it to any of them either. “I should be ready to drill you like an oil rig tonight.”

“Go take a shower.” She rolls off me. When I don’t move, she arches an eyebrow. “Scoot. Hurry up. I want your pillow.”

“Wench.” I climb from the bed. Every muscle in my body and some I had no idea existed scream as I move.

What did you learn last night, big boy? Don't be a fucking hero.

When I get to the bathroom door, I spin around and stare at her. The sheet is wrapped around her waist as she clutches my pillow to her cheek. She sighs and sinks into the fabric.

Her bathroom is small but clean. She has several rows of rolled-up black towels tucked on a shelf, and none of her feminine products are left laying out on the counter. A large mirror covers the wall behind the tub, and there is a standup shower beside it.

Although I have dark circles under my eyes that broadcast the three hours of sleep I managed to get, they don't dampen the enormous smile on my face or the twinkle in my eyes. *You look like a total goner.*

So what?

I yank on the shower knob and wait for the water to heat. After the temperature is right and not going to feel like buckets of ice landing on my head, I step in. The warm water cascades over me, and I let the heat relax my muscles.

As I rub soap over my body, I raise an eyebrow. No wonder my dick hurts. Who gets a hickey on the head of their cock? Not that I don't deserve it since I put one on her neck.

Several minutes later, I hop out of the shower, dry off, and yank my jeans up to my thighs. I've got to stop showing up to work wearing the same clothes I wore the day before, or the guys are going to give me crap.

My phone rings. "Kameron, your phone."

"Will you get it?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." I step to the threshold.

"You're right there." She grabs the phone and holds it out to me.

"No." I shake my head. I need to prove to her that I'm an open book and to myself that I trust her. "Answer it."

“Fine.” She sits cross-legged on the bed. Her heavy breasts bob with her movements, causing my cock to jump. Down boy. Take a few hours to recover. I grab my shaft, adjust it, and fasten the button of my jeans.

“Hello?” Her face scrunches as she listens to the caller. “Okay.” Finally, she glances up and covers the phone. “It’s a Rich calling about a game this weekend in San Francisco. Are you going?”

“Yeah. We’re going.” I suddenly can’t wait to see the guys again and introduce them to Layla. They’ll love her.

Her mouth drops. “We’re going?” She points between the two of us. “To a football game and meet your friends. A professional football game with hot guys.” She gives me a saucy grin.

“Leave out the hot men part. You’ve got enough to handle from me.” I stomp across the floor and snatch the phone out of her hand.

“You do have plenty to handle.” She sits on her knees and rubs my erection through the denim.

“Stop. You’ve done enough damage.”

“Damage?” Her eyes fill with concern.

I lean down, kiss her lips, and then whisper, “You left a hickey on my dick.”

She flushes and leans back. “Oops.”

“Hey, Rich.” I brace the phone between my shoulder and ear.

“Hey, buddy. It sounds like I caught you at a bad time.” He chuckles as I study her. She’s gorgeous. I can’t believe I almost pushed her away and missed the opportunity to be with her like this. I was a fool.

“Nah, It’s a great time.” I can’t believe I’m saying it, but it is. I’ve never felt better.

“It’s good to hear you happy. I’m assuming the woman who answered is someone special.”

“Definitely.”

“Fantastic. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Oh, she’ll be coming.”

“Asshole.” She bats at my chest and rolls off the bed. “I’m getting dressed.”

“Nice ass.” *Lord, have mercy.*

She wiggles it harder as she walks away. I bite my bottom lip and groan.

“Dude, I’ll let you be. I’ll text you the times and locations. Can’t wait to catch up with you.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Layla

Chloe waves her hand dismissively. “Kameron’s ridiculous. I never held the bet against him.” Her face scrunches. “It was all Tabitha’s doing.”

“She’s a total bitch.” Jenna shakes her head, causing her dark hair to flow around her shoulders. “And you’re so sweet.”

“I’m not that sweet.” My face heats. All the dirty and delicious things we’ve done over the last week do not put me in the sweet and innocent category.

To my left, Kameron is talking to Rich. They seem to be getting along and letting the past stay where it belongs—in the past.

“Oh, I bet you aren’t.” Chloe giggles and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “Tell us all about those filthy things you two have been doing.”

“Really?” I still like a squirrel in the middle of a highway. I haven’t even had the chance to tell my best friend about the dirty things we’ve been doing, and I’m not sure Kameron wants our sex life broadcasted at the football stadium.

“Really.” Chloe’s eyes twinkle. “I’ll start. Rich has this obsession with baked goods, and since I run a bakery, he likes for me to dress up like Little Red Riding Hood and bring him a basket of goodies.”

“God, I’m going to be sick.” Jenna cups her mouth. “She never realizes that she’s discussing my brother’s dick when she starts these stories. I’m pregnant, for God’s sake, and prone to projectile vomiting.”

“Grow up, buttercup.” Chloe drops her arm from me and stares pointedly at Jenna. “Share one of your stories with Layla, so she doesn’t feel like a freak.”

“Fine.” Jenna glances out at the football field where her fiancé Tony Timmerman plays as the tight end for the away team. “I’m trying to decide which one to tell. They’re all hot.”

“How about phone sex?” Chloe cocks an eyebrow as the crowd erupts around us. We should be watching the game, but I like Kameron’s friends.

The dinner the night before was a blast as the guys gave each other a hard time. I could tell Kameron was nervous on the way to San Francisco, but the second we stopped at the club, they welcomed him with open arms and an open bar tab. I’ve never gotten drinks so quickly before.

“Phone sex is almost every other weekend during the football season, so that’s not a story.” She snaps her fingers. “How about the time I went down on him at the stadium?”

“Do tell.” I lean closer. I’d been worried I was turning into a nympho, but now I’m positive this is what it feels like when you find the person you’re meant to be with.

As she relays her story, I watch Kameron. He’s too into the game to notice me. I love everything about him. I love how caring he is even when he pretends he’s not a rescuer. I adore how generous a lover he is. And the man is a better housekeeper than I could ever be.

He turns as if he senses me staring at him and winks. My damn knees go weak, and then my heart catches in my chest. What happens when his time is up? These’re the people he fits in with. These’re his friends. Now that he knows none of them have hard feelings, does that mean he’ll go back at the end of his time?

Why wait? My stomach clenches. What do I do? Go with him? What if he doesn’t ask? He made it clear at the beginning that our relationship had an expiration date. He never promised me anything. Actually, he made me promise not to fall in love with him.

Fuck. Don’t borrow trouble. We still have two months.

“Give us some deets.” Jenna bumps me with her elbow as the caterers traipse in with armloads of silver covered trays.

The combination of BBQ, smoked meat, and onions flood the room. My nose tingles. *God, that’s strong.* My turn. “I guess I would have to say when he fingered me in my cousin’s backyard.”

“Oh, hot.” Chloe bites her bottom lip and eyes Kameron. “I bet his fingers—”

“Do you have to say bet every time?” Jenna snorts.

“It’s funny.” Chloe grabs her stomach and laughs. “If the bet didn’t exist, Rich would still have me in the friend-zone.”

Jenna shrugs. “You’ve got a good point. If it weren’t for the contract, I wouldn’t be with Tony. I’d still think he was a prick who took my virginity and said I was lousy in bed.”

“Wait....” I raise my hands in the air. “What are you two talking about?”

I listen to their rundown of how Jenna and Tony got together. The longer we talk, the more I realize I like these women and would love to hang out with them more often. Except, we live nearly two thousand miles away from each other.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kameron

By the time halftime rolls around, my hands and throat hurt from clapping and yelling. Tony and the rest of the team are playing lights-out football, and the home crowd is starting to turn on their team.

Not that I feel sorry for them, they've had numerous championships over the years, and our home team has been in a fifty-year drought. It's about time we end up on the right side of the jumbotron.

"It's good to see you happy." Rich slaps me on the back.

"Thanks." I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans. "It's a relief to know you and Chloe don't hold a grudge. It ate at me to think I'd lost you as a friend. I know you said you weren't mad, but it was hard for me to believe you could forgive me."

"No worries, man. The second we found out you didn't know anything about the bet, neither of us blamed you. We all make mistakes in the dating department."

"Yeah." I glance at Layla, who's chatting animatedly with Jenna and Chloe. *Am I Layla's mistake?*

She's not had a huge dating history, and I've got enough baggage to fill a Winnebago. What do I bring to her besides a history of being left behind and duped? I have no idea how to be in a long-term relationship. "How're things with Chloe?"

"Fantastic." He grins. "We're having a baby. So are Jenna and Tony."

"Congratulations." My stomach drops. I've always wanted kids, but that's a stupid wish. I would be a horrible father. There were no June or Ward Cleavers at my house. My dad worked all the time, married women that didn't stick around, and passed out exhausted every night.

"Layla seems like a wonderful person. She evens you out."

“How?”

“I haven’t seen you smile this much. Ever. Even before the Tabitha fiasco. You were always so serious. Working three jobs. Making sure your siblings got to school and turning their schoolwork in on time. Hell, you never had time to be a teen.”

“I guess you’re right.”

He punches me in the upper chest. “You should get married and have a family. Unless you don’t want kids.” He frowns. “I guess I could see how you wouldn’t want any since you basically raised four kids already.”

“What?” I stare at him like he’s started a new Babel account and trying to get his first Portuguese sentence out.

“You raised your siblings while your dad worked. You were basically a parent at fucking twelve years old. What were you doing when I was playing football?”

I shake my head. “I was brushing tangles out of my sister’s hair and feeding my brothers.” *Holy hell. Why didn’t I ever realize that?*

My dad was around, but he was always busy working, paying the bills, and trying to get a few hours of sleep. I was doing it all.

Sure, Ms. Connelly stepped in from time to time to clean the house and bring over some pre-made casseroles, but who warmed them up? I did. Who made the kids go to bed instead of staying up all night playing video games? Me, also. I’m the reason they didn’t flunk out of school.

“Your dad was lucky you were the oldest.”

“I never thought about it that way. I guess I was too busy doing it and hating my mom for leaving.”

“I’m sure she had her reasons. Not good ones, but it wasn’t because of you.”

“Thanks.” We bro-hug and smack each other’s backs. “Also, thanks for asking me to come to the game. And for getting my head out of my ass.”

“No problem.” He drops his arm and rocks back onto his heels. “I’ve

got to talk to Chloe for a second while the crowd has died down.”

“Sure thing.” I follow his lead and join the women.

When Layla looks up with her big green eyes, my heart swells. Maybe we aren’t doomed to end in an epic crash and burn. “Hey, Doll. Are you having fun?”

“I’m having a blast. This is great.” She frowns. “Except, I haven’t watched any of the game. Is your team winning?”

“Yep. Gunner and Tony are on a roll today.”

“The good-looking, dark-haired guy we met last night?”

“Yes,” I say through gritted teeth. Why is that women always drool over the quarterbacks?

“Don’t.” She wraps her arms around my waist. “I don’t remember anything else about him except for his dark eyes and those killer biceps.”

“Hussy.” I claim her mouth and effectively shut her up as she shakes with laughter.

The desire to demand she never looks at another man is on the tip of my tongue, but I’m not an asshole, and we’re in a public place. That’s kind of a private thing to discuss.

Maybe I can convince her to tattoo my name next to her panty line. I unwrap my arms from her waist and move one to her shoulders. “Come stand next to me and watch the game.”

“I would love to.” She rests her head against my heart, and I don’t want to ever let her go.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Layla

One week later, I'm pouring a mug of coffee for one of my regulars when Blanche leans her elbows on the counter and studies me.

"What?" When Edward Ramsey raises his finger, I tip the pot up and walk to the opposite side of the counter and return the carafe to the coffeemaker.

"You're different."

"What do you mean?" I study my reflection on the stainless-steel cabinets.

My face is flush, and I've never been more relaxed, but there shouldn't be any outward signs of how thoroughly I've been loved by Kameron. Unless. I squint and try to make out my neck. Did he leave another hickey? I just stopped wearing a scarf.

"You're on time every day. You're well-rested. And well-plowed."

"Blanche!" I jerk around to see if anyone is listening. The regulars chat at the table oblivious to our conversation.

"Gu-u-urll, don't deny it. You're one hundred percent getting some dick, and some good dick at that."

I grin and fan myself. "I'm not denying it."

"Word on the street is you're seeing that handsome firefighter. The one who was all grumpy and now's practically singing in the rain without the singing or the rain."

"That would be him." I drop my dishtowel to the counter and scrub along the surface.

"Well, he looks good on you. He's tapped into your responsible streak." Blanche chuckles. "Tapped." She twists on her heel and goes into the kitchen.

She's not wrong. I've been more responsible since Kameron's been in my life. He must have a strict schedule because of his hours at the station, so I'm up earlier than usual. And I don't feel an overwhelming need to help everyone that calls me up.

I've only taken Mr. Campos on one date over the last two weeks, and not once have I chased a wild animal into the street or up a tree. Or run into a burning building.

It's not because Kameron told me not to, it's because I'm not clamoring to fill the hole in my heart. He's wormed his way in and filled it to the brim.

The bell rings, and I jerk out of my musings. When Kameron swaggers in the door, my stomach does a slow roll. "Hey." I wave weakly. He hasn't been to the café since we first met.

One side of his mouth raises in a cocky grin. "Hey, yourself."

His legs eat up the ground between us. "I missed you."

"Really?"

"Yes." He runs a finger over my cheekbone, causing me to shiver. "What time do you get off work?"

I glance at the clock. "Five o'clock."

"I'm off at six o'clock. Do you want to go out?"

"I hadn't thought about it." Most of the time we spend together is at one of our homes, but going out might be nice.

"Let's go to a wine tasting."

"Really?" He's not expressed an interest in seeing the local sites until now. Does that mean he's open to sticking around? I try to keep my fears of the future at bay, but they're always there lurking around the corner.

"It sounds fun. Not that I don't like spending all my free time with you at home, but I figure we should do something besides have sex all the time."

"Okay." My stomach lurches. *Sex all the time*. Shouldn't I have had my period by now?

Oh, Lord. This is not good. I count backward to my last period, and my shoulders relax. It should be any day. Sometimes I'm late. Don't fret about it.

"It's a date." He leans down and presses his lips to mine. "See you in a couple of hours. I'll pick you up. Be sure to bring clothes and plan to stay the night."

"Perfect." I watch his every move as he walks away. He's perfect. All our time together is perfect.

Between making pancakes together on Sunday mornings to watching old reruns of *The Office*, there hasn't been a time we've been incompatible. And the bedroom? I shudder. Every time we're together is better than the last.

Unless I'm pregnant. I don't want him to feel trapped, and we've used condoms every time except for the first time we made love. Surely one time isn't all it takes. I rush to the bathroom.

As soon as I have the door shut, I clasp my breasts. They feel the same. Slightly aching as I squeeze. Nothing different than when I'm expecting my period. See—nothing to worry about.

Chapter Forty

Kameron

The vines of grapes line the hills in straight rows. Each one has been meticulously tended to by the owners to ensure a bumper crop. The gravel road is bordered by a wooden fence that's as perfect as the grapevines.

In the distance is a large two-story white home with a sprawling front porch. The barn is covered in large glass windows that look over the wine field. I whistle. "This place is impressive."

"I thought you'd like it. It's one of the oldest family-owned wineries in the county. Of course, everything's new and in pristine condition."

"This sure beats anything we have back home."

Back home. Do I belong in Kansas City? The longer I'm away, the less of a pull I feel toward there. Is it possible to pick up and permanently move? I'll miss my family, but that doesn't mean visiting is out of the equation.

"What do the wineries look like in K.C.?" She stares out the window as I put my pickup into park.

"None of them are this big. Most of them are small and barely large enough for distribution." I shrug. "I guess it's more of a hobby than a livelihood."

"People in the Napa Valley area take their wine seriously." She runs her hand over her skirt as if she's trying to eliminate wrinkles.

Her white dress is short and flirty. The way the top hugs her curves and the skirt teases her knees has put it in the top ten of my favorite outfits for her to wear. Not that she looks bad in cutoff shorts and a T-shirt. Hell, she could wear the proverbial gunny sack and look fantastic.

"Are you ready to show me around?" I grab her hand and lace my fingers through hers.

"Absolutely." She beams and places her free hand on the door handle.

“I’ll get the door.” I frown slightly. “City boys can be chivalrous.”

Her face flushes as her hand drops to her lap. “Sorry. I’m still used to being alone.”

As I round the front of my pickup, I recount her words. Why has she always been alone? I’ve told her a little about my past, but hers has been like a sealed vault.

The closest vehicle is a Cadillac, and it’s parked three spots over. The parking lot is only half-full for a weeknight. I open the door and wait for her to get out.

Once the door is shut, I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close. The scent of vanilla fills my nose. “Why are you used to being alone?”

She stumbles over a piece of gravel. “Wow, that makes me sound boring. Doesn’t it?”

“No.”

She worries her bottom lip. I’ve never asked her about her past relationships in fear that she’s spent years pining over some guy who’s never noticed her. What happens when he shows up and sweeps her off her feet? My heart skips a beat. I don’t want her with anyone else.

“I’ve dated a few guys, but none of them lasted long.

My back stiffens. How long is she talking about? We’ve only been together for a few weeks. Is that short or long in her opinion?

She swallows and looks at the ground. “Stanley was probably the longest. We dated six months, but when I wouldn’t have sex with him, he broke up with me. That was back in high school. Then, in college, I dated a guy. He was sweet and nice.” Her jaw tightens. “At least, I thought he was.”

I place a hand on her cheek. “What did he do?”

Her eyes narrow into slits, and she wrinkles her nose. “I met him at the country club where Harbor and I worked during the school week. He flirted with me for weeks before I went out with him. We almost had sex, but I said no. He got mad and left me on a deserted road. I had to walk five miles back

to town.”

“What’s his name?” Every muscle in my body tightens and they feel like they’re going to spring into motion. The guy’s damn lucky he’s not in my vicinity.

Her head jerks back, and she gazes into my eyes. “Why?”

“I’m going to beat his ass.”

She grabs my biceps. “Kameron, don’t worry about him. He doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“That’s not the point.” The vein in my temple thumps with my pulse. “The point is that a man doesn’t leave a lady stranded where anything can happen to her. You could have been run over, kidnapped, or raped. The guy’s a pig.”

What is it with cocksuckers who get angry when a woman doesn’t have sex with them? It’s ridiculous. Between this dude and George at Whiskey Moon’s, she’s had some shitty luck with men.

“You don’t know the half of it.” Her eyes darken, and her bottom lip quivers. “He was married, and I was one of the many waitresses he hit on over the years. I felt disgusting when I found out. I was moments away from letting him do it and just get it over with.” Her expression falls as the anger seems to disappear and fills with regret. “I’d held out hope for years that the perfect guy would come along, but at the time, I figured I was kidding myself.”

I pull her against my chest and rest my head on the top of hers. “I’m sorry he was a jerk.”

She snuggles closer. “I’m not. I’m glad I found out he was an asshole and waited for you.”

I smile against her hair. “So, if I see this yet to be named bastard, I should thank him?”

“You don’t have to go that far.”

“Good,” I growl. “I still want to meet him and explain in detail that’s

not how to treat a lady.” Thank God nothing happened to her. I can’t imagine never knowing her. “Am I the perfect guy, or did you give up on that pipe dream?”

“Given up, of course.” She laughs and slides her hands up my chest. When she lays her palm over my heart, she stops. The thumping in my chest reverberates against her fingertips. “I’m glad I waited for you. I know we haven’t seen each other long, and we don’t know what the future holds, but I like you. A lot.”

“I like you, too.” I rest my forehead against her and inhale her scent as the sun sets in the west. I swallow. “I don’t know what the future holds, or...” I trail off as words swirl in my head.

I want to tell her I’ve fallen for her, but it’s not fair. How do I say, ‘I love you,’ but I don’t know where I’m going to live? Or how to be a husband.

How can I be who she wants me to be? She’s waited to share herself until she found someone she trusted and genuinely cared about. Me. Am I destined to break her heart?

How do you learn to be something another person can depend on? Not for the first time, I curse my parents for not being the role model couple I needed. I clear my throat. “We should go inside.”

Her eyelids lower, and she steps back, leaving a cold chill to seep into my pores. “You’re right. Our reservations were for seven. We’re probably late.”

After the owners share their enthusiastic spiel, I try and reclaim our earlier connection, but she’s grown distant. Not that I blame her, she opened her wound, and I tossed salt in it and ran scared without a backward glance.

Just another reason why I don’t do relationships—I suck at them.

Chapter Forty-One

Layla

As I grasp the wine glass, I gaze out the window. I've come here before with Harbor at dark and during the daytime. The evening is my favorite. The only thing you can see is pitch black sky and dazzling stars.

Kameron moves behind me, and I brace my shoulders. The fact he can't commit is not so different than the married guy trying to get in my pants. There wasn't a future with either of them.

Stop being petty. You knew the score when you started dating him. He never once pretended to be something he isn't. Just because you want it all and he's not falling at your feet is no need to take it out on him.

The muscles in my shoulders sag. This is my fault. I'm the one weaving dreams of a future. Not him.

Enjoy the time. Enjoy the man.

I inhale and get my emotions in check. He doesn't have to promise forever for us to enjoy tonight.

I twist on my heel. "It's beautiful. Thanks for thinking of this."

"Are you sure you're okay? You've been off tonight."

"No, I'm great." I walk into his arms being careful to not spill my drink. I'm not holding it against him that I've fallen in love.

What will I do when he's gone? My stomach heaves. Let. It. Go.

As he trails a finger along my jaw, I tip my chin up and slap a smile on my face. I can do this and pretend everything's fine. I've done it a million times. It's what humans do. Put on a brave face and lie to the world.

'How're you doing?' 'Fine. Thank you. How're you?' Such a pointless exchange. No one wants to know how you are, and everyone's terrified of spewing the truth.

I step back and take a sip of my wine, letting the liquid seep down my throat. It's like a drug numbing all my emotions. Maybe if I understand his past better, it'll be easier to accept his unwillingness to commit. "What were your parents like?"

His eyes darken as he shoves his hands into his pockets. "I don't talk about my mom."

I cock an eyebrow. "I see." That's all the answer I need. I can have his body, but not his heart and soul. "My parents were great. As an only child, we did everything together. They worked hard to provide for me. We didn't have a lot. My dad worked construction until he started at the fire station, and my mom worked as a receptionist for a doctor."

Why the hell am I rambling? To prove that I'm better than him? That I'm an open book? Fuck. I'm a catty bitch.

His entire body is tight as his jaw twitches. "Sounds nice."

"It was. We never went on vacations, though. My dad hated to travel. My mom and I always wanted to, but I guess being stuck in California wasn't the end of the world." I lean against the windowpane as my mind drifts off to my childhood.

Swinging in the backyard. Singing in the bright sunshine. Dancing in the rain. But I was always alone. I sigh, "It must have been awesome to have siblings."

"My mom was a drunk. She and my dad met at a bar where they screwed in the men's bathroom, and I was conceived. They got married because she was pregnant." His nostrils flare, and the muscles in his neck are so tight I'm afraid his carotid artery is going to explode.

"Kameron." I step forward as the couple closest to us whispers and moves away.

His eyes flash, and he shakes his head. "Don't. You wanted to know. I'll tell you."

"Okay." My bottom lip quivers.

"I spent most of my life questioning whether I was my father's child or

whether my siblings were my full-blooded relatives. It's kind of hard not to when she disappeared for weeks at a time." He shrugs. "Sometimes, months at a time, and then hopped back into dad's life like nothing happened. My dad welcomed every one of her kids, whether they were his or not."

"I'm sorry." I touch his forearm, but he yanks backward, leaving my hand to fall to my side.

"When I was twelve, she left and never came back. Since my dad was working twelve-hour shifts and rarely had a day off, I was left to make sure my siblings got to school and ate food. If it weren't for Ms. Connelly, we would have never had clothes. It was something my dad was too fucking exhausted to think about."

The world he painted tore through my gut. I can't imagine not having a two-parent household or my parent's undivided attention.

He pulls his hands out of his pockets and scrubs them over his face. The anguish in his eyes destroys me, making it hard to breathe. He doesn't want my sympathy. He's not even willing to see my empathy. "It was better after she was gone. Except my dad met another woman at the bar who looked exactly like my mom. He married her after knowing her for a week."

"Shit." My mouth drops open. People have obviously experienced worse childhoods, but me spouting off about my perfect life had to be a slap in the face.

"They split up after a couple of months." He shakes his head in apparent disgust. "After that, he had the decency to keep his dick in his pants or keep that part of his life private."

I swallow over the lump in my throat. The heaviness of the conversation is stifling. I need a drink, but I can't find the strength to lift my arm. "Are you close to any of your family?"

"I'm close to all my siblings. After the second woman ran off, I realized no one else would protect them from the shitshow in our life." His shoulders sag. "I love my dad. He did the best he could, and after he stopped dating, things were good. He was around the house more. Helped with the younger kids. He hired Ms. Connelly to clean and cook for us. It made things

a hell of a lot easier on me, but by then, I was fifteen and working three jobs.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“I don’t expect you to say anything. It is what it is.” He rolls his head in a tight circle, and a loud popping sound shoots through the quiet around us.

I did live a privileged life. We weren’t rich by any means, but life was good and comfortable. Who would I have been if I were in Kameron’s shoes? Would I be happy-go-lucky or full of doom and gloom? Expecting him to see the good in life is stupid.

“Let’s go.” He swivels on his heel and weaves through the tables.

I toss back the rest of my wine and set the glass on the white tablecloth with a thud.

Smooth move, Layla. Way to ruin an evening.

Chapter Forty-Two

Kameron

I clasp the steering wheel, and if there was daylight, I would be able to see the whites of my knuckles. The only sound in the pickup is from the air conditioning as Layla stares out the side window.

Everything I said was true, but there were also good times. I was never verbally or emotionally abused. We had huge Christmas parties. When dad took his vacation, we'd go to an amusement park or stay in a hotel. I shouldn't have been such an asshole. It isn't her fault that my mom left.

I flip on the blinker to turn onto my street, and the clicking sounds like a bomb about to detonate. My stomach rolls as sweat beads pop on my forehead. Is this the end?

My breath catches, and I try to swallow over the lump in my throat. I wouldn't blame her if the second I put the vehicle into park, she runs to her car and never looks back. I would deserve it, but I can't imagine not having her in my life.

If she's willing to stick around after that display of childish bullshit, she deserves a medal. The gravel crunches under my tires, and I slide to a stop. When her hand clutches the door handle, my heart sinks to my feet. It's too late. How can I blame her? "Listen, I'm sorry."

She twists to face me with eyes swimming in unshed tears. "I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have said anything. I don't know much about you and shouldn't have pushed you to share something you weren't comfortable with just because I was selfish."

"No, you weren't." I grab the hand that isn't on the door and hold it in mine. "You weren't wrong for asking. We're dating. Or were dating." I sigh, "I shouldn't have held back that part of my past. It's a big reason for who I am today. It's why I fear commitment and have always vowed to never get married or have a family."

She bites her bottom lip and nods. "I understand completely. If I had

your experiences, I would feel the same.” Her eyes dart to her vehicle parked beside mine. “I should go.”

“Don’t.” I swallow. “I don’t want to be alone. I want to be with you. I shouldn’t drag you down the rabbit hole with me, but I can’t seem to stop.”

“Okay.”

Just like that, she’s ready to jump in feet first and let me ruin her. The realization floors me. I lean over the console between us and cup the back of her head.

Somehow, I’ve got to keep us from hitting rock bottom. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know the first thing about committed relationships, but…” I inhale. “I love you. You bring light into my life. The only real light I’ve ever had.”

Tears escape from the corners of her eyes, and then a slow smile curves up to her cheeks. “I love you, too.”

“I will do my best to be a better person and not disappoint you.” I swipe the tear onto the pad of my index finger. “Thank you for pushing me to share my past. It’s a wound I don’t like to open, but it needed to be said.”

Her smile grows larger, and she cups my face. “I promise to be there for you to help you through the ugly times.”

All the heaviness of the evening evaporates as I place my lips on hers. Her mouth is soft and willing against mine. There’s nothing I’d rather do than be the man she deserves. To be the person who fights for her. “Let’s go inside.”

Her face is full of hope and happiness. I put that there. I’ve got to live up to that expectation.

“I thought you’d never ask.” She grins and yanks open the door.

“I told you a gentleman opens the door.” I hop down to the ground.

“I’d rather you spend the night running your hands and mouth over me and bringing me to multiple orgasms.”

“Deal.” I slam the door shut and run to her side of the pickup. After I

open her door, I tip out my chin. “I’ll gladly give up my door rights to have sex rights.”

She jumps and wraps her arms around my neck. “You own my body and soul.”

I swoop her into my arms as a neighborhood dog barks. “Doll, you tempt me to do some dirty acts to you here in the driveway, but my neighbors will call the police.”

Her mouth sucks down on the column of my neck as I walk up the stairs to the front door. “It’s dark. Who’s going to notice?”

The back-porch light of my neighbor’s house, the one with the yammering dog, flips on. “Damn it, Brutus. Shut up.”

“That’s who’d notice.” I chuckle and drag the key out of my pocket, which isn’t as easy as it sounds while carrying her.

My entire body feels light and full of joy as I snap open the lock. Sharing my past with someone, getting all the ugliness out, and telling Layla I love her seems to be the magical elixir for happiness. Who knew?

“Fine,” she sighs dramatically. “I’ll save my tongue lashing for inside because I have some great ideas in store for you.”

I shudder. Lord, help me. I must force myself to open the door. I want to make love to her outside under the stars. To watch her face light up with moonbeams washing down on us. To smell the earth as I enter her welcoming body.

We should go camping. I roll my eyes and chuckle. When did the city slicker turn into a country lover?

She angles her head to study me. “What?”

“Never mind. I thought of something funny.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Layla

After Kameron lays me on the bed, I watch him remove his clothes. The room's dark, but a sliver of light from the moon illuminates his broad chest, tight abs, and killer thighs.

Damn. This is all mine. Who would have thought little Miss Perfect would end up with a brooding cocky man like Kameron?

"Come here." He uses his index finger to encourage me forward.

He doesn't have to ask me twice. I climb onto my hands and knees and crawl over the mattress to him. The padding doesn't move under my weight.

"Sexy," he growls deep in his throat, causing my nipples to tighten. He grabs my upper arms and raises me upward. From there, he clutches the hem of my skirt. "Too many clothes."

As the fabric exposes inch after inch of my flesh, his eyes grow bigger. "No panties?"

"Nope."

His hands still as the fabric bunches around my waist. "If I'd have known that I would have leaned you over the tailgate of my pickup and sunk into that sweet pussy of yours."

I quiver. "I'll take a raincheck until tomorrow night." I toss my clothes in all directions.

"Deal."

"You're going too slow. I'm going to die of old age before you even have your tongue in all the right places."

"Where're the right places?" He stares at my chest as his hands caress my waist.

"For starters." I point to my chest. "My nipples are hard and aching for

you to suck on.”

“We can’t have that.” He leans down and clamps his lips over the tight nub of one and massages the other.”

“God, yes,” I moan, and my head falls back. The second he touches me; I turn into a puddle of lust. It’s crazy.

His tongue repeatedly flicks over the nipple, and I grab his hips to keep from falling on him and knocking him to the ground.

His mouth feels like heaven working over my tight skin. Each movement causes a lustful pant to fall from my lips. When his thumb and index finger pinch and tug on my other nipple, my pussy floods with wetness, and I press my thighs together.

Not enough. I need more. I pull back and slide my hands over his washboard abs and down inside his boxers. My fingers brush his hard cock, and excitement sings through my veins.

I clasp his hardness and jerk it up and down, causing him to bite down on my nipple and thrust his hips in coordination with my efforts.

His mouth pops off my tit. “Your hand feels so good stroking my dick.”

“You like this?” I coo as I work my thumb over the crown and swirl the moisture oozing out of his seam.

“Fuck, yes.” His hands ball into fists at my sides. It’s amazing that I make him lose control like this. I jerk down the fabric of his underwear and expose his jutting flesh. His dick bobs toward me in apparent anticipation, and thankfully, I aim to please.

I run my tongue over the hard ridges of his shaft and inhale deeply. I love the scent of musk and sex. An intoxicating feeling washes over me, and I engulf his hardness into my mouth. His erection jerks against my tongue as his stomach clenches. “Doll, I want to be inside you.”

Nope. I shake my head, but don’t let go. This time, I want to bring him to his knees. I don’t want to be the only one experiencing the overwhelming pleasure he brings me.

I grab the base of his shaft and work over his thickness with a firm twisting grasp while sucking him deeply into my mouth. When his length touches the back of my throat, I gag and slowly expose him inch by inch.

As I work his dick between my lips, I stare at his face. He's beautiful. His eyes are closed, and his chest heaves as he gasps for air. When his jaw tightens, I know he's getting close. Instead of stopping, I increase my movements.

His hands clasp my head, and he pulls back. "Stop. I'm going to come in your mouth."

I smile over his girth and shove my head toward his balls. I'm not going to stop until I milk every last drop from him.

"Oh, God," he groans and twists his hands into my hair. "You're a fucking witch."

His thighs are tense as he loses control. I suck down as he fucks my mouth with long deliberate strokes. Soon, his legs shake, and he increases his speed. His motions become jerky.

God, I want this so bad. I want to be the one that blows his mind. I don't want him to ever picture another woman feasting on his body. I want him to be mine forever and always.

I hum against his flesh, causing him to yank my hair, and he grunts out, "Fu-u-uck."

Warm liquid shoots across my tongue as his body convulses. I relish the sensation of his shaft flexing against my tongue.

I tense. Now what. Do I swallow? His semen tastes salty and bitter, but not what I expected. I pull back and run the juices over my tongue. I don't want to spit it out. Well, then, swallow it. I swallow and run my tongue over my lips.

"I'm sorry." His eyes scan my face. "I should have had more control than that."

I smack his stomach. "Stop. I can't wait to do that on our outside adventure."

He arches an eyebrow. “You don’t mind?”

“Why would I?” I frown. “I want to give you as much pleasure as you give me. I’m not going to have you licking all over me and then scoff at sucking you off.”

“Damn, I love you.” He clutches my face and kisses my lips.

I stiffen and pull back. “Do I kiss–kiss you?”

“Absolutely. You kiss me after I eat your sweet pussy. Which I plan to do in about five seconds.”

“Thank God because I’m about to spontaneously combust over here.” I lace my hands behind his neck and smash my mouth to his. When his tongue slides between my lips, I greedily accept it.

Chapter Forty-Four

Kameron

The pale sunlight beams through the curtains and floods the foot of the bed with light. I inhale Layla's scent and pull her closer. Our bodies fit together like puzzle pieces as everything from my chest to my lower legs rub against her backside. I lean my head down to the crook of her neck and kiss the sensitive flesh.

She murmurs in her sleep and arches against me. My body instantly responds to her, but I'm not an ass. We were up most of the night making love, so she needs her sleep.

"Keep sleeping." I kiss her again, flop onto my back, and stare at the ceiling. Everything about last night was perfect.

Well, at least once we made it back to my place. I cringe. I can't exactly say I was a perfect gentleman in my word vomit description of my childhood. After sitting on the edge of the bed, I press my lips together.

It was the first time I'd recounted the whole thing and how it felt to anyone, but I feel lighter. The overwhelming gloom that always lurked at the edge of my consciousness is gone. Maybe getting it out in the open took some of the power my parent's relationship held over me.

My stomach growls. What time is it? I glance at the clock. It's nearly noon. No wonder I'm starving. Layla barely ate last night, so she must be famished as well. I grab a pair of shorts and slip them on.

When I'm almost to the door, I reverse directions, grab a condom, and slip it in my front pocket. Always be prepared. I grin and chuckle softly.

She groans, rolls over, and blinks. *Shit. I wasn't going to wake her up.* For several seconds, I stand motionless until her eyes flutter shut. Her mouth twitches, and then she sighs and relaxes back into the pillow.

My heart floods with emotion. What I feel for her hit me out of the blue. I wasn't expecting to stay a few months in Meadow Bay, meet a girl

with the personality of sunshine, and fall in love. But look where I am—right smack in the middle of it.

I whistle as I stride through the living room and into the kitchen. What should we eat? I'm not in the mood for steak and potatoes. What else do I have? I snatch the refrigerator door open and eye the contents. Milk. Eggs. Butter. Bacon. Salad. Steak. Breakfast it is.

After I collect the ingredients I need, I whip up a breakfast for a queen. My queen. Golden silver dollar pancakes, eggs—Sunnyside up, and not too crispy bacon. By the time I'm done, the whole place smells like a café, and my mouth is watering.

“Hey.” She walks into the room wearing one of my T-shirts. It covers her to the top of her thighs.

“Hey, yourself.” I snatch a piece of bacon, march over to her, and dangle it in front of her mouth.

“Thank you,” she moans, bites off a piece of it, and steals the rest from my fingers. “I'm starving.”

“Damn. I'm feeling bad here. You have the same ‘O’ face for bacon as you do for me.”

“You're both delicious.” She grins and gobbles down the rest of the bacon. After she swallows, she smacks her lips together. “More, please.”

I waggle my eyebrows. “More bacon or more sex?”

She laughs and moves to the plate of bacon. “More bacon, then sex, then more food.” She raises her eyebrows. “Deal?”

“Perfect. Eat quick.” I snatch the condom out of my pocket and wave it in the air.

Her eyes widen. “You brought a condom to the kitchen?”

“Yep. Don't want anything keeping me from an opportunity to bury myself in your sweetness.” I stalk toward her. “Eat.”

“Yes, sir.” She munches on the food as the flush on her neck moves up to her cheeks. The second she swallows, she says, “Done.”

“That’s better. I don’t want you to die of starvation.” I cage her between my arms and press her back into the island top. “Too bad you haven’t tried the syrup yet.”

Her eyes are glued to my lips. “What about you? Won’t you get hungry.”

“Nope.” I drag the hem of the T-shirt up to her waist and stare at her face. I’m never going to grow tired of being with her. She’s everything I never knew I was looking for. My hand slips down her belly and to her soft curls. “No panties?”

“No.” She strokes my hard shaft. “I guess we both had the same idea.”

“Yeah.” I drop to my knees. It’s been hours since I’ve tasted her sex. As I lean forward, I inhale her scent and it has me growing harder. I want her in my bed every morning so I can revel in her goodness.

When I reach the juncture of her thighs, I feast greedily on her pussy. Her moans of delight go straight to my head, spurring on my actions. I need her like a drowning man needs air. As I flick and suck her clit, her pelvis arches toward my face, and her hands lace into my hair.

“God, yes. That feels so good.” Her voice sounds full of heat and need.

I tug on her clit with my tongue and upper lip as I slide my hand up her thigh. Her sex is wet and ready for me as she grinds against my face. Fuck. I love how desperate she is for me. I want to touch all of her at once. Although, my dick is starting to get pouty about all the action my mouth is getting.

Too bad. I slip two fingers into her tight core and thrust hard against her sweet spot. Her growl of approval causes me to smile against her mound.

“Please, make me come.” Her hands pull on my hair as she shoves my face hard against her body. There’s nothing I want more in this world than to fulfill her command. I want to feel her sex convulsing against my tongue and to hear her desperate mews of pleasure.

I repeatedly lash my tongue over her sensitive clit and work in and out of her pussy. Her legs quiver as her orgasm nears. “Faster, Kam. Harder.”

As I follow her demands, she crashes around me. Her body bucks and

thrusts as I bathe my tongue in her honey.

Chapter Forty-Five

Layla

Several days later, I step onto the sidewalk in front of my parent's house and snatch my cell phone out of my purse. *Harbor*. "Thanks for calling me back."

"You said it was urgent."

"It is." I pace in front of the concrete steps.

"What could be so important that you pull me out of a boring meeting?"

I snort. "See, you weren't doing anything."

"Yes, I was. I was working but thank God you gave me an excuse to get up. I told my boss it was an emergency." She sighs, "I love my job, but Mr. Dickerson is a pompous ass. He could bore an accountant."

"I'm sorry. I finally received a message from Mrs. Thomas. She would love a photoshoot with you and Cole."

"I..." she sputters, and then there's dead silence.

"Harbor?"

"Y-yes. I'm here." Her voice is husky as if she's afraid someone's listening. Granted, she's at work, so anyone could be within earshot, at least on her end of the conversation. "I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. It's just pictures." I wait.

Harbor's been in love with Cole since we were in grade school, but her brothers have always made it known that they don't want their friends poaching on their sister. Especially, someone like Cole, who's a bad boy player. However, I question how bad of a bad boy he is. Cole is sweet as pie.

"Fine. You're right. It's not a big deal." She pauses as if she's straightening her shoulders and preparing for battle. I don't dare tell her what

type of photos Mrs. Thomas wants. “When do we do this?”

“I’ll get with Cole, and we’ll set a date.”

My dad steps out on the porch and waves. “Hi,” I mouth as I wait for Harbor to respond.

“That’s fine, but if he doesn’t want to do it. With me. I mean. Shit. I don’t mean if he wants to do it with me. Damn. You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.” I roll my eyes. “I’ll talk to you later.” They need to get together already and get it on.

The hot sun burns my skin. Kameron and his wicked tongue and hard body have me melted in a puddle of lust.

But that’s not his only appeal. I cherish his openness with me, willingness to share those painful memories from his childhood, and the way he hangs on my every word. And I sure can’t forget how he makes me breakfast or all the extracurricular kitchen sex we’ve had.

I fan myself as memories of his pelvis slamming into my ass as I lay over the island flash through my mind. *Lord, have mercy.*

“Layla, are you coming?”

Fuck. My entire body shudders. *You don’t know how close.* I glance down at my phone. *Crap.* I click it off and smile at my dad. “Sorry, Dad.” I shove my cell back into my purse and jog up the stairs.

“How’s my little girl?”

“Great.” I kiss his cheek.

He stands back. “You seem super happy.”

“I am.” I clasp the doorknob, twist, step inside, and my dad follows behind me.

It’s like stepping back into a piece of my childhood. The living room hasn’t changed. My dad’s recliner is still directly in front of the television, and my mom’s rocking chair has a crocheted afghan laying across it. She’s long since given up the fight over the thermostat. “Where’s Mom?”

“I’m here.” She sweeps in from the kitchen while wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “It’s so good to see you. It’s been forever.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Sorry. I’ve been busy.”

My dad crosses his arms over his chest. “With Kameron?”

“Yes.” I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin. “Do you have a problem with that?”

He stands motionless for several seconds as the clock on the wall ticks. Second after second. “I guess you could do worse. But I always pictured you falling in love and getting married to a man that was from here. What happens when he leaves town and goes back home?”

“Everything’ll be fine.” I don’t know what’s going to happen, but if I show one sign of weakness, my father will march into work and demand Kameron ask me to marry him. I want him to decide on his own that he wants a future between us. Not because my father held a shotgun to his head.

My dad turns on his heel and walks to the living room. “Let’s hope so.” His voice is muffled, but there’s no question about what he said.

I swallow hard and embrace my mom, inhaling the scent of cinnamon and vanilla. “What’re you baking?”

“Banana bread and a cake for a lady’s group.” She tilts her head and studies me as my dad settles back into his recliner.

“Sounds delicious.”

“You want some banana bread?”

“Absolutely.” I rub my hands together and rush into the kitchen.

“Warmed up with butter?”

“Of course.” The kitchen is tidy, but stacks of papers cover one end of the cabinet beside her rolltop desk. She uses it as a combo office and kitchen. If you don’t see my mom, this is where she’s hiding out.

“Tell me what’s been going on with you.” She busies herself, getting my food together as I sit down in a wooden seat at the table.

After graduation, my mom updated to stainless steel appliances, so there's been some modernizations done in here. The scent of bananas fills the space as the plate of bread rotates inside the microwave.

"Work's going great. I haven't been late in weeks." I frown. "More like three weeks." Or is it four? Time flies when you're having fun. Or when you're on your back getting serviced.

"That's wonderful, dear. I'm proud of you." She yanks open the microwave door with a snap. "Not that I wasn't proud of you before. That came out wrong."

"Stop." I wave a hand at her dismissively. "I was flighty. I get that now. It's time for me to be a responsible adult. Just because I was off helping someone else doesn't give me an excuse to shirk my duties."

"Wow." My mom jerks her head around and stares with wide eyes. "What brings on this newfound maturity?"

"Well..." I pause as she sits the plate down, slathers butter onto a knife, and hands it to me. "I've been seeing the man dad was asking about. His name is Kameron."

She smiles and pulls out a seat across from me. "Tell me all about him."

"He's..." I drift off as I coat the bread with a heaping pile of butter. *Delicious*. I moan deep in my throat. "He's complicated. He's only here for a few months, so I'm not sure what the future holds."

My heart skips a beat as thoughts of Kameron leaving town drift through my brain. Do I go with him? This is my home. My hometown. I've never considered leaving for good. My gut churns, and suddenly, I'm no longer hungry.

"I see." Her face is filled with concern.

"Yeah." I drop the bread to the white plate. "I love him, but I don't know if we'll be together long-term."

"I'm sorry." She grabs my hand and pats it. "How long have you been together?"

“Several weeks, so it’s still early.” My gaze drifts to the living room where my dad’s laughing at something on the television. “How did you know?”

She follows my gaze. “Know what? That your dad was the one for me?”

“Yes.”

“The instant I met him, but it took a good year for him to be on board. Men fight relationships so hard for fear of being hurt.”

“Bullshit.” My dad’s booming voice drifts in from the living room.

My mom purses her lips and rolls her eyes. “He’s the one who’s full of it. Men are babies when it comes to their hearts. Give him time.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I nod. She’s right. Kameron has made a complete one hundred and eighty degrees turn since I met him. He smiles and laughs now. He likes having a good time, and not only when we’re in bed.

The key is not to push him. We have six weeks left. My stomach churns, and nausea rolls up my throat.

Six weeks? Oh, hell.

Chapter Forty-Six

Kameron

I lean against the green cushion at the restaurant and study the menu. The white sheet is covered in grease smudges, but the food is phenomenal.

“What’re you getting?” Cole asks as he tosses down the menu.

“I’m getting the tenderloin. You?” Cole and I have grown tight over the last several weeks. We have the same schedule at the station, so when we’re off and Layla’s working, we go out to lunch together.

The first day I met him, I thought he was a cocky pretty boy, but he’s not like that at all. Well, he’s cocky, but he’s the kind of guy that has everyone’s back. And it helps that he’s not interested in Layla.

“Same.” He rubs his stomach. “I’m starving.”

I cock an eyebrow. The dude eats like a pig and never gains any weight—he must work out like a fiend. “Don’t you have a photoshoot coming up?”

“Yeah, in a couple of weeks.” He shrugs. “It’s not a big deal.”

“What’s the situation between you and Harbor?”

“Nothing.” He wrinkles his nose. “She’s my best friend’s kid sister. We’ve always had a ‘you’re a pest’ kind of relationship.

“Oh.” *Shit.* Layla has her heart set on Cole and Harbor getting together. I hate to burst her bubble.

“She thinks I’m a player. Her dad thinks I’m irresponsible. And her brother would kick my ass if I looked at her.” He picks up the menu, and I grin. *Yeah, there’s something there.* A guy doesn’t know how a woman’s family feels about him if he doesn’t have his boxers in a bunch over her.

“She’s a good-looking woman.” I pick up my water and watch the condensation run down the glass while waiting for the fireworks.

“Don’t get any ideas.” His jaw flexes.

“Is that brotherly advice?”

He growls and waves the waitress over. “Let’s get it to go.”

“Fine. I’ll stop giving you shit.” I grin at, Emily. She’s bubbly like Layla but has platinum blonde hair rather than auburn. And she’s probably four years younger.

“Hey, ya boys. What can I get for you?” She drags her order pad out of her apron and smacks her gum between her teeth.

After we give her our order, Cole crosses his arms. “Quid pro quo.”

“What?”

“Tit for tat.”

“You want me to get a tat on my tit?”

He glares. “Asshole.” Then, he grins. “However, if you want a tattoo on your tit, you should get a butterfly.”

I love Cole’s quips. He’s full of quotes and colloquialisms. When we get going, we can go all night.

“How’re you and Layla? What’re you going to do when your cousin comes back? She’s a great girl, and I don’t want to see her get hurt.”

My hand shakes, and I drop it from the glass. *Did I swallow part of the Sahara Desert?* But I’m not about to take a drink. If I do, I might end up with water spilled all down my shirt. “I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

Every second of the day, I spend thinking about Layla and what to do when my time’s done. Do we try long distance? Do I stay here? Do I ask her to come with me? All those thoughts swirl like a hurricane in my head until I’m barely sleeping. “There’re still six weeks to figure it out.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes. Of course. What’s not to love about her? She’s an amazing person.”

“But?”

The wall behind Cole is covered in photos of old movie casts and assorted replica props. “I’m worried I’m not the marriage and family type. My parents weren’t good role models, and she deserves someone who has their shit together.”

Fear flows throughout me at the prospect of her with someone else. “But I can’t stay away from her.” I need her like air. “Is it fair to get married and screw everything up? What if we have kids and I fuck them up like my parents did me?”

“You’re too hard on yourself. You’re a great guy. I don’t know your history, but whatever it was seems to have rocked your confidence. You have a job helping people. You’re a good friend. You love her. What more could she ask for?”

“Is it that simple?” The waitress brings our food as I contemplate what he said. What am I going to do? There’re only a few weeks to get it all straightened out.

“Hell if I know.” Cole laughs. “It’s not like I’m dating anyone. Did you catch the game this weekend?” Cole picks up the enormous sandwich and pieces of lettuce and a blob of ketchup fall to his plate.

“It was a good one. Tony made a spectacular play in the endzone.”

“Fuck yes. He did.” Cole shakes his head. “I can’t believe you’re friends with a pro player and didn’t invite me to the game.”

“Maybe next time.” Will there be a next time? Do I want there to be a next time?

I survey the restaurant. The laidback atmosphere of Meadow Bay has steadily grown on me. I enjoy the quiet nights without sirens. It’s fantastic that the station’s calls aren’t at the same pace as back in K.C. Hell, I even like that there’s only one stoplight.

Could I make this my home? Our home? It’s a great place to raise a family. Gavin is right about that.

Seconds later, my cell phone pings, and I smile. *Layla*. I drag it out of

my pocket, but when I see Roman's number, my stomach lurches.

Roman: Hey, dude. How's it hanging? I'll be back in two weeks. Called it off early. I'm sure you're ready to get back home. Thanks for watching the place while I was gone.

Fuck. Two weeks. Sweat breaks out on my back. I've only got two weeks to get everything figured out and settled.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Layla

One week later

When the alarm goes off, I crack my eyes open and stare at the ceiling. What time is it? I flop over and grab my cell phone from the end table. Six-thirty? How did it get so late? I swipe the alarm off.

“Did your alarm not go off?”

When Kameron doesn’t answer, I twist my head and examine his side of the bed. The covers are pulled up perfectly under his pillow. When did he get up?

“Kameron?” I call out and then listen for sounds from the adjoining bathroom. Nothing. Sadness flows through my body, leaving me feeling deflated and weak. He’s grown distant over the last several days.

Last week everything was great, and then, bam—out of nowhere—he turned broody and pensive. When I ask, he says everything’s fine. Yeah, ri-i-ight. Something’s wrong. Half the time when he’s not working, he disappears.

Last night, he fell asleep before I even got out of the bathroom from showering. I should have gone home. Obviously, we’re at two different places with the definition of ‘I love you.’

I hop out of bed and toss my clothes on as I walk toward his bedroom door. From the living room, I can hear glasses clanking in the kitchen. At least he hasn’t left yet.

Ring. Buzz. Ring. Kameron’s cell phone vibrates across the coffee table. “Kam, your phone’s ringing.”

I step toward his phone and wait for his response. The water blasts against the metal basin as the phone continues to ring.

“Shit.” I snatch it up off the table and twist on my heel.

Kameron rushes toward me. “I’ll get it.”

“Okay.” My heart dives to my feet. I thought we were past the point of him getting upset if I grabbed his phone. Either he doesn’t trust me, or he’s hiding something. Neither scenario makes me feel good.

Our fingers brush as he grabs the phone, swipes the screen, and shoves it into his pocket. *He’s hiding something.* My stomach cramps. *Is he seeing someone else?* The urge to crumble to the floor and weep is overwhelming.

“I’ve got to get to work.” He leans forward, places a kiss on my cheek, and heads to the kitchen.

As I watch his retreat, I’m motionless. I thought I was prepared for our time to end. He leaves in five weeks. But I’ve been lying to myself, I’m not strong enough to see us end. I’ve always known I wanted everything with him. I was an idiot to think he would change his mind. I’m a momentary distraction at his pitstop in the road.

Is there still time? Can I convince him what we have is worth it? Finally, I find my gumption and follow him.

He grabs the pot of coffee and pours a mug for him and one for me. “Here you go.” He hands the steaming hot mug to me. “Sorry for flaking out on you last night. I’ve had a lot on my mind and must have been exhausted.”

“It’s okay.” My eyes scan over him, looking for signs of trouble, but he appears the same as always.

“You should have woken me up.”

“I tried.” He grins and cups the back of my head. “I spooned you, and you ignored me.”

“Oh.” I flush. That wasn’t a dream. As his mouth descends on mine, I wrap my arms around his neck. His tongue sweeps against my bottom lip, nudging it down to give him access.

Not that I would deny him. I would do whatever he asked me to. My heart skips as my knees go weak. Even if that means following him halfway across the country. It’ll break my heart to leave my family and friends, but I can’t live without him.

I pull back. “My mom wants to meet you. She said she would like for us to come over and have dinner this weekend.”

His eyes widen, and he steps back. “I don’t think this is a good time.”

“Why?” My back stiffens, and I prop my hands on my hips. “There’s nothing wrong with her, and you’ve met my dad. Remember? He’s your boss. What’s the big deal?”

“I’m sure she’s great. I don’t doubt that.” He paces in front of me. “But your dad barely tolerates me, and at work, he pretends like we aren’t seeing each other. He’s not going to want me to shove it in his face by sitting across from him at the dinner table.”

“My parents are a perfect example of what a committed relationship looks like. They’ve been devoted to each other for thirty years. I want you to see that people who love each other can have a long-term relationship that works.”

He shakes his head, stops in the middle of the room, and shoves his hands into his pockets. “I’m sure they’re great. But we’re having pre-marital sex, my parents are a shitshow, and I can’t tell them exactly what the future holds.”

“I see.” I lick my lips and back up. The unforgiving hardness of the island smacks into my lower back.

“Listen, we need to talk about where things are going, but I need to get to work. I can’t be late.” He lifts his arm and scrutinizes his watch. “I’m already late.”

My hands curl into fists, causing my nails to cut into my palms. “You’d better get to work, then.”

‘*Do you want to break up?*’ The words stick in my throat. I know it’s better to be blunt and get things out into the open. But I can’t ask the question. I’m too scared of the answer.

“When do you get off work?”

“Six o’clock.” I swing around to keep the tears from swelling up and flooding his kitchen.

I won't cry. At least not in front of him. I hate when women use tears to keep a guy—almost as much as I can't stand women who trick men into relationships by getting pregnant.

If a guy doesn't want to be with me, then that's the way it is. Even if it's Kameron and the whole world is being ripped out from under my feet.

“I'll stop by on my break.”

“Sure.” I speed walk through the living room. Before I can make it to the bedroom door, the first tear rushes down my cheek, followed by a trickle of her friends. I've got to get out of here.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Kameron

Shit. I close my eyes and lean my head against the headrest of the pickup. I need to tell Layla my plans, but I don't have everything lined up yet. I want to know exactly where things are going before I talk to her about it, and approach her parents.

I have a week until Roman gets back into town, and that should give me enough time to find a place to buy. Something perfect that symbolizes how I feel about her, about us, and how much she's changed my life.

Every night this week, I've been by the real estate agent's office looking at available homes. Over the years, I've saved up enough money to have a good down payment on a house for Layla and me. One we can raise a family in.

Between work, searching for a place to live, and rearranging my financial affairs, it's taken every waking moment I've had. I feel like an ass falling asleep on Layla last night, but I'm exhausted.

When she brought up dinner with her parents, I freaked out. I don't want them to ask what my plans are and not be able to declare that Layla's the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. First, I need the house. Then, I need a ring.

Once I have those things set in stone, I'll ask her to marry me, and together we can convince her parents that I'm a good catch.

My stomach churns. Am I ready for this? What if I fail her? I can't stand the thought of not being the man she deserves.

My cell phone buzzes, and I glance down at it.

Roman: Hey, my flight gets in tomorrow night at ten.

What the fuck? The world goes black and spins in vicious circles inside my head. That messes up my entire timeline.

Me: I thought you were gone another week.

There was little chance I was going to get everything finalized in a week, but in just one day—that's not going to happen. I'm going to have to find a rental. This is not how I wanted to start my future with Layla.

Roman: Nah, man. Missed home.

Sweat pools on my forehead. Layla will be out any second. Crap. I've got to get to the real estate agent and figure out where I'm going to live.

The front door opens, and Layla sprints out into the sunshine. Her face is freshly scrubbed, and even without an ounce of make-up, she's beautiful. I want to wake up every morning next to this woman. It doesn't matter where I live. Layla's home.

A slow smile curves up to my cheeks. So what if the timeline is moved up, and I don't know where I'm going to live? Layla's my home.

Me: I get it.

Roman: Cool. Then you won't mind heading back early.

Me: I'll figure something out. Is it okay if I shack up with you until next week?

I don't want to invite myself to stay at Layla's rental. Her parents aren't going to approve of us living together, and I don't have a ring picked out yet. There's so much to do. I thought I had more time.

Roman: Sure thing.

I wave at Layla and shift the gearshift into drive. I need to stop by the real estate agent and tell her about the change in plans. Surely, there's somewhere else in town for rent until I can find the right place to purchase.

As I drive through town, I stop in front of the agent's office. The closed sign hangs prominently in the window. Perfect. She doesn't open until nine o'clock. Three more hours. Nothing like losing more time. Adrenaline buzzes through my veins. Am I really doing this?

I take in everything as I pull out from in front of the office. The streets are quiet, with a few vehicles dotting the parking spaces. Everything's still as

the sun continues to rise. The buildings look like a scene from a movie.

I love this town. I can see getting married to Layla and starting a family here. Our kids can grow up in the same cocoon of community support that Layla experienced. I've spent my entire life avoiding commitments, and she's broken all those defenses in less than two months. When I'm with her, I feel complete.

Her parents. Will they approve of our relationship? Hell, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to prove to them that I love their daughter and want to make her happy. Surely that's all they're hoping for. Okay, I'm positive they want her to remain here, and once they know I'm ready to make Meadow Bay my home, that should be a point in my favor.

As I pull into the station, my cell phone buzzes again. Who is it now? No one's called my number in weeks besides my dad and Rich, and now, it's like Grand Central Station.

Tabitha: We need to talk.

Fuck. I don't want to talk to you.

Me: I don't mean to be rude, but I don't have anything to say to you.

Tabitha: I only need five minutes.

Me: Later. I've got to go to work.

I shove my cell phone into my pocket and whistle as I walk to the station. This is where I cradled Layla in my arms for the first time. How would she feel about a wedding at the station? I chuckle. Yeah, not exactly romantic. I've got to pick Gavin's brain for romantic gestures that don't blow up in my face. I obviously don't have the knack for that.

Cole opens the door and stops in mid-step. "Hey, bud. I was about to send out the search party for you."

"Sorry, I had some personal things come up. Roman's coming back tomorrow night, and I've got to get some things in order."

"Wow." His mouth drops. "I didn't think he was coming back for

another month.”

“He texted me a week ago that he would be back early, but I wasn’t expecting him until next week.” I slip through the threshold.

I’ve got to talk to Gavin about leaving for a couple of hours to meet with the real estate agent. Find a place to rent. Continue looking for a house. Buy a ring. Sweep Layla off her feet. Time’s ticking.

“I see.” His voice is distant as my brain whirls with the laundry list of things to do. I’ve also got to get ahold of my dad to get my stuff out of storage.

It’s going to cost an arm and a leg to get everything transported here. Never mind. I’ll sell everything and get new furniture. If I can find a place to live. “Sorry, man. I’ve got to call my dad about getting my stuff out of storage.”

Hell, I don’t need the money. Dad can sell everything and use it for Micah. Micah’s the youngest of my siblings and still living at home. He can get Micah a used vehicle to pick up chicks. I shake my head. How did all my siblings grow up so fast?

I clock in, wave at the guys, and grab my cell phone. After I dial my dad’s number, I wait. Two rings. Three. Four. I frown. What in the hell? It’s two hours later there.

On the fifth ring, he answers, “Son, what’s up?”

“I was thinking you weren’t going to answer.”

“I was busy. Sorry about that.”

When he doesn’t elaborate, I tilt my head. “Is everything okay?”

“We’re all great. Micah has gotten a part-time job at a pizzeria. Josie has got a new beau. Dallas is busy in college.”

I grin and lean my hip on the counter as he drones on. It’s time to stop fretting about my siblings. They’re all grown up and starting their own lives. They need to find their own way.

“What about Dominic?”

“You know Dom. He’s got three women on the line.”

I chuckle. Dominic’s the ultimate player and one year younger than me. One day it’s going to come to a screeching halt. My stomach tightens. I’m going to have to depend on my dad to fill me in.

Don’t be dramatic. You can visit. It’s not like moving here means you can’t fly back to see your family.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?” I can hear the apprehension in his voice.

“I’ve met someone.”

“Hallelujah.”

“I take it you were starting to give up hope.”

“Son, you could say that.”

“I’m not good enough for her, but I’m also asshole enough not to let her go.”

“Good for you.” His voice booms across the airwaves.

“I’m going to stay here, so I wondered if you would sell my stuff and buy Micah a car.”

“That’s fantastic. I’ll miss you, but I’ve waited for this moment since the day you were born. And Micah would love the vehicle of his own.” He pauses for a second. “I hope you bring her out to visit sometime.”

“Absolutely.” I lean against the wall. “Hey, Dad, I’ve got a ton of stuff to do. I’ll talk to you later.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Layla

“Order up.” Charlie Rogers yells out through the opening between the kitchen and the dining area. He grabs the next order and disappears.

The scent of eggs and ham rolls out of the kitchen. *Lord.* My stomach clenches. *That’s disgusting.* I shudder. When did I develop an aversion to omelets?

“Thanks.” I grab the plates and line them along my arm, being careful not to overlap them or get them off-center. The last thing I want to do is clean the yellow goo off my shoes.

“No problem, Doll.”

Doll. Kameron calls me doll. Tears sting my eyes. *Damn it. Stop getting worked up over Kameron.* I straighten my shoulders and growl deep in my throat. It’s not like he said he wanted to break up. Stop putting words in his mouth.

I drop off the order to a couple of regulars who smile and greedily take their food. At least someone’s hungry. When was the last time I ate? As I move across the dining room, I rack my brain—crackers last night before bed. I’m starving. My stomach revolts at the idea. Or, I should be starving.

The door dings as a new customer walks in. I smile at Cole. “Hi.”

His eyes dart outside like he’s considering leaving. What’s up with him? I stop in mid-step. He wanted to leave when he saw me. My pulse accelerates. Kameron’s seeing someone else—that’s the only explanation that makes sense.

“Layla.” He swallows and carefully shuts the door. His movements are sluggish as he ambles across the floor. “I didn’t realize you were working today.”

“I see that.” The rest of the customers continue to chatter as forks clink against porcelain platters. My hands shake, so I clasp them together. My

whole world is getting ready to unravel, and no one else is paying attention.

As he marches across the café, his face is flush and sweat beads on his forehead. “Um....”

“Yes?” My voice sounds weak and raspy. I clear my throat. I’m a strong woman, not a weak pansy. I’ve lived without him this long; I can live the rest of my life without him. “Spill it.”

“Well.” He coughs and stares at the floor. “I thought something serious was going on between you and Kameron, but he said his cousin was coming home tomorrow.”

“What?” My breath catches in my throat. Was that what was wrong this morning? Did Roman text him?

No wonder he didn’t want me to see his phone. He wanted to tell me first. That must be it.

“Yeah, he said his cousin texted him last week and was coming back early, but he thought he had another week.”

“Another week?” His words barely penetrate the fog in my brain. His cousin texted him last week. He knew last week. He’s leaving and didn’t tell me. He’s leaving tomorrow. *Holy hell*. My knees buckle, and I grip the counter. The whites of my knuckles poke out as I clench the wood.

“He was searching for Gavin when I left. I assume it was to tell him he was going back home.” He frowns. “I’m guessing you didn’t know.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I had no idea.” *Oh, my God. I’m going to pass out*. I inhale deeply to suck in as much air as possible, but the swimming sensation doesn’t ease.

“I’m sorry, Layla. He seemed like a nice guy, but I guess he’s not the long-term type.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

Damn it. He told you that from the beginning. Why did you think you were different?

Anger pushes the disbelief and hurt away with one swift shove. *Fuck*

that. How dare he not tell me he's leaving. It's one thing to say he doesn't know what the future holds and another to lie to me for a week. He knew he was leaving and didn't say a word.

The betrayal is like a punch in the gut. The only other time I've been lied to by a guy was the married one, but he hardly counts. Is this what relationships look like? He's right. Life isn't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a switchblade knife to the chest. "Thanks for telling me."

"Do you want me to talk to him?"

I jerk backward and grab Cole's forearm. "Fuck, no."

"Layla." His mouth drops open so wide that if we had flies, he'd end up catching one.

"Sorry." Heat floods my chest and up my neck. "I shouldn't have said that. I can't believe he didn't say anything to me."

Cole wraps his arms around me and pats my back. "I'm so sorry. He played us both. I've gone to lunch with him twice this week, and he didn't say a word to me either."

"At least you weren't sleeping with him." My voice is muffled against his T-shirt.

"You've got a point." He chuckles against the top of my head.

"Thank you for telling me." I bite my bottom lip and step back. I've got to be a grown-ass woman and finish this day.

Then, I can cry into the fur of my favorite stuffed teddy bear—my companion for life. My shoulders quake. No. You aren't breaking down, but you might just junk punch him.

"I care about you." He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"Thank you. Do you want to do the photoshoot next weekend? Harbor will be in town." I might as well focus on someone else since my life is an epic bust.

He scuffs the toe of his boot on the floor. "I don't think that's a good idea."

“It’s a great idea. Photoshoots always cheer me up, and I need something positive in my life right now.” I glare at him, grab the front of his T-shirt, and twist it, pulling him closer. “Don’t you screw me over.”

He chuckles. “When you put it like that, I don’t have much choice.”

“No. You don’t.” I drop the fabric and cuff him on the upper arm. “It’s a date. Now, what do you need?”

Chapter Fifty

Kameron

As I drive toward Layla's house, I study my new rental. It's not a fancy house, but it'll work for now. I can't believe I was lucky enough to find a place quickly and at a great price. Even better, it's two doors down from hers.

I signed a three-month lease. By then, I hope to have everything lined out to find a permanent place to buy for the both of us. My fingers tighten on the steering wheel. Hopefully, I'm not moving too fast for her.

Before I can get the vehicle into park, Layla's front door snaps open and light floods the front porch. With the light behind her, she looks like an angel. I can't wait to tell her the good news. She paces the floor.

If she considers it good news. My gut churns. Something's wrong.

I step down from my pickup and slam the door shut. A dog down the road breaks into a fit of yaps at the sharp noise. I stride across the gravel to her. "What's wrong?"

Her hands ball into fists. "How could you? I knew you were hiding something this week. Were you going to tell me?"

"What?" I jerk backward at her barrage of questions. My head spins as I try to figure out what she's asking and how to answer it.

"I thought at first you were seeing someone behind my back." Her movements are slow as she twists on the heel of her tennis shoe.

"I'm not seeing anyone else." I raise my hands in defense. What's she upset about? Did someone see me at the real estate office?

Ri-i-ight. This is a small town. Of course, they did. "Never mind." I grab her upper arms and hold her in place. "I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy?" She gapes at me like I have an alien growing out of the top of my head.

My hands drop to my sides. I guess I was overcalculating her

excitement of us being together long-term. Maybe I was the one who read things wrong.

“No. I’m not happy. You were right. You don’t know how to be in a relationship. People in relationships don’t lie to each other or hide things.”

“What are you talking about? I only found out today.”

Her eyes soften, and she gnaws on her bottom lip. “You only found out today about Roman coming back early.”

I blink and shake my head. Her questions have me off-kilter as they bounce from one topic to another. I feel like I’ve gotten a bad case of whiplash. “No. He texted me last week.”

“I see.” Her jaw tightens, and her shoulders go back like she’s ready to fight.

If it weren’t such a shitty situation, I’d appreciate her strength. But too late, I realize the mistake I’ve made. It hits me like a lightning bolt. I fucked up. I should have told her I was staying instead of planning to surprise her. This is why I suck at relationships. I screw things up. “Listen, Layla.”

“No.” She shakes her head and steps back. “People in relationships don’t keep secrets. You’re right. We’re too different.”

“Let me explain.” I reach out, but she’s gone before I can get another word out. The door shuts with a snap, leaving me standing alone on the front porch. “I’m staying.” Sadly, no one can hear my confession.

What does it matter? She’s right. I’m not the kind of guy a woman wants to spend the rest of her life with. I’m no different than my dad—he couldn’t keep a woman either. We’re destined to be alone.

The sound of my boots clanking across the wooden porch is the only noise that makes it to my ears. It’s like I’ve stepped into an alternate universe where nothing else exists. There’s no breeze. No birds singing. No dogs barking. Everything’s muted as a hush falls over my shoulders and sucks me into the abyss.

As I snatch open the door, the hinges squeaking signals that the world continues to exist. I don’t. I’m unraveling, and nothing will be able to hold

the threads and put me back together.

A door crashes against the outside wall of a nearby house, and a child emerges laughing as she chases a dog down the steps. “Stop it, Dixie.” The dog yelps and dances at her feet.

Then, the older couple I met during the fire at their house step outside and toddle over to the porch swing. Like a force of nature, the world started spinning again, and my throat closes.

Fuck. The noise and motion are too much. I need the oblivion from a few seconds ago. That way, I can pretend everything’s an illusion. I’m fake. My time with Layla was a dream. None of it existed.

I slam the door shut and welcome the utter silence. The lights in Layla’s living room blink off, and a low groan escapes my mouth. *Damn it.* I slam my hand against the steering wheel, causing pain to shoot up my forearm and into my shoulder. This is my destiny. To be alone and in pain.

Desperation claws at me. I need a bottle of whiskey. There’s only one thing that provides the escape I’m seeking. *Fuck.* I’ve got to go back to work and finish my shift. Then—whiskey.

Chapter Fifty-One

Layla

The dust bunny on my floor mocks me with its beady eyes. Fine. It doesn't have eyes. I squint and stare. Are those eyes? I cringe and roll over onto my back. Who cares?

Slowly, I drift off. The sweet release of sleep cradles me in its arms, and I let everything go. There's no more Kameron. There never was. Our time together was a fantasy. Leave it to me to fall for the bad boy grump with the brooding eyes and think I'm going to change him.

How many times did my mom tell me I couldn't rescue everything? Stray cats. A random dog. Makeshift crates for abandoned bunnies. I've done it all. But men? You can't fix them. They must want to change. And apparently, Kameron's aversion to long-term relationships is here to stay.

Sex? Sure. A few dates? Why not. Love? Let's blurt that out. Commitment? Fuck no.

Two Days Later

My eyes pop open, and I stare at the ceiling. I can't stop dreaming about him. Thankfully, this one was not the one where he holds me in his arms and kisses away all my heartbreak, because that one kicks me in the gut every time.

Ring. Ring. What the fuck? I glare at my cellphone. *I don't want to talk to anyone.* It's been two days, and I can barely get out of bed. By now, Kameron must be back in Kansas City, where he belongs.

I double over in pain. Why does it hurt so much?

Bang. Bang. Someone knocks on my front door. Why can't I die in peace?

If they want to see me, they can come back later. Much later. I pull the pillow over my face and block all the light and sounds.

Seconds later, my bedroom door crashes open, and the wood rattles against the wall. “What the fuck?” I throw the pillow to the side of the bed and jerk upright. *Harbor*. “Bitch.” I flop back against the bed. “Go away.”

“Are you going to stay here forever?”

“Yes. Where else would I go?” I called Harbor the second Kameron left. Fine. I lay propped up against the front door for an hour hoping he’d come back and tell me I was wrong. Explain what happened. But he never came back. He’s probably back to his old life and living large.

“To the shower.” She sniffs loudly. “What’s that smell?”

“Despair.”

“No, I’m serious. Something stinks in here.” She randomly picks up items off the floor and tosses them to the side.

“It’s sour milk.”

“Sour milk?”

“Yes.” I jerk my head toward the other side of the bed.

She marches around the footboard and stops in mid-step. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“What?” I crawl over to the edge of the mattress and peer at the floor. It is littered with cartons of ice cream, cookie packages, and wads of Kleenexes. Humph. That does make me seem pathetic. I crawl back to the center of the bed, flop down on the mattress, and close my eyes. “Life sucks.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

“Yes.” I sit up and glower. “It. Does.” Anger radiates through me. “My whole life, I’ve looked at everything with rose-colored glasses. Always saw the best in people. Never committed until I found the perfect guy. I got snowed. He’s a prick.”

Her eyebrows scrunch together. “Are you sure? Maybe you should have asked him to explain rather than telling him he sucked at relationships. He told you it would be a struggle for him.”

“He was right. He does suck at relationships.” I wrinkle my nose. “I don’t believe in lying, and he lied to me. He knew Roman was coming back early and didn’t say a word.”

“You’ve never lied to him?”

My shoulders sag as the effort to exert energy sucks the life out of me. Did I ever lie to him? I didn’t tell him I loved him as soon as I knew. Is that a lie? “I don’t know.”

“Layla.” She sits on the edge of the bed. “Relationships take effort. You can’t toss away the right one without giving it everything you have.”

“Do you think I should call him?”

“That’s up to you. I can’t tell you what to do, but if I were in love and the guy seemed as into me as I was with him, I’d try. I’d toss my heart out there and let it be trampled on because the alternative could be the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek until blood pools in my mouth. “I can’t. Not yet. I need a few days to get my head on straight. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Heartbreak is hard.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Nauseous. Head spinning.” I rub my hand over my face. “The smell of eggs at the café makes me break out in hives. Yesterday, I puked until my ribs hurt.”

“Holy fuck.” Harbor stares with wide eyes and a mouth big enough to drive a dump truck through.

“What?”

She grabs my hands and places her forehead against mine. “You’re pregnant.”

“No. I’m not.” *No-o-o-o.* I slam my eyes shut and block out the possibility. It’s been over a week since the day at the café when I was sure my boobs hurt because my period was coming. *Shit. It never came.*

I lean back and cup my boobs. They feel full and tender under my

palms. “I.... Shit. I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, my Gawd. I was half-joking. I was hoping something at the café had given you food poisoning or something.”

“No. No one else has been sick, and we had unprotected sex the first time. My period was due over a week ago.”

“Oops.” She wrinkles her nose and presses her lips together.

“Oops is fucking right.” I jump up and pace the floor. “This is horrible.”

“Why? You love kids. You love Kameron. Sure, you’re not together, but a baby will change all that.”

“Yeah, it will make it all worse. Kameron’s mom trapped his dad repeatedly with kids. That’s why he doesn’t want children.”

“Oh, that is bad.” Her face pales.

“I can’t be pregnant. He’s going to think I did it on purpose to force him to be with me.” My entire body shakes until my teeth chatter. This can’t be happening.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Kameron

The flight to Kansas City was uneventful, even if I did have to wait overnight to get a standby ticket. The desire to get away and lick my wounds was the only thought drumming through my brain like a broken record.

After I flop onto the brown sofa, I stare at the ceiling. The marks from Micah's remote-controlled helicopter still dot the ceiling along with a smattering of cobwebs on the fan.

"What happened?" My dad strides into the living room with two beers in his hands. It's five o'clock somewhere. Even if it's only nine o'clock in the morning.

"She dumped me." I snatch the ice-cold container from his hand and pop the top. The kind of beer doesn't matter at this point. I'd drink warm piss if it took the edge off. I'll drown my sorrows in whatever I can find.

"What the hell for?" My dad's voice sounds like he's got a pound of gravel lodged in his throat from years of yelling in the factory. He moves to the recliner and plops down. A loud whooshing sound erupts as the air deflates under him.

"Fuck if I know." I guzzle the entire can in one gulp, set it on the coffee table, and wipe my mouth off with my hand.

He presses his lips together and arches an eyebrow. "She must have said something."

"Fine," I sigh in exasperation and slouch into the cushions. Damn it. I feel like a nine-year-old prepping for a lecture. "She says I lied to her. I guess she's not wrong, but I was figuring everything out and wanted to surprise her. She got all pissed off and wouldn't listen."

"Then why are you here?" He takes a sip of beer.

I curl my lip. "Why wouldn't I be here?"

“Because you love this girl, and she’s had time to cool down. Now would be the time you spill your guts. Instead, you ran here with your tail between your legs.”

“That’s a little harsh. Don’t you think?” I brace my hands on the cushions and shove my weight forward. This conversation deserves another beer. I expected a pat on the back, and ‘She was the wrong woman for you.’ Not–‘You screwed up.’ I stomp through the living room as the joists squeak under my weight.

“No. I don’t think it’s too harsh,” he mutters more to himself than to me.

“Need another?”

“Nope. One’s plenty for nine o’clock in the morning.”

After I march through the kitchen, I jerk open the door and grab a beer. I should’ve gone to Rich’s place. He should be home by now. I slip back into my spot on the sofa.

“You need to straighten this out.”

“Why? This proves what I’ve always thought. Like you, I don’t have what it takes to be in a long-term relationship.”

“Dude.” My dad rolls his eyes. “You don’t know everything.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve been with Margaret for twelve years.”

My mouth drops open, and I stare at him. Ms. Connelly? What in the fuck?

“Why in the hell did you think she came over all the time and cooked and cleaned?”

“I thought you paid her to do the work.”

He chuckles and smacks his leg. “In sex.”

“Oh, fuck.” I cringe. “I didn’t need to know that.” How in the hell did I not realize that?

She was here three days a week when we got up in the morning. And when we came back from school, she was still here. Yeah, it doesn't take ten hours to clean the house. I suck down half of the beer and rest the can on my knee.

"Tough. We decided not to get married or live together because you kids had been through enough. Your mom was so messed up with what she wanted, and I rushed into it with the other one." Even my dad can't say her name. "I have to admit that was a mistake."

I blink and swallow over the lump in my throat. I'm not surprised he considered Jolene a mistake. "Was mom a mistake?"

"No, son. Your mom was a bundle of good and bad times. When she was taking her medication, she was amazing. But sadly, that was when she felt disconnected to herself, so she'd stop taking her pills. Then came her overwhelming need to party and have a good time."

I've got to know. Lord, I can't believe I'm asking this question. "Did you ever wonder if all of us were yours?"

"Son." He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter who's blood runs through any of your veins. I loved each one of you from the day I saw you. I wanted to be a dad, and she wasn't capable of being a mother. I've never regretted it for one minute."

I lean forward, set the beer on the coffee table, and rest my elbows on my knees with my chin supported by my laced together hands. "Why didn't you talk about this earlier?"

"You had enough on your plate when you were a kid. You had school, your friends, your overwhelming need to protect your siblings, and three jobs. You didn't have time to worry about your old man."

"Was it her idea to leave the last time?" My mind drifts back to the night she left. My memories are filled with screaming and the thrashing of pots and pans off the kitchen wall—the wall between my bedroom and the kitchen.

"No. I told her to go. She'd promised to take her medication again, but it was too late. I couldn't have her revolving in and out of your lives." He tips

the beer and takes a long drink.

Would knowing the details have changed anything? Not at the time. It didn't matter—I hadn't met Layla.

Now it feels like my entire future is resting on the answers to this conversation. It feels like a vice is squeezing my heart until it puffs out into pockets that are about to explode, making it hard to breathe.

“Am I like her?” My knee bounces as my heel raises and lowers on the carpet. “Am I the type of person who can't commit?”

“Kameron.” My dad gives me a weak smile and shakes his head. “You're the epitome of commitment. At twelve years old, you insisted you were going to take care of your siblings. You aced school and took on three jobs. You busted your ass every day. I never once asked you to do any of that. I appreciated it.” He shrugs. “Maybe I took advantage of it.” He flushes and works the can from one hand to the other. “I'm sorry about that.”

“Don't.” I sit up and wave him off as I replay his words.

“I'm proud of you, son. You're a fantastic man. You've already committed your life to one family. It's time you made your own.”

The vice snaps open as if its finally releasing me from the confines of my self-imposed imprisonment. I've lived under the mistaken belief that I don't know how to be in a relationship, but that was bullshit. I was only running from getting hurt again. My mom being in and out of my life was a roller coaster, and I've been terrified I'd fall for someone like that.

Layla couldn't be less like my mom if she tried. “Do you still talk to her?”

“Not for a long time. The last time, she was still cycling between taking and not taking her medication.”

I nod. “Maybe someday I'll be ready to see her again.” Once I've buried my fears, I can look her up. But now, my dad's right. I need to focus on making things right with Layla.

“That's a good idea.” He raises from his recliner and walks over to me. “If I knew you were harboring the belief you weren't husband and father

material, I would have told you this years ago. I thought you were just playing the field.”

“Dad, it’s fine. I wasn’t ready to hear it yet. I needed to meet Layla, first. To find the woman who’s worth fighting for.” I swallow. “You’re right. I need to apologize for not telling her the truth and ask for forgiveness.”

“That’s good, son,” he beams as I stand, and then he wraps his arms around me. “I love you. You’ve turned into a hell of a good man.”

“Thanks.” Tears fill my eyes as I embrace him. I need to get back to Meadow Bay, but I needed this conversation just as much.

“I’ve got something for you.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

Layla

I pace the same strip of linoleum in my kitchen for twenty-five minutes while waiting for Harbor to return from the drugstore.

It took too much effort for me to go. I barely made it through my shower and getting dressed. But now, I'm regretting the decision to have her retrieve the pregnancy test. I'm going to die from the lack of control.

"Hurry up." I glare at the open front door and spin on my heel again to tread back to the sink. I grab my phone off the counter.

Me: What's taking so long?

Seconds later, she responds.

Harbor: Did you want me to get it in Meadow Bay?

Shit, no. Everyone would know before she got back to my place. Of course, they'd think it was her. That's not such a bad idea. I'd rather it was her than me.

Kameron's going to flip his lid. I clutch my breasts. Yep. Still tender as fuck. And I've been to the bathroom five times and still no blood. I've never prayed for a period before today.

Not that I don't want a baby. Or for that matter, a baby with Kameron, but the last thing I want is to trap him to me and force him into a relationship. It would never work. He'd blame me for getting pregnant and resent me. It won't matter if it was my intention or not.

And he's right. People who feel obligated to raise children—resent the person who forced parenthood on them and the child. God. Tears flood my eyes and stream down my cheeks. I don't want that for him. Sobs rack my shoulders until I can no longer catch my breath. What am I going to do?

When I hear a car door slam shut, I jump. She's back. I run to the door while wiping tears from my cheeks. There's no use pretending I haven't been

crying.

“I’m back.” She yanks the screen open and stops. Her nose wrinkles. “You look worse.”

“Thanks.” I glare at her and snatch the brown paper bag from her hand.

Hell, I haven’t had a brown paper bag since my college days when we’d buy liquor at the gas station and pretend it wasn’t a brown paper bag with alcohol. Yeah. There was no use pretending it was something else.

“Did anyone see you?”

“I don’t think so.” As I walk to the bathroom, she follows behind me.

“Here goes nothing.” I pull out the carton and stare at it. Inside this seven by three-inch box dictates where my future goes. Positive and life as I know it changes forever. Negative and...

Damn. Negative is worse than positive. My fingers shake as I try to pull one end of the carton open. Several seconds later, Harbor grabs it from my hand and rolls her eyes. “We’re going to be here all day.”

“Fine. You do it. While you’re at it, pee on it.”

“Don’t be stupid. Being pregnant isn’t the end of the world.”

“I know.” I sniff loudly. “Now I’m afraid it’s going to be negative.”

“Shit, girl.” She pops the end open. “You’re like being on a roller coaster. Do you want to have a baby or not?”

“Yes, I do.” I straighten my shoulders and wait as she pulls out the package and tears open the plastic.

She smiles. “Then, congratulations.”

“We don’t know if it’s positive or not.”

She places the pregnancy test in my hand and wraps hers over mine. “Yes, we do. You’re going to rock being a mom—with or without Kameron in your life. So, get to peeing on this stick so we can celebrate. I’m hoping for a girl so we can dress her up and take her on photoshoots.”

A smile curves up to my cheeks as excitement radiates through me. “Yes, I will. Team girl.” I’m pregnant with Kameron’s baby. And it’s a girl. It’s like the universe is shouting loud and clear.

As I squat on the toilet, I wrinkle my nose. “This is not as easy as they make it sound.”

“I got you the curved one. At least you won’t be peeing on your fingers.”

“Easier said than done.” I snort and count to thirty. *Shit. I can’t go.* “Sing the A.B.C.s or flip on the water.”

“God, you’re crazy.” She giggles and then sings. By the time she gets to ‘U’, the stick and my fingers are covered in urine.

“Thank you.” I pull the stick out and wave it. “You were wrong. I still got my fingers wet.”

She snaps on the faucet and lays down a paper towel. “Wash up, and let’s start planning baby showers and names.” Then, she pulls out her phone and sets a timer.

My stomach flops as I lay the stick down and wash my hands. What if I’m not pregnant? My heart skips a beat and sweat pops out on my back. *You’ll be fine. You can have another baby.*

Damn it. I want this one. My teeth grind together, and I snap the faucet off.

Harbor paces the floor like I did in the kitchen—only my bathroom is so tiny she practically runs into me every time she swings around. “Do you think he’ll be mad?”

“I don’t know.” I wring my hands together. “He has some stupid notion that he won’t be a good father, but from how he describes his childhood, I think he practically raised his siblings.”

“Are you still mad at him?”

“I don’t know that either.” I wave my hands in the air. “I’m upset he didn’t tell me Roman was coming back early and he knew. I’m disappointed

he didn't tell me he called that day." I shrug. "But I didn't give him a chance to explain. What if he was going to ask me to go with him?"

She stops pacing. "Would you go?"

"Of course." I worry my bottom lip. "I love him. I would go wherever he goes. If he wants me to be there."

"Fuck." She grabs me in a bear hug. "I was getting so excited about the baby, and you're moving halfway across the country. What am I going to do without you?"

"We'll still see each other." My voice is muffled against her hair. I'm too afraid to say the last words, 'And, he might not want me.'

We stand like that until the alarm blares. *This is it.* We walk arm and arm to the sink and stare.

Oh, my God. I can't breathe.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Kameron

The next night, I watch my younger brother, Dominic, as he moves across the bar. The eyes of all the females in the room land on him. Not that I blame them. He's got dark hair and eyes, and dimples that pop when he grins, which is about every five seconds or as frequently as he flexes his pecs. They both seem to be in competition to get the most attention.

When he reaches the table, I shove his drink at him. "I thought you got lost."

"Dude." He winks. "There was a lady in line for the bathroom that needed her ass massaged."

"Fuck." I chuckle and take a sip of my beer. I'm going to miss him. Someone puts money in the jukebox, and classic rock fills the bar. "Thanks for helping go through everything in storage."

His face sobers. He can be the life of the party, but he's loyal to a fault. "No problem. Glad to help. I can't believe you're going to move for good."

"It's a great place. You'd like it. The offer is still open. I'd love for you to come to stay for the weekend or a week sometime." My phone beeps, and my heart skips a beat. *Layla*.

Tabitha. I roll my eyes. *Fuck*. She's texted me three times since I've been back, but I still have no desire to see her.

Tabitha: Kam, I want to talk to you. I need to talk to you.

Me: Let's keep the past in the past. No hard feelings.

The words are true. I'm not upset with her. I'm glad we broke up. Hell, I'm glad she used me. I wouldn't have ever moved to Meadow Bay if she hadn't. I owe her a debt of gratitude. Fine. I'll talk to her and get it over with.

Me: I'm at Johnny's with Dom. Stop by.

Tabitha: You're here?

Me: Yes.

Tabitha: I'll be right there.

Dominic tips his head toward the phone. "Who was that?"

"Tabitha."

"Yuck." He wrinkles his nose. "She's such a schemer. I can't believe you dated her, and why in the hell did you tell her where you are? Do you want to get back together with her?"

"Hell, no." I shudder as all the memories of our time together pour through me. "I have no intention of dating her or anyone else. I'm a one-woman man."

Dominic grins, and one dimple pokes out. "I can't wait to meet this woman. She sounds like a doll."

"She's one of the sweetest women I've ever met, but she's tough. When it was time to call me on my bullshit, she did. I love that about her." I chuckle. "And she's always rescuing something."

He takes a drink of his draft beer and sets the glass back down. The white foam slides back down the inside of the mug. "I'm happy for you."

I cross my arms and lean against the cushions. "Did you know Dad and Margaret were an item?"

"Yeah." He flushes a deep red. "I caught them a couple of years ago."

"Caught the—" The word lodges in my throat. I raise my hand. "No, don't explain. I catch your meaning."

"No, dude." He shakes his head. "You made me remember it. They were—"

"No. No. No." I slap my hands over my ears. "Stop."

He laughs and smacks the table until tears leak out of the corners of his eyes. Finally, I put my hands down.

"They were naked in the living room with Margaret riding him like a pony on his recliner."

“Fuck you.” I flip him off as the vision of my dad and Ms. Connelly’s bodies rocking back and forth on the recliner invade my happy place.

Dominic’s gaze drifts behind me, and he sobers. “Shi-i-i-it.”

I twist in my seat. *Tabitha*. My mouth dries as my eyes take everything in from her red painted lips to her hands, resting on her swelling belly. Either she’s pregnant, or she ate too many tacos. I’m betting the tacos are out. She smiles and waves.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Layla

I'm pregnant.

I'm pregnant. Holy cow. I'm pregnant. I laugh as Harbor, and I jump up and down. "This is so awesome. I can't believe it."

"Oh, my God. You're having a baby." Harbor stops and grabs my upper arms. "This is so flipping cool. Do you feel different? I've always wanted to know if having a baby makes you feel like a different person." She stares at me. "You still look like Layla."

"Don't be an idiot. I'm still me." I run from the bathroom and grab my cellphone. "I've got to tell Kameron. Even if he gets upset. He has to know."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No. Don't go. I need moral support."

"Okay." She waves and heads to the kitchen. "I'm getting a drink."

He's got to be excited. Doesn't he? He's going to make a wonderful father. He's take-charge, organized, and has everything put together.

My fingers shake as I scroll to his cell phone number. It's been three days since I heard from him. Has he already moved on? Is that even possible? No. He can't. He loves me. I know it.

My stomach rolls as I listen to each ring. Each one brings me closer to my future. Will he ask me to come to K.C.? Will I like his family? Will they like me?

"Hello?"

"Kameron?" God, I miss him so much. I've got to call the airport and make a flight arrangement. Maybe I should tell him in person. That's probably better. I'll tell him we need to talk.

"No, this is his brother, Dom."

“Oh.” They sound alike. “Is Kameron there? I need to talk to him.”

“Shit. You pregnant, too?”

“What?” The floor jumps up as my head spins. No. I had to have heard that wrong. I fall into the chair by the front door and grab my stomach. It’s okay. It has to be okay.

“This must be confessions of the ex-girlfriend’s night. Tabitha’s pregnant, so I figure you must be too. Which one are you?”

“Um. Never mind.” I snap the phone off and stare at the wall. Kameron’s ex is pregnant. Tabitha’s pregnant. Kameron’s having a baby. Another baby.

Oh, fuck. I double over and suck down air. This is horrible. He’s never going to choose me. He was with her for several months. We were only together for a few weeks.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kameron’s having a baby.”

“Yes, I know.” She talks slowly like I’ve lost my mind, and I have.

I’ve lost the man I love to another woman. A woman he has a history with. A woman that destroyed him with her betrayal. Kameron wouldn’t have gotten that upset if he didn’t love her. I’m never going to see him again.

I thought I’d cried all the tears I had. I was wrong. They stream down my cheeks and land on my T-shirt. My nose runs, and I raise my arm.

“No, you don’t.” She shoves a Kleenex at me. “You aren’t going to turn into a cavewoman.”

“Who cares? Kameron’s ex-girlfriend is pregnant.”

“What?” Her voice reverberates off the walls. It’s so loud I’m surprised the windows don’t crack.

“His brother answered and said Kameron was busy. His ex is pregnant, and he wanted to know if I was, too. Apparently, he fucks everyone without protection. I’m just one of the many. For a guy who doesn’t want to be a

father, he's spreading his seed everyfuckingwhere."

Anger wells up my gut and fills every inch of my body. I grab a vase from the table and launch it across the room. It smashes against the wall and shatters into thousands of jagged pieces. Like me, it splinters until it can never be put back together again.

"Did you tell him?"

"No. He was busy with Tabitha." The words fly like poison off my tongue.

"Maybe if you told him, he'd choose you instead."

"Why? Why would he choose me? I'm the girl he passed the time with while he housesat. He never cared about me. It was all an act."

"You don't know that." She runs to the kitchen and yanks open the pantry door.

"Yes, I do!" I yell at her back. "He was lying to me all along." I grab the matching vase and hurl it at the other wall.

"Doll." She shakes her head with the broom and dustpan in her hand. "You've got to stop. You've got to think about the baby."

"Don't call me that." Doll. I never want to be called that ever again. My shoulders sag, and all the emotions seep out of me. The baby. I've got to think about the baby. "You're right."

What am I going to do? I can't stay here. Everything reminds me of him, and I don't want to remember him.

At least not until my wounds aren't raw, and I have a beautiful baby to console me and consume all my energy. Something I can smother with my love and attention. Keeping me so busy with every two-hour feedings, that I can't remember my own name—let alone his. "Harbor?"

"Yes?"

"Can I come and live with you?"

"Absolutely. I would love for you to live with me. It'll make those

photoshoots and baby showers so much easier to do.”

“Thank you.” I grab the dustpan and broom. “Let me clean this up.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

Kameron

I wrench my neck from side to side in a desperate attempt to relieve the tension lodged there since my last conversation with Layla.

The pitch-black night is dotted with streetlights as I drive down the street toward my rental. Earlier this morning, I contacted the landlord and had my new furniture delivered. Between that and dealing with my family over the last few days, I'm exhausted.

When I flip on the blinker, the ticking sound fills the cab of my pickup. I didn't bother twisting on the radio when I left the airport. The silence has been a godsend.

As I approach the turn, I glance down the street to Layla's place, but everything's dark. My shoulders slump. What did you expect? That she'd be up at two o'clock in the morning pining over you? She's likely sleeping like a baby and moved on, making this trip and all the plans I've made meaningless.

The neighborhood is devoid of all movement. There isn't even a stray cat to break up the silence. This time, I skip the blinker and turn into the paved drive. A part of me is concerned that a police officer will flip on his lights and stop me from breaking the law, but the blinker seems a bit redundant.

After I put the vehicle in park, I lay my head against the headrest and sigh. Every inch of my body feels like it's weighed down by a ton of bricks.

Tabitha. I roll my eyes. *She's such a joke.* The memory of the conversation fills my head.

"I'm so glad to see you." *Tabitha rushed across the bar. Each movement was exaggerated by the swaying of her hips and the flipping of her hair. Then, there was the giant diamond on her finger.*

"Hey, Tabitha." *I nodded and stood to greet her because I was raised to be a gentleman.*

“Is she pregnant?” Dom barked from his seat.

“Looks like.”

“Is it yours?”

“Not a chance.” Unlike with Layla, there wasn’t one time I’d lost control and had unprotected sex with Tabitha, and it’s been over eight months since we had sex.

From the looks of it, she appeared to be three or four months pregnant. You wouldn’t be able to tell except for it looked like she was blowing out her stomach for dramatic effect.

“Thank fuck.”

Tabitha opened her arms and embraced me. “I’m so glad to see you. I wanted to tell you the good news in person.”

“What good news?” I patted her back. I’m not stupid enough to congratulate her on either her pregnancy or her engagement.

For two reasons, you never imply a woman is pregnant unless you’re prepared to be punched in the face for being wrong, and you don’t take Tabitha’s thunder.

She leaned back and cringed. “I’m getting married.”

“Congratulations.” I stepped back, and her arms dropped to her sides.

“Thank you.” She wrung her hands together. “I hope you aren’t too upset. I wanted to be the one to tell you. To break the news to you gently.”

“Thank you.” I placed my hand over my heart. Good Lord, I’m going to be up for a Daytime Emmy award. “I’m so glad I didn’t hear it from someone else.”

She bit her bottom lip and stared with obvious pity. “And I’m pregnant. Jim and I decided not to wait.”

“Jim?” Interesting. I fought back a snort. Jim Ferguson was the guy who tried to get into Chloe’s pants at Tabitha’s meddling. Talk about two people who deserve each other.

“I’m so sorry.” She clutched my forearm.

Ring. Ring.

Was that my phone? I twisted to look at the table where my brother still sat, but before I could ask, Tabitha placed her hand on my chin and twisted me to face her. “I didn’t mean to fall in love with someone else. Especially so soon. It doesn’t trivialize what I felt for you. I hope you can forgive me.”

How did I ever date this drama queen? Her overinflated sense of self is amazing. “I’m fine. Tabitha, I appreciate you telling me, though.”

“Do you forgive me?” Her eyes filled with tears, and her bottom lip quivered.

“Absolutely. I forgive you.” Saying, ‘There is nothing to forgive,’ would only make the situation drag out longer.

“Oh, goodie.” The tears instantly disappeared, and she jumped up and down. “We want you to be in the wedding.”

I choked on my spit and broke into a coughing fit. You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. These two are nuts. “I don’t think I’ll be able to attend the festivities.”

Her eyes narrowed, and the vein in her forehead popped. “Why not?”

“I’m moving to California.”

“For good?”

“Yes. For good.” My heart skipped a beat, and I let out a slow breath. I can’t wait to see Layla again.

I blink and stare at the white garage in front of my pickup. Damn. What time is it? I glance over at the stereo dashboard. Three-thirty. Crap. I fell asleep with the engine running.

Thank God I stayed outside and didn’t go into the garage. I shake my head and switch off the engine. My neck screams in protest. Fuck. I’m too old to sleep sitting up. I clutch my neck and rub the muscles hard, slowly working my thumb and fingers over the knots.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Layla

After spending the night with Harbor, I turn onto my street. I'd have stayed but I didn't take anything when we left. A couple of kids dart in front of my car, and I tap on the brakes until I come to a complete stop.

They wave and giggle as they run the opposite direction after a basketball that scoots across the road and lands in the opposite gutter.

Oh, my God. My heart races in my chest. I was only driving ten miles an hour and almost ran over those kids.

Sweat beads on my forehead, and nausea rolls in my stomach. *Stop. You're being dramatic. They were forty feet away, and you were driving ten miles an hour.*

But.... But what? They weren't in any danger, and they're at least twelve or thirteen years old.

But what if they were two and three. I clutch my stomach with one hand and rub slowly over my flat stomach. How do you keep a baby alive? I unclench my other hand from the steering wheel and wiggle my fingers.

You've got this. I exhale and step on the gas.

When I go by Jenny Bowman's house, my mouth drops open. That's Kameron's pickup. *What the fuck? He's screwing Jenny Bowman. You've got to be fucking shitting me.*

He has a pregnant ex in K.C. Got me knocked up. And now, he's screwing Big Tits?

I snap on the blinker and come to a screeching halt behind his vehicle, making sure he doesn't have enough room to get out and run. She deserves to know what a dick he is.

He's got another thing coming if he thinks he can continue to treat women like trash. I slam the door shut behind me, and the glass rattles

against the frame. We'll start a Kameron Willoughby Hate Club.

My hands ball into fists as I eat up the distance between my vehicle and the front door. As I clomp up the steps, the door swings open.

Kameron stands in the threshold with low slung jeans, no shirt, and his hair covered in a backward baseball cap. My knees buckle.

Motherfucker. You're not swooning over his pretty face. You're too strong for that.

"What are you doing here?"

"It would seem pretty obvious. I live here." He steps onto the porch and rests his back against the frame.

"You live here?" Anger flies through every vein in my body until the only thing I can see is red.

"Yes, I live here."

"With Jenny Bowman?"

He lurches backward like I struck him and gapes at me. "You think I'd move in with another woman?"

"Jenny lives here. You live here. I can only assume you're fucking her. She will expect bumping uglies to be part of the roommate agreement." I glance behind him.

Where is she?

"That's ridiculous." He shakes his head. "I can't believe you think so little of me."

"Why wouldn't I?" I throw my hands in the air as my bottom lip quivers. *No. I'm not crying over him.* "Your ex is pregnant."

His eyes widen. "How do you know that?"

I clutch my chest. A part of me had held out hope it wasn't true. It feels like my whole world is unraveling before my eyes. Thank God I'm moving in with Harbor. There's no way I could live next to this man. A man I thought I knew. A man who was everything I'd waited for. Gentle. Kind. Perfect. Too

perfect to be true.

“I’ve got to go.” I twist on my heel and stumble on the step. My arms flail, and thoughts of crashing onto the sidewalk fill my vision. The world starts to go dark. *No-o-o.*

Kameron grasps my upper arms and drags me to his chest. “Be careful, Doll. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Doll. I inhale his scent and whimper, which shifts into a sob and a torrent of tears. I can’t do this. I can’t. I can’t breathe. I can’t live without him. I can’t survive. I can’t—anything. What am I going to do?

His chest is hot to the touch against my face as my tears slide down his flesh. I double up my fist and punch him in the stomach. Then, I lean back and ease out of his arms. “Let go.”

He steps back and opens his hands, leaving them at waist level. “Let me speak, and then you can go.”

“Okay.” I nod. This is it. My eyes soak him in. I won’t ever see him again. *The baby. What am I going to do? I can’t keep the baby a secret. I’ve got to tell him.* I lick my lips. “I need to say something first.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I need to get this off my chest.” He waits before he speaks. Waiting for my permission.

Damn it. Why isn’t he as perfect as he seems? “Go ahead.” I wrap my arms around my chest—anything to protect me from further heartache.

“I was wrong not to tell you about Roman’s message. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. I’ve never considered leaving K.C. for good.” He shoves his hands into his pockets, and his biceps twitch in response to his movements.

“But the thought of leaving you rocked me to the core, so I started looking for a place to buy. Then, he texted and said he was coming the next day. I thought I had more time. I ended up having to rent this place.” He jerks his head toward the house behind him.

“What?” My mouth drops open. Is he serious? He was looking for a place to buy. Here? “Where’s Jenny?”

“I don’t fucking know. The place was available to rent, and I leased it for three months until I could find a place to buy. I wanted to surprise you by picking something that symbolized the future I wanted for us.”

“Us?”

“Yes. If there is an us.” His shoulders sag. “At this point, I’m guessing that’s out. I don’t know what I’m doing, and I appear to be fucking it up royally if you think I’m screwing someone else.”

I wrinkle my nose and give him a weak smile. Maybe I read this all wrong. Maybe I’m the screw up. “Go on.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Kameron

“I’m not seeing anyone else. I don’t want to see anyone else.” I yank my hand out of my pocket, but before I can touch her, I step back and rub my eyes and forehead. “Layla, I love you. That hasn’t changed. It’s not going to change because we had a fight.”

“You left.” The hurt in her eyes nearly breaks me, but I can’t walk away. My dad was right. When you want something, you fight for it.

“I went back to Kansas City for a few days.” I shrug. “I’m not going to lie. A part of it was to lick my wounds, but it was more than that. I had a long talk with my dad. I see things differently now. My parent’s relationship wasn’t exactly how I envisioned it.” Someone honks a horn down the road.

“Yeah?” She leans her hip on the railing and rubs the paint with her thumb.

“I’ve been taking care of people since I was twelve years old. Hell, even before that. I was probably born taking care of people. And I might not have had this awesome role model of marriage that you did, but I’m willing to give everything I have to make us work.”

She smiles, and then her expression falls. “What about Tabitha?”

“I don’t care anything about her. She made her big production last night to tell me she was getting married and having a baby.”

“With you?”

“No.” I step forward, hedging my bets on whether she’s going to punch me again. I’m betting on no. “She’s engaged to a real prick, and they’re having a baby. I never thought the baby was mine. We haven’t had sex in over eight months, and I’ve never had sex with a woman without protection.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “What happened when you forgot with me?”

“When I’m with you, I want it all. From the first time I saw you, I knew

you'd shatter any resistance I had. I come unraveled any time I'm near you. It's no wonder I forgot a condom or more likely I didn't want a barrier between me and the world you open up."

"Damn you." She glares at me, then she jumps and throws her arms around my neck. "I love you so much, Kameron. The thought of not having you love me as much as I love you makes me a weak mess. I'm sorry I got mad at you, but I thought you were going to break up with me or disappear."

I rest my forehead against hers. "Layla, I'm not leaving."

"Good." She presses her lips against mine and the world rights itself. Everything I've worried about disappears. I'll be a good husband and father. She won't let me be anything else.

Several seconds pass while I lose myself in her touch. As my hands thread through her hair, she whimpers, and I dive inside, taking the opening she offers. Pure heaven on earth. I soak in her sunshine and warmth and let contentment seep through all my pores. Meadow Bay. Who would have thought?

She pulls back and beams. "Remember when I said I've got something to tell you?"

"Yes." Nothing she says can ruin this moment. Birds are singing as they fly by, and the neighborhood dog kicks up his leg and pisses on my front tire. Yep, this place is perfect.

"I thought for a second you knocked up every girl you date when I called last night. Your brother answered and said that you were with your pregnant ex."

"Shit. Now, I understand. I thought I heard my phone ring. I'm sorry he said that. He knew the baby wasn't mine. I told him the second she walked into the bar."

"And..." She wrinkles her nose. "I came here guns blazing to warn Jenny all about your manwhore ways, and your overachieving sperm count."

"Thank you. I'm sure she would have appreciated it." I smirk.

"Whatever." She rolls her eyes.

My stomach does a slow roll. Overachieving sperm count. Knocked up every girl you date. She can't be. Can she? *Holy fuck. I'm going to be a father.* Happiness and adrenaline race through my body, leaving me feeling like I'm going to burst. "Are you?"

"Nope." She smiles and places her hands on my face. "We are. You're going to be an awesome father. I can't wait to have this baby with you and watch you fall all over yourself over her."

"Her?" What the hell? She can't know that already. Can she? Damn, I need to brush up on this child development stuff.

"She's going to be a girl." She grins.

"Girl. Boy. Doesn't matter to me." I grab her thighs and haul her up my body until she wraps her legs around me. "There's nothing in this world that means more to me than you, and now, our baby. Will you marry me?"

Her eyes drift to my chest. "You don't have to ask that."

"Layla, I want to marry you. I want to be your husband. I want to fight with you and then stick around to make up. I hear that make up sex is hot."

"You don't say?" She grins and wiggles against me. "I say we go find out."

I clear my throat. I'm dead serious about marrying her. She may think it is spur of the moment, but it's not. "Babe?"

"Yes?"

"Reach into my pocket."

She waggles her eyebrows. "Do you have a hole in there?"

I throw my head back and laugh. Even during the most serious of conversations, she brings joy into it. I'm the luckiest man alive.

When her fingers brush against my cock, I groan. "Not yet."

"Fine," she sighs, and then her fingers stop moving. "Kameron?"

"Open it."

She stops breathing as she drags the box out of my pocket and brings it to her chest. “You meant it?”

“Yes, I did.” Every doubt I’ve ever had has completely vanquished. She doesn’t unravel me. I’ve been unraveled by life, and she’s stitched me back together. “Layla, will you be my wife? I need you to be mine as I’m yours.”

Her eyes are soft with emotion as she opens the box. Nestled inside are my grandmother’s wedding band and a solitaire diamond that’s surrounded by tiny yellow diamonds that I bought yesterday afternoon.

Tears fill her eyes, and she blinks them away. “Yes, I would love to marry you. To be your wife. To bring light to your dark and for you to fill my heart with contentment.”

She hops down, and I place the ring on her trembling finger. “We can change them if you want. The band is a family ring, and I picked the solitaire for you. It symbolizes the sunshine that radiates out of you.”

“Ah.... And to think when I first met you, I thought you were grumpalicious.”

“Grumpalicious?”

“Yes.” She laughs. “They’re perfect, and so are you.” I’ll never grow tired of her joy. It’s infectious. I can only hope our daughter looks like her and shares her personality. Bliss fills my soul.

The two things I’ve wanted in my life but were too afraid would never happen are even better than I dreamed. Without Layla, they would be impossible.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Layla

“Maybe we should go inside.” The feel of his hands caressing my back through the thin fabric of my shirt is starting to send my nerves into overdrive. And traffic’s picking up. “I’m afraid there’s going to be a two-car pileup.”

“We can’t have that. When I met you, you were stopping traffic. If we’re not careful, the fire department will have to come to intervene.”

I rub my pelvis over his erection. “Will they bring a big hose?”

He squints and gives me a shitty look. “No hose, but mine is getting close to you.”

“Deal.” I lace my fingers through his. “Give me the grand tour.”

“Sure.” He opens the door, and I stop in the middle of the living room. A black leather sofa with two recliners. A coffee table. Two end tables. When did he have time to get all this stuff? There are even ten or twelve throw pillows.

“You were in Kansas City last night. How did you get all this done? Surely, Jenny didn’t leave everything behind. All this looks new.” There aren’t even butt indentions in the cushions. My sofa’s newer, and it already sags a little from where I sit every night.

“I bought everything online and had it delivered. The real estate agent let the movers in yesterday while I had everything taken out of my storage lockers. My siblings took most of my old stuff, and what they didn’t want, my dad’s going to sell.”

My heart soars as I take everything in. He came back for me. There’s no doubt that he was all in without knowing whether I would forgive him.

Forgive him for what? For making sure he was in love with me before giving up his entire past to be with me. For wanting to pick out a house for us to live in. For selling everything and buying new furniture for our future. All

my emotions collide into a ball of happiness, disbelief, excitement, and with a dash of sadness. I almost screwed everything up.

“Hey.” He places his thumb and index finger under my chin. “What’s wrong?”

“I was a bitch.” I shake my head. “I don’t deserve for you to forgive me.”

“Doll, there is nothing to forgive. We’re still figuring this out, and we’ll get better at it. I promise.”

Doll. God, I love it when he calls me that. Yep, right there, I melt into a little puddle. “I love you.”

He grins. “You’d better.”

As his lips claim mine, I slowly close my eyes and clutch his waist to keep from tumbling to the ground. Not that the ground wouldn’t be a bad thing. What’s wrong with a little rug burn now and then?

His lips leave mine, and he scatters kisses along my jaw until he reaches my ear. “I missed sleeping next to you.”

“Yeah?” I shudder as his words vibrate straight to my core. “Is that all you missed?”

“You know I missed a few other things.” He grabs my thighs and pulls me up his hard body again. “I missed your smile. Your laughter.”

I grind my sex against his cock. “What about my lady bits? They’ve missed you a lot.”

“Have they?” He carries me to the sofa and eases into the cushions. Once we’re settled, I flick my tongue along the column of his neck.

A low growl he emits between his lips sends a sense of urgency to my throbbing pussy. “God, I want you.”

The pulse in his throat pounds in an erratic rhythm against my lips. “You talk too much.” He yanks my shirt out of my pants and over my head. The fabric lands on the floor behind us. He lifts me up and pulls down the cup of my bra.

When his mouth clamps down on my breast, I shiver and arch my back to give him better access. His mouth sucks at my flesh as his tongue repeatedly flicks over the tight nipple. “Kam, I don’t want to wait. I need you.”

The realization that I almost threw this away still haunts me. The only thing that will drive it away is his warmth. The hardness of his body. His steely strength thrusting into me and pushing all those memories away.

His mouth pops off my tit, and the lust in his eyes causes my clit to vibrate with desire. He bites his bottom lip and studies me. “I want to taste your sweet pussy, but I can wait.”

“Please.” I want his mouth on me, but later. “Make love to me. Convince me that you’ll never leave me.”

“Darlin’, I’ll never leave you. You’re mine and always will be.” He grabs the waistband of my leggings and yanks them down, exposing my bare bottom to the chill of the room. Not that it does anything to cool me down. Nothing will until I achieve a glorious orgasm. One only Kameron can give. Masturbation is fine, but nothing compares to the real thing.

I wiggle out of my pants as he yanks open the fly of his jeans. His cock thrusts into view, and my mouth waters. “Maybe a little foreplay.” I grasp the base of his shaft and stroke up and down his hardness. The heat of his flesh feels perfect under my fingertips.

He hisses and shifts his hips to give me better access. “You’re a tease.” His eyes flash. “You deny me what I want. Yet selfishly jerk me off.”

I laugh and increase my movements. His hand slides between our bodies. “If I slip a finger inside you, how soon will you scream my name? Ten seconds? Five?”

“One.” I pout and wiggle toward his hand. His fingers brush the juncture between my sex and my thigh.

“We can’t have that.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Damn it, Kameron,” I whine and press against his thigh, trying to achieve relief by grinding on him.

“Oh, baby girl, do you need some help?” he asks as his mouth latches on my neck, and his fingers brush the curls above my clit.

When he swipes the pad of his thumb over my sensitive nerves, I jump and gasp, “God, yes.”

“I’ll take God.” He thrusts two fingers deep inside me, and I spread my thighs wider. *God, yes.* The words pound through my head over and over in time with his lunging fingers. “You’re so sweet. I can smell you. I can feel your pussy tightening for me. Are you close, baby girl? Are you going to come for me?”

My mouth hangs open as he works his magic inside my core. His fingers curl and swipe over my G spot. Each movement draws me ever closer to release. “Fuck. Yes. It feels so fucking good.” I lunge my hips forward and scream as white lights crash all around me. “Fuck, Kam.”

“Such a good girl, coming all over my fingers.” He removes his hand from my center and pierces me with his cock. “You’re all mine. This pussy is all mine.”

“Oh, Kameron. God, yes.” My body sucks and convulses over his flesh as he lunges into me. His hands grasp my hips as I ride his hardness. Nothing has ever felt this exquisite.

I’ve heard of multiple orgasms, and with Kameron, I’ve had more than one in a night, but never one after another. Is that even a thing?

As we work in unison, every nerve in my body is overloaded with sensation. I want an entire lifetime of this. I want marriage and babies. I want to sleep next to him. To get up in the morning and sit side by side, eating breakfast, and doing a crossword puzzle. Damn. I’m losing my mind. I hate crossword puzzles. No one ever knows the ten-letter word for a popular plastic.

Maybe we can feed each other strawberries, and he can lay me over the table. Yeah, that sounds better. I gasp with each lunge of his hips as his dick rides along my G spot and slams to the hilt.

“I want you to come on my cock. I want to feel your sweet pussy sucking me off.” Sweat slides down his forehead as the muscles in his neck

tighten like the cords of a guitar. His firm thighs slap against the back of my thighs until I feel like he's a battering ram slamming into me. And it's fucking awesome.

Each time the crown of his dick slices over my G spot, my muscles tighten. *I'm so close.* I let my head fall back, exposing my breasts to him. His mouth clamps on my nipple. *God, yes.* The alternating of his sucking and flicking is perfect. I shift my pelvis forward and spread my thighs as far as I can. "God, yes. Right there."

"Fuck, Doll, you're killing me." His movements are erratic as he pierces my sex.

"Oh, God, Kam. I'm coming." I shatter into a million pieces as he thrusts into me.

"That's it. Come all over my dick like a good girl." He stiffens and grunts as his dick twitches inside my sex. "Yes, baby, milk that cock."

Chapter Sixty

Kameron

When I finally come to after a sex marathon I might never recover from, I gape at the ceiling in exhaustion.

There's a strong possibility I have the equivalent of a rug burn on my dick and a dislocated back.

What the fuck time is it? I flop my head to the side. The clock on the wall above the dresser says five o'clock.

I blink. Daytime or nighttime? I roll my eyes. Dumbass. The room's bright. Can a person become stupid from the loss of semen? If that's a thing, I've lost about fifty IQ points.

A soft snore from Layla's side of the bed breaks the quiet in the room. The only other sound is the clicking of the second hand on the clock and the AC's low rumble.

I flip over and watch her sleep. Her eyes flutter behind her lids as her breath fans a strand of hair over her face. I tuck it behind her ear to keep it from tickling her nose.

A swell of contentment settles over me. The world had broken me. Convinced me I had nothing to give a woman as special as her. Layla has pieced me back together with her open heart and giving spirit. She reminds me that there's good in the world and that I can have it all.

Her eyes flutter open, and she smiles at me. "Hey, beautiful."

"Hey, yourself." I trace her cheekbone with my index finger.

"Did I snore?"

"Maybe." I grin and rest my elbow on the mattress. "But it was adorable. Just like you."

"Ri-i-ight." She rolls her eyes and smacks me with her hand.

“I’m telling the truth. I must be because I’m not trying to get in your pants.”

“Thank God,” she groans and rests her open palm on my hip. “I can’t take any more of your sexcapades right now.” She moves her leg and makes a face. “Maybe never.”

“Don’t be a drama queen.” I kiss her lips and pull back. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Then, let’s make supper.”

“Supper?” Her nose wrinkles. “You mean we’ve been in bed since eight o’clock this morning, and it’s already dinner time?”

“Yep.” I wink. At least that muscle doesn’t hurt. Then, I spin over and sit on the edge of the bed. All the other muscles in my body scream in anguish.

“Seriously? It’s a good thing I ate before I came over here. I’m pregnant. I need food.”

“Shit.” My stomach drops as all humor fades away. I swivel to face her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I was teasing you.”

“Don’t tease me about that.” I jump out of bed, grab a pair of jeans off the floor, and slide them up my legs—all while ignoring the screaming of my muscles. I don’t bother to fasten the zipper. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll help.” She hops out of bed. “Shit. Everything aches. I think I pulled an ass muscle.” She hobbles behind me.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Something quick, because I need a warm bath to work some of these kinks out.”

“I bet you never thought you’d say kink, did you?”

“I bet you never thought I’d ride your face for thirty minutes, did you?”

“No.” I wrap my arm around her. “Not when the whole time, I had a tongue cramp, and you couldn’t care less.” We continue to banter on the way into the kitchen. The ease with which we slipped into a close comradery fills my soul with happiness.

“Do you want me to massage your tongue?” She steps out from under my arm and walks over to the island.

“With what?” I laugh and yank open the refrigerator door. What are we going to eat? Eggs. Tomatoes. Peppers. Milk. Cheese. And nothing else. The staples of a love nest. “Omelet it is.”

“I’ll try not to hurl over the smell.” She leans across the island, and her hair flows over her shoulders and touches her nipples. My cock jumps. Seriously? For the love of Christ.

She licks her lips. “After my bath, I’ll massage your tongue with my clit.”

“Sold.” Yep, I’m going to die. But I’m going to die one happy man. How long does it take to cook an omelet? Too long. I shove the tomato and pepper back into the refrigerator. Scrambled eggs it is.

Chapter Sixty-One

Layla

Bang. Bang. Bang. As I blink, my eyes try to adjust to the room. *What in the hell?*

Kameron grabs his head. “Is that my brain?”

“Someone’s at the door.” I sit up and clutch the blanket to my chest.

“No one knows I live here, but you, the landlord, and the delivery drivers.”

Tap. Tap. Tap. Someone taps the window of the bedroom. “Layla, are you in there?”

“Crap,” I groan. “It’s Harbor. She must have driven by and saw my vehicle outside your place.”

“Layla?”

“I’m coming.”

“That’s what she said.” Kameron rolls over and stares out of the corner of his eye.

“Funny.”

“I’ll leave her to you.” He yawns, yanks the cover out of my hands, and pulls it over his head.

“Jerk.” I punch at the blanket.

“Oomph.” He tosses it off and glares at me. “Good aim.”

“I should have aimed lower.” I waggle my eyebrows and hop off the bed.

“You’ve officially worn me out. I could have sworn two hours ago that my dick wouldn’t work again. Now, I’m fairly positive it’s going to fall off.”

“Poor thing.” I drag clothes on and walk to the door.

“I’ll be there in a second. Be sure to tell her I haven’t kidnapped you before I come out. I don’t want to be knocked up the side of the head.”

“I gotcha.” I grin and take one last glimpse at him. God, he’s gorgeous. Five o’clock shadow. Tousled hair. Broad shoulders. I inhale. And smells like sex.

When I reach the front door, I snatch it open and jump backward on the off chance she comes out swinging.

“Why didn’t you answer my calls? Texts. SOS calls.” She marches inside the room.

“My phone died.”

“Where is he? Don’t tell me you let him con you with some line of shit.” She swivels to my left and stomps across the floor. Then, she stops in mid-step and turns to me. “And why are you in Jenny Bowman’s house?”

“He rented it the day he found out his cousin was coming back. So he could have a place to live until he finds a house to buy.”

“And you believe that?”

“Yes, I do.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “And the ex?”

“She’s pregnant, but it’s not his. And she’s getting married to another guy. She wanted to invite him to the wedding.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Right?” I shake my head and shrug.

She sighs dramatically and drops her arms to her sides. “I suppose this means you’re not moving in with me.”

“Moving in with you?” Kameron steps out of the bedroom while fastening his jeans.

Harbor’s eyes rake over him. “I can see how this pretty face got you all hot and bothered, but sex isn’t enough.”

“Lots of sex is.” He smirks.

“Don’t be a jackass.” She marches forward until she reaches him and presses her index finger into his chest. “What’re your plans for Layla?”

“Marriage and a baby for starters. Maybe more than one.”

She presses her lips together. “All good answers. Where’s the ring?”

“Here.” I smile and wave my hand in front of her face.

“Oh, my Gawd. He asked you to marry him.”

“Yes.”

“Before he knew about the baby?” Her eyes and mouth open, and she slaps her hand over her mouth. “Shit,” she exclaims around her fingers. “Forget I said that.”

“It’s fine.” I giggle at her expression. “He didn’t ask before he knew about the baby, but he brought the ring back from Kansas City, so that counts. And he doesn’t think I trapped him into a relationship.”

“You were worried about that?” He rakes a hand through his hair.

“Maybe a little.” I shrug. “Consider it pregnancy hormones.”

His eyes rake over me, sending a shiver along my spine. Lord, he’s too much to take. “We’ll discuss this more later.”

“Yes, sir.” I shiver and return my attention to Harbor. “And he’s permanently moving to Meadow Bay.”

“Well. I guess that’s something. I’m not losing you to Missouri.” Her shoulders slump. “But I was so excited about spoiling our baby girl.”

“Boy.” Kameron ambles across the room and lays his arm over my shoulders. “I fucked her six ways to Sunday to put extra Y chromosomes in there.”

“It doesn’t work like that.” I elbow him in the side.

“Too bad. I was trying.” He kisses my lips and whispers, “You know I’m teasing, right?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t care either way whether we have a boy or a girl. There’s always next time.”

“Oh, you two are too cute.” Harbor runs across the room and embraces us. “I’m going to be a bridesmaid and a BFF auntie. I can’t wait.”

Chapter Sixty-Two

Kameron

One week later, we pull into Layla's parent's driveway. To say I'm nervous is an understatement. They know we're seeing each other but they don't know about our engagement, the baby, or that we're moving in together before the wedding.

Her mom sounds like a sweet woman. Her dad. Well, I already know Chief Monroe is a ballbuster. So if he objects, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. It's not like we can put the frosting back in the tube. The damage is already done.

"Would you stop fidgeting." Layla bats at my upper arm as I throw the pickup into park.

"That's easy for you to say. They're not deciding if they're letting you into the family." I drum my fingertips on the steering wheel.

"You're ridiculous." She places her hand on the handle. "My mom will love you, and my dad is a teddy bear."

"More like a grizzly bear," I mutter under my breath.

"Are those the ones you play dead to avoid? Or are they the ones where you march up to them and punch them in the face."

"Funny." I glare at her. "And don't you dare open that door. I'm sure they have their faces plastered to the window. I don't want them thinking I'm not going to take care of their little girl."

She winks and giggles. "You took outstanding care of me this morning."

I waggle my eyebrows. "Yes, I did." I open the door and round the front of the pickup. Layla makes me happy. A couple of months ago, I wouldn't have believed it was possible to be this content.

In bed, we're lights out amazing together, but that's only the tip of the

iceberg. Her sense of humor fits mine perfectly.

The only issue is her phone has a built-in camera, and she's constantly snapping photos of me. In the bathroom. When I'm asleep. In the kitchen. And I never have clothes on.

This is a problem. If she ever accidentally hits send on one of those puppies, I'm going to be humiliated. How do you show your face in town when your dicks on display for everyone? I wear clothes. Frequently. But there isn't one photo on her camera roll of me with a stitch of clothes on.

Before I can grasp the door, it's yanked open, and a woman with red hair and green eyes smiles. "Boy, you are handsome. I never noticed the color of your eyes."

I stop in mid-step and grab Layla's hand. "What does she mean by that?"

Her eyes are huge and innocent as she looks up. "You've had to work almost every night since you got back, and I wanted mom to see what you looked like."

"What did I look like?" My jaw is tight. Image after image flashes through my mind, and my horror grows larger.

"Pft." She smacks my chest. "I cropped the good stuff out."

"Much to my disappointment." Her mom shakes her head. "Layla's always been an amazing photographer. She caught all the good angles except for...." She waves her hands in front of my pelvis. "Anything below the Adonis belt. Much to my disappointment."

"Layla?"

"Don't be a prude. My parents had to have had sex, or I wouldn't be here." She grabs my hand and drags me forward.

Well, this is not how I envisioned this encounter going. At least I haven't had to play dead or punch anyone in the face. I slap a smile on my face and pretend this situation isn't one of the most embarrassing ones I've encountered. "Hello, Mrs. Monroe. It's a pleasure to meet you."

“Oh, how sweet.” She grabs me in a bear hug and pats my back. “Good looking and a charmer.”

When she stands back, she studies me. “Layla says you’re permanently moving here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Please, call me, Katherine.” She waves dismissively. “We’re not formal here.”

“Katherine.” I nod and wait for her next question. It’s like being grilled by a twenty-year older version of Layla.

“And you’re a fireman, like my Alan?”

“Yes. I’ve worked as a fireman since I was twenty-one. I’m also working toward a degree in business administration and finance.”

“Oh.” Her eyes glow. “That will come in handy as Layla advances her photography business. Ever since she was a little girl, she’s been dying to have a studio of her own.”

“Yes, we hope to work toward that.” I arch an eyebrow as Layla throws her arm over her mom’s shoulders.

“Mom, you can tone down the twenty questions.”

“I’m feeling him out.” She dismisses her daughter and shifts her attention back to me. “What’re your future plans?”

“Yes.” Chief Monroe strides into the room and crosses his arms over his chest. “What exactly are your future plans?”

My heart skips a beat and then pounds double time in my chest. “We want to have a summer wedding.”

“Let’s see the ring.” Katherine grasps Layla’s free hand and holds it to the light. “Very nice. That’s a beautiful ring.” She lowers her arm to her side and nods at me. “You have good taste.”

“Thank you.” I wince. This next bit might not go over as well. “But, in the meantime, we’re thinking about living together.” Should I duck? Punch

him in the face? Play dead?

Chief Monroe's eyes narrow into slits. "Is that so?"

"Dad, I'm an adult. Please, remember that." Layla drops her arm from her mom's shoulders, steps toward me while tilting her head sideways and arching her eyebrows. The look is supposed to be intimidating but on Layla, it's not working. "I love Kameron, and we're getting married." She gnaws on her bottom lip. "Although, I hope you'll support us and be a part of our lives."

Katherine studies me. "Which house?"

"Mine."

Her mouth flattens into a thin line. If there was a nearby ruler, I'd worry she was going to smack the back of my hand. "Why?"

"My place is in better shape and newer."

She tips her chin outward. "Is there room for a baby?"

I blink. *Did Layla tell her?*

"Mom." Layla gapes at her with an open mouth. We'd decided not to break the news to her parents—yet.

"Don't try and pull the wool over my eyes. I saw the starstruck look in your eyes when you talked about him, but your whole expression is more. You're pregnant."

"Fine," Layla sighs.

Fuck. This is going to go to shit. I walk the rest of the way to stand behind her. We're in this together. No matter what happens. But why couldn't I keep my dick in my pants or at least have enough control to grab a condom? It was right there.

No. I straighten my shoulders. It wasn't a mistake. I want Layla and our baby. But I'm not letting her take the brunt of their anger. I place my hand on Layla's back. "Ma'am. It's my fault."

"Did you force my daughter to have sex with you?"

“No. Not at all.”

“Did she beg you to wear a condom?”

“Well, no....” At this point, I’ve stopped breathing, and if she had a shovel, I’d start digging my own grave.

She presses her lips together and then laughs. “You two are adorable.” She smacks her thigh. “Come on in. Let’s celebrate. Your dad and I want lots of grandbabies, so we’re beyond thrilled that one’s already on the way.”

Fuck. I roll my eyes. *She’s just like Layla. I’m screwed if there are three generations of these women to flip my world upside down.*

“I’m not ready for this.” Chief Monroe shakes his head, trudges across the floor and offers his hand. “Congratulations, son. Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you.” I wince as his grip tightens, squeezing until it feels like my eyes are going to pop out.

“Dad!” Layla snaps.

“I’m your dad. It’s my responsibility to make sure he’s a strong enough man for you.” He laughs, lessens his grip, and wraps his arms around us. “I suppose you expect to keep your job now that you’re staying in town.”

“Well....” I cough. “I hope so.”

“Fine.” He slaps harder and steps back. “You’re a good man, Kameron. You have a good work ethic, and I respect how you stepped up to the plate with Layla.”

Thank God.

When her parents leave the room, she turns and wraps her arms around my neck. “See, I told you.”

“Yes. Yes, you did.” I lean down, burrowing my face between her neck and shoulder, inhaling her scent. “Layla, I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mr. Grumpalicious.”

“That’s Mr. Filthy Grump to you.”

She giggles when my lips caress her skin. Who would have thought
that I'd pack up and go halfway across the country to find the love of my life
chasing after a momma duck?

Epilogue

Layla

I step out onto the balcony of our Caribbean resort. Kameron and our son, Kade, lay fast asleep in the shade while lounging on a chaise lounge chair. Kade is nestled in my gorgeous husband's arms with his thumb stuck in his sweetly puckered lips.

Too perfect. The temperature is a balmy eighty-four degrees. There's a light breeze blowing a strand of my hair, which I re-tuck behind my ear. In the distance, the ocean waves lap at the sand.

Life's been a huge blessing over the last year and a half. Kameron got his boy, and I couldn't be happier. He's a living, breathing doll. I'll get that little girl.

I lay my hand over my bare stomach and caress the tiny curve that's starting to grow. My bikini isn't going to keep my secret for long. Love overwhelms me as I stare at them. How did I get so lucky?

Must document the memory. I twist on my heel with a smile playing on my lips.

"You aren't grabbing your camera, are you?" Kameron's rough voice rumbles down my spine and settles in my core. I shift to face him, and he pops one eye open.

Lady bits, slow down. You've already gotten me in trouble twice. Well... It's not like I can get more pregnant. "What if I am?"

"I'm going to have to punish you."

"Then, that settles it. I'm getting the camera. I want a photo of my gorgeous husband holding our precious baby. What's wrong with that?"

"At least my dick's covered." He yawns, stretches his shoulders and neck, but leaves his chest perfectly straight to keep from waking Kade.

I give him a saucy smile. "For now."

“Doll,” he drawls. “Don’t get me all worked up. Kade’s going to wake up any second, and I’ll be stuck with a raging hard-on for two hours. You know what us firemen say, ‘You can’t prime the pump unless you want to squirt a little water.’”

“You’ll live.” I giggle and run into our villa in search of the camera. He can protest all he wants. He has not died yet from an erection. Not that I ever keep him hanging.

When I step back outside, I frown. Where did he go? The lounge chair’s empty. I step over to the chair and Kade’s in the bassinet on the other side with his mouth wide open and eyes shut. *Yes.* I can’t ever lay him down without waking him up.

Kameron’s arms wrap around my waist, and his lips graze my neck. I shiver at his touch and wiggle my ass against his cock. “How do you do that?”

“Look at you. Think about you. Smell you.” He sucks down on my flesh as his hands caress my stomach.

I roll my eyes. “Not that. I know how you get hard.”

His fingers slip inside my bikini bottom, and I moan. My nipples poke against the fabric of my top.

Please, don’t wake up. Mommy needs an orgasm. Just one. Please. Well, maybe two. “I meant. How do you keep him from waking up when you put him down?”

“Magic fingers.” He pinches my clit, and my eyes roll back into my head.

“Yes, they are.” I spread my thighs as his fingers plunge into my hot pussy. To think, twenty months ago, we were in my cousin’s backyard doing this very same thing. Now, without a care in the world. I know how much he loves me. That will never be in question.

“Do you have something to say to me?” He sucks on my earlobe.

“Yeah.” I pant as his movements increase. “I want to scream your name when I come.”

“No.” He chuckles and slips out of my sex. “That’s not what I meant. Although I’m happy to oblige.” He spins me to face him. His eyes are full of devotion as he places a hand on my belly. “We’re having another baby, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” I beam and jump into his arms.

“It’ll be a girl this time.” He swings me in a circle. “She’s going to be as beautiful and sassy as her momma.”

“We’ll see.” I place my lips over his and melt into a puddle of love and lust. He’s probably right. He always is. I cup his cheeks as his five o’clock shadow tickles my palms. “Unravel me, Mr. Filthy Grump.”

“Forever and always, Doll.” He pulls me up into his arms until my legs wrap around his waist, and I shiver at the heat in his eyes. He leaves the door open and walks us into our villa bedroom.

Didn’t get enough of Layla and Kameron? Grab a copy of Kameron’s side of the Epilogue [here](#).

Missed Daisy’s story? Grab *Her Filthy Professor* [here](#).

Enjoy the vibe of this story? Check out Taming the Beast where a sweet and innocent Ember meets the sexy and gruff billionaire tattoo artist Maverick. [Taming the Beast](#).

Taming the Beast

Ember

As I pull into my parent's driveway, I fight the urge to turn my BMW around and drive until I reach the end of the earth. *Dumbass. The world isn't flat. Fine. Smack dab on the opposite side of the globe is where I'd love to be.*

I inhale and shove the gearshift into park. Their home is on thirty-five acres near the outskirts of the city. From the outside, the structure appears flawless. It's a white two-story house with a wraparound porch. It's stately and perfect for fundraising parties.

My father has been working his way from city leadership positions until now; he's a state senator. *Shit.* I feel their pull like it's nipping at my heels. *I'm twenty-two years old. They can't make me stay.* I snap the door open and step onto the asphalt drive. It loops in front of the house and returns guests to the main road.

The grass is freshly cut, and not a clip of the trimmings remain to mar the landscape. As I travel the sidewalk leading to the front door, I inhale the scent of roses. My mother is obsessed with roses. Red ones. Pink ones. Purple. Yellow. White. Each color bleeds into the one next to it. My tennis shoes make light slapping sounds on the coated surface.

The front door swings open, and Albert, the butler, smiles, and winks. He's in his customary tux, and his salt and pepper hair is cut short. "It's about time you showed up."

"Hey, Albert. It's so good to see you."

He steps forward and shuts the door most of the way behind him like he's blocking the rest of the house from listening to our conversation. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yes, everything's good. School's great." I glance around while hiking up the steps and whisper, "I have a job."

"That's great, honey. Do everything we told you, so you're prepared."

“I am.” I nod.

If my parents knew their butler and maid had been plotting with me since I was a teen on how to save money and get out from under their thumb, they’d be livid. *Tough shit.* I cringe. *Yeah, you’re a pussy. If your dad told you to jump, you’d jump and then ask him how much higher you need to go. It’s embarrassing.*

“How is Cora?” I miss them. They’re like my grandparents because my other one’s died before I was out of grade school – the bad luck of being born to parents who’d thought they’d moved past their fertile stage.

“She’s great. She can’t wait to see you.”

“Me, either.” I hug him and step back so as not to draw attention to us. “Let’s get together in town.”

“We’d love to.” He beams, twists on his heel, and his shoulders tighten as if on cue. He’s officially switched from the role of mentor to the employee of a senator. “Come inside, my dear. Your father and mother are waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Albert.” I hold the same tone of indifference while speaking loud enough for my voice to carry inside the house. Not that they care what I’m doing. Not personally. Just on how it will reflect on their standing in the community.

My gaze darts around the foyer as we approach the study. Nothing is different. The floors are still polished to a glow that you can see your reflection in. A clang comes from behind me as the grandfather clock strikes one o’clock.

In the study, my father sits in his chair with his forearms resting on the leather arms. “Hello, Ember. It’s been a long time since you visited. I expected you to make a greater effort.”

My shoulders sag. *Why did I expect anything else? Of course, there’s censure.* “I’ve been busy with school.”

“Dear.” My mom nods.

“Mother.” I stand in the middle of the room with no desire to rush across the room to embrace either of them. Quite the opposite, I yearn to flee

to the kitchen and see Cora or beg off to my bedroom for the night. Only I no longer have free reign in the house.

“Have a seat.” She nods to the sofa across from her. As I lower to the cushions, I meet a stiffness that keeps me upright. “I’m so glad you could break away for a few minutes to see us.”

More condemnation. I brace my back. If they weren’t paying for my schooling, I’d leave. And my car. And my cousin for a place to live. Yeah, I’m at their mercy until I save up enough money to break out on my own – if I can ever get up the nerve.

“Oliver said you broke up with him.”

Not exactly. I wouldn’t screw him, and he got pissed – throwing things around like a baby, saying hateful things, and stomping out. “We aren’t together anymore.”

“Dear.” My father leans forward and pins me in place with his piercing blue eyes. “He comes from a well-established family. The son of one of my business partners. If he tells his dad you aren’t together, he’s going to end a very lucrative partnership.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I know that. He’ll forgive you for your lapse in judgment. He’s looking forward to your call.”

Shit. Not exactly what I meant. I can’t see Oliver anymore. I can’t stand him. He’s disgusting. “I –”

“I’m relieved that went as well as expected.” My dad taps his fingertips on the edge of the chair arm.

“Dear, I told you Ember was compliant and would do what you instructed.” She takes the needle in her hand and pushes it through the fabric as she works on her cross-stitch project.

My dad shoves out of his chair. “I’m sorry we can’t stay and chat, but your mother and I have a function to prepare for.” He turns on his heel and disappears into the foyer.

“Mom?”

“Mother,” she says without glancing up.

“Oliver is –”

“Your boyfriend. No questions asked. Your father needs your support. As always, you will be obedient.” She stands and exits the same way without a backward glance.

Well, fuck me running. I don't have enough money saved up. How can I get more funds – and quick? My gut churns. I'm not going back with Oliver.

Please, God, no. I can't. I've got to figure something out. I'm so tired of doing what I'm told. Of never having a voice. I want to be whisked away and become a different person. A woman with my own opinions. A person worthy of respect.

I spin in a circle. Yet here I am. The dutiful daughter of a state senator. The daughter who can never do the right thing – even when I try. Never quite smart enough, pretty enough, polite enough, obedient enough. “Shit,” I growl.

“There you are.” Cora breezes into the room, and I run into her arms. She's soft and smells like baked goods. I breathe in as anxiety washes away in her blanket of comfort.

“God, I've missed you,” I mutter while trying not to cry.

“Sweetheart, we missed you, too. But you had to get out of here.” She grabs my face. “Don't listen to your parents. This is your time to grow. If you need money for a place to stay, we've got the cash. We've squirreled away for years.”

“I can't take your money.”

“Yes, you will. We didn't have children, and you're like our granddaughter. Do not go back with that boy. You hear me?”

“Yes, ma'am.” I'd called Cora when we split up and told her all about it. Not that I was upset, but to get someone's support – when I should be calling my parents. How pathetic. Little Miss Rich Girl's classic miserable life. I feel like Cinderella without the ugly stepsisters, birds, or glass slippers. Yeah, totally not like Cinderella.

But I'll never take their money. They've been too good to me over the

years. I should be giving them money to retire – not watching them keep working so they can save enough money to rescue me if I need it.

I'm so sick of people with money. They always believe they can buy you. Tell you what to do. Lord it over your head. Well, at least that's what I've experienced. The only people I can depend upon are living paycheck to paycheck and struggling at that. Those people have substance.

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[Taming the Beast.](#)

About the Author

Alexia Chase is a steamy contemporary romance author who specializes in visual stories set in an interconnected world.

If you love stepping into a place that feels like home where familiar people, places, and things welcome you with open arms, then you're in the right place.

Ms. Chase pens everything from short stories to novels with heroes from bartenders to billionaires.

What can you find between the pages? Heavy doses of snark, sinful fun, smut, and happily ever afters.

Come inside. They're waiting for you.

Where can you find Ms. Chase when she's not writing? Ms. Chase lives in a small community outside of Kansas City, Missouri. She spends her free time with her husband, three children, and two dogs and loves to spin stories in her head. She's an avid learner and never far from her computer. Just ask her children. They have plenty to say about her excessive computer usage.

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**** Ms. Chase has written an engaging, steamy, funny, angst driven, and entertaining. ****

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Quick. Dirty. Sweet.

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Book Review

If you liked this book, I'd be honored if you would write a review. I'd be forever grateful.