



Men of Forbidden Temptation

RYDGER

JESSICA LONG

RYDER

Men of Forbidden Temptation

Book 1

JESSICA LONG



Ryder

Copyright © 2022 Jessica Long

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover Design by Eve Graphic Design LLC

✿ Created with Vellum

Important Note For Readers

Ryder is a second chance romance that deals with love, loss, and pain. There may be situations and/or scenes that are triggering for some readers.

Warnings Include:

- Emotional wounds caused from death, loss, grief, and hospital stays*
- Spicy sex scenes*

Contents

[Important Note For Readers](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Jessica Long](#)

*To the special moments in life that help keep love alive and
blossoming.*

“That’s why they call them crushes. If they were easy, they’d call them something else.”

- *Sixteen Candles*

Chapter One

THE SUDDEN JERK of the plane as it hits turbulence causes the butterflies to flap rapidly in my stomach.

Fear radiates through my body as I imagine the plane falling out of the sky.

My fingers wrap around the edge of the armrest and hold on tight for what feels like an eternity.

My mom's comforting touch eases away some nerves.

Letting out a shaky breath, I say, "How am I twenty-one and never been on a plane? The least I could have done is spend some time to prepare myself."

I used to dream of traveling and seeing the world, but the furthest I usually travel from home is the mall that is an hour away.

Mom chuckles in the seat next to mine.

"You're a homebody, through and through. You always have been and probably always will be."

A small laugh comes out of my mouth.

"Why would I leave home when everything I love and need is right there? I mean, even my job is there, and if I need something, I can order it online."

My stomach tightens as nervousness creeps into my veins. Sweat slickens my palms as I stare out the window at the ground that is thousands of feet below.

Mom loosens my death grip on the armrest. “We’re almost there. Just relax and think about all the fun we are about to have.”

“Yes, fun, but remember, we need to pace ourselves if we are going to sightsee as well as visit the casinos, see some shows, and lounge by the pool.”

Thinking about our plans for the weekend helps keep my mind off the uneasy feelings running through my body right now.

Mom pats my hand.

“Since it’s going to be later in the afternoon when we get checked into the hotel, I think we should get gussied up and hit the casino to start your birthday weekend off with a bang.”

“That sounds perfect. Then, tomorrow, we can start sightseeing right after breakfast.”

Like a true out-of-towner on her first visit to a new city, I have compiled a list of things to do and places that I really want to visit.

Mom chuckles as I pull my folded up list out of my short’s pocket.

“We can probably do one or two of the things on your list before our appointment in the afternoon.”

Appointment?

“What appointment?”

Mom hasn’t mentioned an appointment, so what could it be for?

“It’s a surprise for the both of us.”

“A surprise?”

Mom’s bangs cover her eyes as she nods her head.

“How can something be a surprise for the both of us when you know what it is?”

She chuckles. “It’s a surprise for you, but it’s for the both of us.”

I don't have the energy to figure out her riddle, so I try to act unaffected so she will tell me.

"I guess I will just have to wait and see when the time comes."

Mom doesn't take the bait.

Instead, she leans her head back against the headrest and closes her eyes as the pilot comes over the intercom to let us know we will start our descent in just a couple of minutes.

My curiosity grows the more I try to figure it out. Like an itch you can't scratch, it nags at me, becoming almost unbearable.

What would need an appointment in Vegas?

Is Mom looking at houses or apartments? Why would she even want to move when we all love our house and farm?

It could be a show that she booked, but we said we would see what jumps out to us once we got here.

Mom clears her throat. "Don't think so hard, honey. It wasn't on your list, nor was it something we discussed."

Nothing we discussed?

An image pops into my mind from all my hours of research, and my mouth falls open.

"Oh. My. God. It's strippers, isn't it? Please God, do not let it be strippers."

Mom's loud, boisterous laugh garners hateful looks from nearby passengers.

"Gosh, no. That didn't even cross my mind. Although there are some pretty great ones here."

At my flamed face and horrified expression, Mom adds, "So I've been told."

"Who has told you that there are some pretty great strippers in Vegas?"

Mom doesn't skip a beat.

She says it loud and proud. "Grandma."

I shrink further into my seat at the thought of Grandma watching male strippers in Vegas.

Slapping my hand over my eyes, I mumble, “Just kill me now. I’ll never get that image out of my head.”

Mom laughs. “We will just have to replace it with our own innocent memories.”

She elbows me in the arm to get my attention. “Look out your window. We’re here.”

Looking out of the window, I frown. “Where is the strip?”

This is not all glitz and glam like I was expecting.

Mom points. “Like two miles that way, and before you ask, I have already secured a shuttle to the hotel.”

The plane bounces as it touches down.

My stomach tightens as the plane slightly shakes from side to side.

When the plane touches back down, it doesn’t bounce this time. It slows down before the pilot expertly drives the plane to the terminal.

Mom and I slowly and patiently grab our carry-on suitcases from the overhead bin and make our way through the airport to the waiting car.

The driver loads our suitcases into the trunk as we get settled.

I sit in the seat behind the driver. “Now that we are on the ground, I’m so excited.”

The driver gives us a short scenic tour of popular attractions as he heads down the strip to our hotel.

The hotel’s lobby is grand and wide open, with glittering specks sprinkled in the flooring. There is gold trim everywhere, giving off an air of elegance.

Mom heads to the receptionist’s desk to check in while I continue to watch people.

There's a wide variety of people mingling around the lobby.

From guys wearing tank tops and swim trunks holding bottles of beer to women in ball gowns and fur coats sipping on a glass of wine, I watch in amazement as this hotel seems to cater to everyone.

Mom walks over to me and hands me a brightly colored room key.

"We are on the fourth floor and the casino is down here, but on the other side of the lobby. The restaurant is on the second floor, as well as the piano bar and lounge."

"Let's get going then. Lots to do before the night is over."

We don't have to wait for the elevator. It's already on the first floor and opens immediately after I press the up button.

The ride is quick and smooth.

I'm impatient to get to the main plans for this evening, so I press my key against the lock on the door and push the door open in a hurry.

The room is more modern than I ever imagined it would be, with its black and white theme and recessed lighting throughout the room.

The setting sun shines through the open blinds as it tries to slink down behind the skyline.

Mom carefully lays her suitcase at the bottom of her bed before unpacking her belongings.

I skip the unpacking, deciding that it will be easier to just grab what I need when I need it directly from my suitcase.

Grabbing my small makeup bag, I darken my eye makeup and put a fresh coat of lip stain on before placing the bag back in my suitcase and pulling out my shimmery dark blue one shouldered dress.

"Great choice." Mom says as she grabs her clothes to hang up in the closet.

"Thanks, Mom. Which dress are you going to wear?"

I grab my silver sparkly heels to wear tonight.

“The red short-sleeved one that I wore to your high school graduation.”

My high school graduation seems so long ago, back when I was looking forward to the future and hopeful about my first relationship. My oh my how time and age change the outlook on life.

“Is that the one that has the beaded rose on the side?”

Mom nods as she pulls it out of her suitcase.

“Ooh, I love that one.”

I change into my short dress and slip on my heels as Mom refreshes her makeup.

Grabbing the silver wristlet from my suitcase, I put some cash, my driver’s license, and room key inside before zipping it up and tossing my phone onto my bed.

Mom slips on her dress and sparkly flats before grabbing her necessities.

We head downstairs to the casino with a plan to walk around the casino and check out all the different tables and games before figuring out where we want to start.

The casino is already bustling, although it doesn’t appear crowded.

Hundreds of lights and sounds assault our senses. Laughter and conversations float over to us as we make our way through the slot machines towards the tables games that are deeper into the casino.

Mom and I stop and watch a hand of blackjack. The dealer shuffles the deck of cards and deals them out to the three people at the table.

He has one down facing card and one up facing that is showing a four.

Mom leans closer to me and whispers, “The dealer will probably win.”

Turning to look at her, I ask, “Even with potentially only having thirteen?”

“Yep, just watch.”

I watch as the first two players greedily ask for more cards, eventually busting.

The third player cautiously hits once before stopping at sixteen.

The dealer flips his card to reveal the king of diamonds. He gives himself another card to get higher than a sixteen without busting.

It’s a six.

“Twenty.” He calls out before taking all the chips.

I turn to face Mom. My eyes are wide with surprise that she knew he was going to win.

“How did you know the dealer would win?”

“They have to keep hitting until they get seventeen or higher. Plus, most players usually end up busting from my experience.”

“Amazing. I think I will leave the table games for the experts. I’m going to find a cool slot machine to spend my money on.”

We walk through the casino, scoping out the machines. There’s Egyptian themed machines, fruit themed, even game show themed slot machines.

“How about these?”

I point to the small group of slot machines that promise lots of fun for cheap, but still having good payouts.

“Fine with me. This trip is all about you, but I’d prefer the two that are side by side.”

I take the one to the left while Mom takes the one to the right.

Sitting on the plush leather seat, I get my cash out of my wristlet. “I’m only going to put one hundred dollars in and

when I run out, I'm done."

"That's very responsible of you. I'll do the same and then we can go to the restaurant and get a bite to eat."

Mom watches as I push the button for a max bid of one dollar and take my first spin. The reel stops and yells, "Winner!"

I sit up straighter in my seat. "What? No way! Five dollars? That was quick."

Mom takes a spin and loses.

She doesn't let it affect her. She immediately spins again and gestures for me to spin as well.

I focus on my machine, feeling excited when I win, but feeling a little disappointed when the spin wins nothing.

Mom clears her throat and I know we are about to have a serious conversation.

I glance her way. "Yes?"

She keeps her focus on the machine in front of her.

"This might be the wrong time to bring it up, but this is the only time I have been able to get you alone."

She pauses as a cocktail waitress stops by to see if we would like a drink.

We order two frozen strawberry daiquiris.

Mom continues, "Anyway, I was wondering if you have reached out to your brother or Ryder lately?"

Why is she asking me this?

"Umm, no. Why?"

"I was just curious. You don't date and haven't in almost a year."

"There just hasn't been anyone interesting. All the guys that are interested are boring or weird."

Mom frowns.

"I think there's more to it."

Of course, there's more to it, but I have barely admitted it to myself, let alone my mother.

I don't speak, I stare at my machine and get lost in the spins.

"Addison, as your mother, I only want what's best for you. I think it would help to talk about things."

A tear forms in my eye.

"What can I say, Mom?"

"The truth. We both know it, but it might help to get it off your chest."

"How will that help? How is confessing my feelings for Ryder despite the years that have passed beneficial? How is dwelling on the fact that he and Sam left years ago for college and have never come home going to help me?"

Mom gives me her patented mom look.

"It will hurt like hell to talk about things, but it will also help you move on and maybe you will meet someone equally spectacular as you."

"I don't want to meet someone new."

I only want Ryder.

Always have, always will.

Ever since I was thirteen and naïve.

Mom reaches over to give me a hug just as the waitress is bringing our drinks over.

I raise my glass.

"Cheers to turning twenty-one and having a great weekend with my best friend, who just happens to be my mom."

Mom taps her glass against mine before taking a sip.

I follow suit and take a huge sip of the frozen concoction.

"Mmm, this is delicious."

Feeling happier, I continue to play my slot machine, hoping to win a jackpot.

Mom wins twenty dollars and wiggles in her seat. “I can feel the luck flowing.”

“I think that’s the alcohol.”

We laugh and sip on our drinks while our slot machines continue to win small amounts.

Nothing can bring my mood down.

Nothing at all.

I shouldn’t have counted on my luck extending past the slot machine, because as luck would have it, you can’t have everything on your side at once.

A soft female voice sounds from behind me. “Addy?”

That all too familiar voice makes the hair on my arms stand on edge. It’s the last voice I want to hear while having the night of my life.

Chapter Two

AFTER SEVERAL MOMENTS of being frozen in my spot, Mom elbows me.

I spin around in my seat and come face to face with my childhood best friend. She's the last person I thought I'd run into here,

“Maya? What are you doing here?”

I turn to look at Mom. “Did you?”

Mom quickly shakes her head. “I didn't plan any of this. I swear.”

My gaze makes its way back to Maya, hoping she can explain what is going on.

She frowns, but doesn't speak.

The longer she takes to answer, the more impatient I get. I just want to enjoy my weekend, free from reminders of the past.

She plasters on a fake smile. “Well, it was OUR dream to come for our twenty-first birthdays. We had it all planned, down to this very hotel.”

I internally roll my eyes. “Well, technically, it was my dream that I had with my mom and then you tagged along with it.”

A small smirk forms on her face before being replaced with a grin. “Well, I'm here for the weekend. What are you

going to do?”

That’s a great question.

There’s a lot that I want to do and say to her, but this is neither the time nor the place, and I refuse to let her get to me and ruin my weekend.

“I’m going to continue playing the slot machines and enjoy my birthday weekend with my mom and pretend that I never saw you.”

Maya scoffs before turning around and walking away.

I turn back to face mom to gauge her reaction. She looks disappointed, and it almost breaks my heart.

“Before you can say anything,” I take a sip of my drink.

Mom doesn’t interrupt. She lets me gather my thoughts and speak what’s on my mind.

“I know you loved Maya and I know she was my best friend for years, but she bailed on me when I needed her the most.”

Mom’s face softens like it usually does when she’s feeling sympathetic.

“Addy, I understand why you’re so defensive towards her, but maybe she needed time to grow up.”

See, this is what I get for not telling mom everything that happened. Maya didn’t need time to grow up. She knew exactly what she was doing the entire time.

“Mom, she called our friendship a sham. She wasn’t really my friend. She only hung out with me because of Sam and Ryder. Once they were off to college, she didn’t have a reason to come over anymore.”

Mom’s eyes widen. “She really said that to you?”

“Not exactly, but that’s practically what she said. It took lots of arguing to get her to admit it, but at least I got the truth and didn’t waste more time on a fake friend.”

Mom sighs. “I never knew that. You never told me.”

“What was I supposed to say? My best friend only used me to ogle my brother and his best friend? The same best friend that I had a huge crush on? That I still like even though I haven’t talked to him in such a long time?”

I chug the rest of my drink, ready for another one.

A stronger one to help remove these thoughts from my mind.

“Ryder was young and had gone through very tough times.”

My heart aches with the reminder of Ryder and the fun times we had.

“I know that, Mom, and I don’t blame him for not coming home. Losing both parents in an accident and then having to move in with your best friend’s family for your senior year would be tough on anyone.”

Mom pats my leg. “Then give him sympathy, even after all these years.”

“I tried Mom. I tried reaching out and talking to him after the accident, but he ignored me.”

“He needed to grieve, in his own way.”

“Well, he did. He moved across the county for college and took Sam with him.”

And neither of them have come back home in six years.

Not for holidays, winter break, or even the summer. They stayed out in California and missed all the family holidays and even my high school graduation.

I blow out a breath of air. “I don’t want to spend our celebratory weekend reminiscing on the past.”

Mom furrows her eyebrows and gives me a once over.

“Okay. We will table this conversation for another time.”

I play another spin on the slot machine. “Yes, another time in the far, far future. A time when I am in a happy relationship and have moved on.”

Mom doesn't counter back. She turns back to her slot machine and spins for the jackpot.

We continue to play the slots and forget about Maya, Ryder, and all the other problems until my stomach growls.

Mom chuckles. "Are you ready to eat?"

My stomach lets out another loud growl, causing me to laugh. "I'd say so."

We push the button to cash out and wait for the machines to print out our ticket before taking them to the cashier's booth to exchange the ticket for cash.

I look over the ticket and see that I am up six dollars. Not the jackpot I had hoped, but better than a loss.

The cashier takes the ticket and hands over the cash.

Mom and I head towards the elevator to take it to the restaurant on the second floor. The restaurant is dimly lit, giving off a romantic vibe.

We are led to a line of booths that separate the restaurant from the piano bar and are immediately greeted by our server.

"Can I start you two off with a drink or a shot?"

I look at mom and she looks at me. "How about a birthday shot?"

I nod enthusiastically. "Yes! But I also think we need to have a glass of water too. Balance out the alcohol with hydration."

Mom looks back at the server and says, "Can the bartender surprise us with a shot?"

The server nods and grins. "Absolutely. She loves creating new masterpieces. I'll get that ordered for you while you look over the menu."

I open the menu that is laying in front of me. My gaze immediately goes straight to the cheeseburgers.

They have every burger known to man, including the classics like the all American burger, bacon cheeseburger,

mushroom and swiss burger. There are burgers made with wagyu beef, regular beef, elk, soy, and even ground chicken.

“I think I’m going to get the bacon cheeseburger with a brioche bun and a side of fries.”

Mom laughs. “Of course you are. That seems to be your favorite when we go out to eat.”

“Hey! I love cheeseburgers, but that’s not the only thing I order. I eat ribs, steak, and chicken all the time. It just depends on the main cuisine of the restaurant.”

Mom counters. “This restaurant doesn’t have a main cuisine.”

“Exactly. When there isn’t a defined cuisine, I always go with a burger, as they are hard to mess up.”

Mom flips through the menu before closing it and laying it back down on the table. “I think I might get a cheeseburger as well. The grease will help with the alcohol.”

The server returns with two festive shots on a tray, as well as two glasses of ice water.

Mom softly claps excitedly. “Ooh look, they even put whipped cream on it for you.”

The drinks are carefully placed down in front of us as the server explains what’s in the shot.

“This shot is made with cake vodka, chocolate liqueur, and Irish cream with a sprinkle coated rim and topped with whipped cream.”

We give the server our order and after she scribbles it down on her notepad, she walks away.

Mom and I pick up the shot glasses, clink them together, and drink it.

The alcohol is strong and causes my arm hair to stand up, but the sweet whipped cream helps with the burning after taste.

Mom is the first to speak. “Wow, that is goooood. I could probably drink ten of them.”

I laugh and take a nibble of the sprinkles. “And then I’ll have to carry you upstairs and help you nurse a hangover all weekend.”

“We can’t have that because we have plans for this weekend.”

Super secret plans that Mom had to make an appointment for.

“Speaking of which-” I start.

Mom interrupts. “It’s a surprise and no matter how many times you ask, I won’t tell you.”

I frown dramatically, so she knows I’m not serious. “Not even a small hint?”

Mom rubs her chin menacingly as if she is a villain deciding whether she wants to tell her evil plan.

“Hmmm. There’s really no way to give a hint without giving it all away. It’s like the time you asked for a hint for your tenth birthday party theme and I said carousel. You immediately knew it was a carnival theme.”

“Well, yeah, because that was an obvious hint.”

“If I had said cotton candy, you would have guessed it, too. You will just have to wait and see because I refuse to ruin this surprise.”

I roll my eyes. I’m not a kid anymore, so I don’t need any surprises.

“Fine, you win. I will just wait and see what it is.”

Or I’ll wait until she is tipsy and try to ask again.

The smell of freshly cooked food wafts over to our booth, causing my stomach to growl loudly.

My mouth waters when I realize it’s our food and our server is bringing it over to us right now.

“I’m starved.” I say as my burger is placed in front of me.

The server places down a bottle of ketchup and a small ramekin of mayonnaise before assisting other customers.

Taking a large bite of my burger, I moan as the hot grease and the flavors of the seasoning coat my tastebuds.

“This is incredible.” I say once my mouth is no longer full.

Mom nods her head as she takes a bite of hers.

“Mmm-hmm.”

After a while of eating in silence, I ask. “So, what do you think we should do after this? More slots in the casino?”

“This is your birthday weekend, so whatever you want to do. If you want to play more slots, then that is what we will do. If you want to go for a midnight swim later, that’s fine too.”

That would be fun. I love swimming, especially at night when I don’t have to worry about burning from the sun.

“How about both?”

“Whatever you want,” Mom reiterates.

I raise my eyebrow. “Whatever I want?”

“No. I’m not telling you what the surprise is.”

“I wasn’t planning on asking what the surprise is.”

Mom presses her lips into a thin line, not believing one word I just spoke.

I laugh. “Ah, you’re right, but I wasn’t going to ask what the surprise was. I was going to ask for a hint.”

Mom gets her card out of her wallet and pays for the meal. “Let’s get a dessert drink and head to the casino so we can keep your mind off of it.”

We head to the bar and ask the bartender to make a dessert drink for us to carry to the casino.

Her face lights up as a grin stretches across her face. “Is there anything you don’t like?”

Mom and I shake our heads.

“Great!”

She pulls several bottles off the shelves. She grabs a scoop of ice and dumps it into the shaker.

Following the ice are three different liquids and then a splash of half and half.

She shakes the concoction before expertly pouring it into two separate martini glasses.

“With a dusting of cocoa powder, your tiramisu martinis are ready.”

“They look so good.”

Mom pays for the drinks while I leave a tip in her tip jar.

I take a sip of the dessert drink, my eyes water at the alcohol’s strength. “Wow, this is incredible! Strong, but delicious.”

Mom tries a sip of her drink and smacks her lips together. “Mmm. You’re right; this is good.”

We take the elevator to the lobby and have to maneuver through the crowd to get to the casino.

The all too familiar sound of Maya’s laughter echoes throughout the large lobby, causing me to stop in my tracks.

Turning towards the sound, my heart sinks into my stomach as I instantly regret looking at her.

Maya has her arm looped through Ryder’s and they are both grinning as they walk arm in arm towards the elevator.

Did he come here with her?

Does he even remember that it’s my birthday weekend as well?

Chapter Three

THE PROBLEM with partying for your twenty-first birthday and excessive drinking is that the consequences are the last thing on your mind.

However, the next day, a hangover is the only thing on your mind.

Thankfully, Mom got me the best bacon, egg, and cheese bagel she could find with a large side of hash browns.

I've never been more grateful to be the youngest of four kids, since Mom is now an expert at dealing with her hungover children.

Mom's voice brings me out of my thoughts.

"Addy? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just tired. I didn't realize how exhausting sightseeing would be."

We've already toured the strip, drove the Vegas super karts, walked through a botanical garden, and we are currently walking through a haunted museum because Mom wanted to do something out of the ordinary.

"Nursing a hangover and dealing with seeing your former best friend hundreds of miles from home while on a birthday trip doesn't help. Add in all the sightseeing and you have your current state."

I roll my eyes. Of course, she would mention that.

I read a placard for a haunted doll warning us to not look it in its eyes before moving on to the next display case.

Mom joins me at another display. “Vacations are exhausting unless you are only relaxing. That’s why most people only vacation once a year.”

Why do so many people dream of vacationing if it is this tiring?

“Our next vacation should just be total relaxation. Like a week long spa trip.”

We follow the tour guide back to the lobby, where she announces the tour is over, but the gift shop is open.

Mom and I head outside where our hotel shuttle is waiting to bring us to our next destination- our surprise appointment.

When we are buckled in our seats, I turn to face mom. “Now, can you tell me where we are going?”

The driver chimes in. “We will be there in just a minute.”

Mom laughs at my disappointed expression.

“I could tell you, but I want to see your reaction.”

The driver turns into a strip mall, fueling my curiosity before announcing, “Here we are.”

I lean forward to look through the windshield as he parks in a parking spot.

My eyes widen as a grin forms on my face. “Tattoos? We’re getting tattoos?”

Mom nods. “Only if you want to.”

I can’t contain my excitement. “Hell yes!”

Mom and I head inside the tiny shop and we are immediately greeted by a burly man that is almost completely covered in tattoos sitting against the back wall.

“Welcome to Inked Out. Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

His voice doesn’t match his appearance. I was expecting a deep, gruff voice, but his voice is soft and almost melodic.

Mom perks up. “We have an appointment.”

The guy looks from Mom to me before standing. “Great. Do you know what you two are looking for?”

“Well, I would like a giant sunflower on my foot, and I’m not sure what Addison wants, but she is interested in a piercing too, if you can do that.”

The guy looks towards a back room before returning Mom’s gaze. “I can’t do the piercing, but Liam can.”

I gasp and turn towards Mom. “How did you know I wanted to get a piercing?”

“You asked me last night if we could get matching belly button piercings.”

“I did? I don’t remember that.”

Mom’s barely able to suppress a laugh. “That’s exactly why I said no to finding an open tattoo shop last night.”

A lean but equally tattooed man walks out from the back room.

“Who’s ready for a piercing?”

I speak up. “That would be me.”

Mom walks over to the burly guy to discuss her tattoo as I walk towards Liam.

I give him an appreciative once over as he gets out the piercing necessities and washes his hands.

He’s lean, but in a CrossFit kind of way. He’s not like the farm working fit guys I am used to, but I am intrigued by him.

His eyes are as dark as his hair, and his smile is as dazzling as the sun.

“Shall we pick out your jewelry?”

“Uh, sure.”

I follow him over to a display case where hundreds of pieces of jewelry are on display.

Most are simple in design, but some are more elaborate.

“How about the pink one that has the rose design in the bottom ball?”

He opens the case and grabs the one that I am pointing at. “Good choice.”

While he rewashes his hands and gets the piercing needle out, I watch the tattoo artist grab the tattoo gun and start on Mom’s sunflower.

She winces as the needle pierces her foot, but the pain on her face doesn’t last long. She leans her head back and closes her eyes.

Liam walks around me until my view of Mom is blocked by him.

“Ready?”

I lift my t-shirt and tuck the bottom into the band of my bra to expose my stomach.

I chuckle. “Now I am.”

He leans the chair back until I am almost laying back before he rips open an alcohol swab and cleans the piercing area. His gentle touch tickles and I let out a loud laugh.

“Sorry.” He says as he throws the alcohol pad on the table.

My cheeks turn a light shade of pink. I take a deep breath and close my eyes as he grabs the needle.

His hand on my stomach lets me know he is about to pierce me.

The hum of the tattoo gun calms my racing heart.

Liam whispers, “One.”

Taking a deep breath, I steel my nerves.

“Two.” His whisper holds a hint of a smile.

I prepare for the stabbing pain on three, letting out the deep breath that I just took.

Three never comes.

Liam jabs the needle through my flesh when I have no more breath to let out.

“Breathe.” He instructs.

I take a shaky breath. The pain radiates as he screws the ball onto the end of the curved bar.

“All done.” He helps me sit up before leaning the chair back into a sitting position.

He grabs a couple of bottles of cleaning spray and puts them in a small plastic bag.

Looking down, I smile at the shiny new accessory.

“Looks great, Addy.” Mom says from across the room.

Liam cleans up from the piercing before getting the tattoo gun out as I flip through the binder of tattoo ideas.

I’ve thought about getting a tattoo for years. And spent just as much time trying to figure out what I wanted and where I wanted to put it.

“Do you have anything like flowers and a moon?”

Liam flips toward the back of the binder. “Here are some of our popular ones, but I can do a mixture of a few if you don’t find one you love.”

I point to the picture of the pink and blue flowers. “Can you do these flowers in this moon’s shape?”

He doesn’t even seem fazed. “Sure, no problem. Are you fine with the same colors? And where do you want it?”

“The colors are cute and behind my left ear.”

I sit back down in the chair as he gets to work gathering all the necessities he will need.

Looking over at Mom, I see her tattoo is almost finished. The bright yellow pops against the dark shading.

Liam pins my hair and cleans the entire area behind my ear all the way down my neck.

“Do you want it closer to your hairline or a little bit down your neck over here?”

His finger glides from my hairline down to my neck, stopping about an inch away from my ear lobe. It feels sensational and I want him to keep doing it.

“Right where your finger is right now.”

He removes his finger, much to my disappointment. “That’s what I was going to suggest. It can easily be concealed if you leave your hair down, or you can show it off.”

He angles my head and rests it against my shoulder as he starts on the tattoo.

The pain is like nothing I’ve ever felt before.

I concentrate on my breathing and count the breaths to keep from passing out.

It feels like an eternity of stabbing and scraping, but eventually, Liam finishes.

He cleans me off, puts antibiotic cream on the new ink, and disposes of the trash.

Opening my eyes, I watch as Mom grabs her phone and takes a picture of my flower tattoo.

I zoom in on the picture and smile at the tiny pink and blue hibiscus flowers in the shape of a crescent moon.

“That is so cute, but I’m glad it’s over.”

I can’t believe I got a piercing and a tattoo while on vacation. And Mom got a tattoo.

What will Dad say?

Liam throws a couple more things in the bag with my piercing spray. “Make sure you let your piercing breathe. Clean it daily and no swimming until both are healed.”

The burly man checks Mom out. “I put a sheet of after care instructions in your bag. Call us if you have any issues.”

I fix my shirt and follow Mom out the door to our hotel shuttle.

Mom breaks the silence. “How about we get changed and eat at the bar tonight? I overheard the concierge telling a

couple that there is a famous DJ playing tonight.”

“That sounds fun. I might need to find something else to wear that will let my piercing breathe.”

“We can stop at the boutique that is off of the lobby when we get back.”

Our growling stomachs and traffic from hell prevent us from stopping at the boutique.

We hurriedly change into our dresses and head downstairs to the restaurant and bar.

The crowd is huge and all the booths are occupied, so we have to sit at the bar.

Mom and I order the same thing- steak, broccoli, and a side salad.

I stare at all the people on the makeshift dance floor. Not a care in the world, just drinking, dancing, and having a great night.

Mom nudges me. “Go on, have fun. I’ll let you know when the food arrives.”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

Mom shakes her head and laughs. “Enjoy it while you can. Before you know it, you will be too old to dance the night away.”

I join the others on the dance floor and sway my hips to the beat of the music.

The DJ keeps the songs to more upbeat, fun going songs.

Bodies touch as more people get on the dance floor. My ass rubs against someone.

I spin around to apologize and come face to face with Ryder.

My heart pounds in my chest.

His sparkling blue eyes look just as surprised as I feel right now. His grin is like the sun itself- brightly shining and welcoming.

Happiness drains from my face as I remember seeing him with Maya last night.

Ryder reaches beside him and pulls on someone's shirt.

My brother's familiar voice is heard over the music. "What the hell-"

His statement is stopped short as his gaze locks with mine. "Addison? What are you doing here?"

Mom's voice calls out for me, and I make my way back over to her with the guys in tow.

"Ryder? Sam? What in the world are you two doing here?"

Ryder answers mom, despite his gaze still locked onto mine. "Sam and I are in town for an engineering tech show."

I look away to see Mom's face lights up as she looks at the guys.

"Addy, look. It's your brother and Ryder."

The way she says Ryder's name makes me believe she is trying to hint at something.

When I don't speak, she frowns and asks, "Why aren't you happy or surprised to see them? Especially after our talk yesterday?"

Ryder and Sam speak at the same time. "What talk?"

Mom waves them off to allow me to speak.

It's hard to gather my thoughts over the loud music, and my even louder emotions, but I let my unfiltered thoughts flow.

"Why am I not happy or surprised to see Sam and Ryder? Well, that's because I saw Ryder and Maya getting cozy as they were getting in the elevator last night."

Sam chokes on his saliva as Ryder imitates a fish. He opens his mouth before closing it before repeating the action several more times.

I look at Mom, who is speechless like the guys. "I've had my fun, but it's time to move on with my life. I'm ready to go

home. I'll be upstairs packing my suitcase.”

Chapter Four

A SIGH ESCAPES past my lips as I scroll through social media and see my old classmates posting pictures of their exorbitant summer vacations.

“I wish I had a twin sister.”

Mom yells from the kitchen. “Be careful of what you wish for.”

“Yeah, I know, but if I had a twin sister, she would be my best friend and I would have someone to share my secrets with. We could share clothes and go on vacations together.”

I ramble on as my mind paints the perfect life that I have just imagined.

“Just be careful putting it out there in the universe.”

Mom isn't very superstitious, but she believes in karma and negative energy, especially with wanting to change the future.

I, unfortunately, had to learn this the hard way.

The last time I wished for time to hurry so I could have a better future, all hell broke loose.

The first and only time I made that mistake was when Sam read my diary in front of Ryder, and I was too humiliated to want to look at Ryder ever again.

Ryder's parents died in a car accident the following month.

Of course, I know that wishing for Sam and Ryder to hurry up and graduate so they would go off to college had nothing to do with Ryder's family's freak accident, but to this day, I still feel guilty.

It was right before his and Sam's senior year started, so he moved in with us for the last year of school. It had the opposite effect of what I had wished for, but it helped me grow up and appreciate my family more.

Sam and Ryder were the bestest of friends- almost like brothers.

They dressed like brothers and even acted like brothers. They even had the same baby blue eyes and hairstyle, but Sam had our family's traditional chestnut brown hair color, whereas Ryder had the traditional boy next door with sandy blonde hair.

So, like brothers, they shared a bedroom, opting not to have bunk beds but two twin beds on either side of the room.

Ryder chose that Christmas to inform all of us he applied to a college in California and was planning on moving halfway across the country as soon as he graduated.

My parents were shocked by his decision, but supportive.

I masked my pain by joking he would fit in with his baby blue eyes and shaggy, sandy blonde hair.

Not to mention his washboard abs.

Sam, being his best friend, followed him to California to keep an eye on him.

They never came home, not for Thanksgiving or for winter break.

I overheard Mom on the phone one night. Sam was telling her that the pain was still too fresh for Ryder and he couldn't deal with the reminder of the accident.

My heart broke for Ryder and even though I wished he would come home, I didn't want him to spend the winter break being sad.

I hoped that the two of them would be back for summer and life would go back to normal, but that never happened.

They never came home.

Mom and Dad flew out to California every Christmas and for an entire month every summer while I stayed with Grandma and Grandpa.

After the first boring summer, I begged Dad for a swimming pool and even promised I would keep it clean as well as keep up with all my other chores.

I batted my baby blues at him and he was a goner.

I used the pool to my advantage. Not only was it great to keep me busy and pass time, but it was great for exercise.

Plus, after laying in the sun all day, it was nice to cool down in the cool water.

So, while Ryder was away working on his degree, I was here working on gaining self-esteem. I hoped that one day I would get a second chance to confess my real feelings for Ryder and not have Sam read them to Ryder from my diary.

I had that chance when I bumped into him in Vegas, but I was too angry about seeing him with Maya that I let the opportunity pass.

Mom walks into the living room and sprays the furniture with the ocean scented spray I picked out at the store yesterday.

“Addison, are you daydreaming again? We need to focus so we can finish cleaning and move onto our next task.”

“Sorry, it just feels weird that Sam and Ryder are coming home after six years. Why now?”

I lock my phone screen and place it in my pocket before fluffing a couch pillow. Moving onto the next one, I fluff the pillow and place it back in its original spot as Mom sprays the previous pillow I just fluffed.

“I know there are a lot of emotions involved, but can you please wait until after our guests leave before starting

anything?”

Mom has her hand on her hip, and I know she means business.

“I promise I won’t start anything, but I can’t promise that I won’t say anything if Sam tries to start something.”

Not that I am itching for a fight with my brother or Ryder, but I’m not taking any of their shit right now. Not when they haven’t been home in six years and pick now to come home.

Mom sighs before grabbing the window cleaner and a paper towel.

“If you feel the need to say something, please bring your conversation inside and not fight in front of our guests. That’s all I’m asking.”

I take the items from her and get to work cleaning the dozen mirrors Mom has hung up around the living room and foyer.

After we clean and freshen up the living room, Mom heads to the kitchen while I head to the guest bathroom.

She replaces the hand towels with more festive ones while I change out the towels in the guest bathroom.

I give the mirror a quick clean and make sure the hand soap is full before returning to the kitchen to see what else Mom needs me to do.

“Can you put the clean sheets on the boys’ beds? I have them in the blue basket on top of the dryer. There are two stacks of clean towels for them as well.”

Mom might have asked, but I know this is more of a demand. She’s clearly stressed out to the max right now.

Even though I am cringing inside, I say, “Sure, no problem.”

I haven’t stepped foot in Sam’s room since I was thirteen before he read my diary in front of Ryder. I had no intention of ever going in there again, but I know this will make Mom feel good knowing they have clean sheets to sleep on tonight.

Grabbing the ocean scented furniture spray and the basket with their sheets and towels in it, I carry them upstairs.

Knowing that Sam likes the pale blue sheets, I put them on his bed, making sure his sheets are perfectly smooth like I like mine before throwing the cover on top.

Sure, he might mess them up within the first few minutes he is home, but at least I'll know they were nice to begin with.

The dark blue sheets go on Ryder's bed.

I hesitate before I make my way over to his side of the room. On his end table is a picture of our two families together. He has his arm wrapped around my shoulder as I stand between him and Sam.

This picture was taken the Christmas before his parent's accident. We all traveled south to enjoy the sun, beach, and water as an early senior year gift to Ryder and Sam.

We were all a little sunburned and laughing at Ryder's dad, who had just spilled his drink down the front of his shirt.

This was the last vacation we took as a family, and the last time I saw Ryder's mom and dad.

The corner of a picture is sticking out from between two CD cases. Curiosity gets the best of me and I grab the edge of the picture and pull it out.

Shock crosses my face and my mouth drops open as I recognize the picture.

It's a picture of just Ryder and me the day we all went to the mall to pick out their tuxes for their prom.

I wasn't in the mood to shop with them, but Mom insisted she needed another woman there with her in case the guys picked out powder blue tuxedos.

Of course, the guys picked traditional black tuxedos.

I begged to walk around the mall while they finished, but Mom conned me into taking a picture with each of them since they were going far away for college.

I never imagined they wouldn't be back home in six years.

Tears well up in my eyes as anger builds inside my chest.

They weren't here to see me win homecoming queen, get dressed up for my prom, see me graduate high school, or walk for my associate's degree.

Before my emotions can turn into crying, I prop my picture up against the frame and put the sheets on his bed.

I freshen up their entire room with the spray before grabbing the two stacks of towels and putting them on the shelf in our shared bathroom.

I move all of my beauty products into my room, as I can no longer take as long as I want in the bathroom.

Setting the bottles neatly on my dresser, I look at the pictures I have displayed.

Most of them are from this past year, except for the picture on the end that I took years ago of Sam and Ryder.

They were muddy from riding their four wheelers in a rainstorm and had matching grins on their faces.

The yard was rutted from their shenanigans, and Mom and Dad were pissed, but it didn't alter their good moods.

Sam and Ryder knew they were in trouble, but they were so happy I couldn't help but to take their picture.

As a punishment, Mom and Dad made them sod the yard the next day after the rain stopped.

I smile at the memory that seems like a lifetime ago.

Carrying the empty basket back to the laundry room, I overhear Mom on the phone.

"I honestly don't know what the boys are going to do. I hope they stay here for a while, but they have their jobs and lives back in California."

Mom pauses as the person on the other end says something and fills a glass with ice water and sips on it, while the other person rambles on and on.

"Mm-hmm."

I can tell she is getting bored with the conversation because she keeps checking her watch every few seconds.

I intervene and loudly yell at her from the living room. “Hey Mom, can you help me in here for a moment?”

She yells back. “Uh, sure, honey.”

She places her glass on the counter before interrupting the person on the other end of the phone. “I’m sorry, but I have to help Addison. I’ll see you tomorrow at the party.”

She hangs up the phone and lets out a long sigh.

If they bore her with one conversation, how bored is she going to be if that person is going to be at the party?

Wondering who was on the phone, I ask, “Who was that?”

Rolling her eyes, she replies, “Your grandmother. Did you finish the sheets?”

“Yep, all done, and I even sprayed the entire room and everything in it to get rid of the old smell.”

I grab an orange and peel it before savoring its citrusy fruit.

“Thanks, honey. I just want things to be perfect. Maybe they will stay here a while before moving on with their futures.”

Mom’s eyes get glossy, like she is about to cry.

I need to distract her quickly to keep her mind off her emotions.

“What else can I help you with today?”

She looks out the back door.

“I want to hose off the lounge chairs and patio furniture so they are pollen and dust-free for the party tomorrow. The weather is supposed to be hot, so they should dry in a few hours.”

Mom looks down at her list. “We also need to check the salinity level in the pool and make sure we don’t need to add more salt.”

“I can do both things. Why don’t you make yourself a festive pina colada to make sure you have the perfect recipe before the party?”

Alcohol will help relax her and hopefully keep her from stressing out too much.

She offers me a small smile. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

I head outside and start with the pool.

The water is perfect and ready for the party, so I move on to cleaning the furniture.

I take my time and let my mind wander to what I hope will happen tomorrow.

My mind imagines many scenarios from Ryder finally declaring his feelings for me to us sneaking into my bedroom so I can finally kiss him- maybe even more.

My heart beats faster as I imagine the things we can do late at night while everyone is asleep. He can sneak into my room and no one would even know.

Danny coughs, bringing me out of my daydream.

His lips form a smirk. “I think the furniture is clean.”

“Uh, yeah. I was just making sure they were extra clean. Mom is freaking out about everything being perfect for Sam and Ryder’s arrival.”

It’s not a lie, but I’m not about to admit I was thinking about Ryder.

“She just wants them to be happy to be home.” Danny says somberly.

“Don’t we all?” My reply is full of mystery that only I can decipher.

“Anyway, I came out here to let you know we’re going out to dinner, so you might want to change. Mom doesn’t want to dirty up the house tonight.”

Danny laughs and I join in.

“Yeah, because we can’t clean up after ourselves.”

Although, I think it’s more that Mom doesn’t want to clean more than we already have today.

I turn off the hose and wrap it back up before running upstairs and changing into appropriate dinner attire.

Mom chooses barbeque, so we go to the locally run restaurant that is our family’s favorite.

When we get inside, the hostess immediately shows us to a booth in the back of the restaurant.

I slide in on one side and Danny sits next to me while Mom and Dad share the other side.

Mark is busy tonight, so it is just the four of us, just like it is more often than not.

We choose the family style meal and order a bit of everything.

Danny keeps the conversation to happier topics, never brushing on Sam and Ryder’s imminent arrival, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

My thoughts are stuck on Ryder and how anxious I am to see him again. I go through the motions of eating and nodding along to the conversation happening around me, but I can’t focus on what is being spoken.

Danny waves his hand in front of my face. “Earth to Addy.”

“Huh? What did I miss?” I look from Danny to Mom and notice a smile on her face.

“Oh, nothing.” Mom chuckles as she boxes up her leftovers.

Danny playfully elbows me on my side. “What’s got your focus?”

“I’m just tired. I haven’t been sleeping much at night since I can’t sleep on my stomach until this piercing heals. Maybe I should call it an early night.”

Of course, I don't admit the real reason I am tired and why I haven't been sleeping well.

Mom reaches across the table and grabs my hand. "Let's head to the car while Dad pays. We all need the rest because tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

Dad pays the bill as Mom and I head outside.

"Are you sure you are okay, honey?" Mom wraps her arm around me as we walk to the car.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a lot on my mind." I admit.

"About Ryder?" Mom's gaze is intense.

"That and about my future."

I still haven't decided on what I want to do, whether I want to move away and continue with college and my online job or stay home and help more with the farm.

"You still have time to decide. You are young. Relax and see what happens. Take a break from everything and just enjoy life. You work all the time while getting your associate's degree and pitching in with the farm. It's a lot."

Mom stops talking as Dad and Danny make their way over to us.

The entire way home and for most of the night, my thoughts swarm inside my head, preventing me from getting any sleep.

Chapter Five

MARK YELLS outside my bedroom door, “Wake up sleeping beauty.”

He bangs on the door a few times, pausing between each bang.

“If I weren’t already awake, I’d be really pissed right now. Plus, I’m more of a superhero like Wonder Woman than a fucking princess.”

His loud, obnoxious laugh echoes off the walls as he runs down the stairs.

He might be twenty-nine and about to be the chief legal officer of the new technology firm in town, but I swear he is still twelve years old at heart.

Even though I am eight years younger than Mark, he sometimes acts like he is the youngest sibling.

Being so young, my brothers always picked on me, and they often left me out from their games and secrets.

Being the only girl of four children made life complicated in terms of friends and boyfriends. Not that I had any boys lined up to date me.

If my weight wasn’t a contributing factor, no one dared to ask my brothers permission to take me out on a date.

I had to rely on my best friend, Maya, to cover for me if I wanted to hang out with a boy, but even then, my heart wasn’t really in it.

No one could compare to Ryder, and since I've had a crush on him for more than half my life, I never had the chance to move on.

Ryder always dated experienced girls that showed a lot of skin while I was the chubby teenager that no one looked at twice.

My heart only wanted Ryder.

It wanted him to only want me.

Hell, just one look from him would have set my body ablaze.

I wanted him to look at me with his lust-filled, darkened blue eyes the way he looked at Maya during his senior year when she was constantly over here.

I can't blame him, though. She was the definition of sexy. She had curves in all the right places. Compared to me, she was a total knockout.

But that was a lifetime ago.

I've changed.

A lot.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, giving it an appreciative glance. No longer am I the chubby friend. I grew up.

Literally.

I have a new piercing and even a tattoo.

Heading into the bathroom, I shower quickly and get dressed in a flowy summer dress to let my belly ring breathe.

The smell of breakfast drifts upstairs and into my room. My stomach lets out a loud hunger growl and I let it lead me to the kitchen.

Mom loads up my plate with sausage, eggs, and biscuits.

As I sit in my usual seat, I say, "Thanks. You've out-done yourself this morning."

“I didn’t cook. I ordered it from the new breakfast place in town.”

Mom grins as my mouth opens into a perfect O.

“You never order breakfast.”

Mom has always cooked breakfast every single morning. Even after giving birth to each of us, she cooked every meal for everyone.

She is jittery like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Today is different. It’s going to be great.” Mom hums to herself as she eats.

Yeah, today is different. Not like I need the reminder.

I eat quickly before helping Mom get the party decorations out of the trunk of her car.

I throw away the wrappers and start hanging up banners, balloons, and fake grass skirts on the tables both inside and outside.

If you couldn’t guess, the party theme is a luau.

I suggested a cowboy themed party since we live on a farm, but Mom wanted it to be something enticing and exotic now that they have lived in a big city.

I shake my head at the decorations that have changed our rustic but modern living room to a makeshift beach.

“You’ll understand one day. City life will change someone.” Mom reminds me as I frown at the fake flower leis.

I hope that’s not true. I don’t want to change, and I don’t want Ryder to change.

Mom grins as she hands me a bag. “Time to put on your costume.”

“Costume? Since when does a luau themed party need costumes?”

This isn’t Halloween.

“Since I bought one for you.” Mom points to the bag, urging me to open it.

Opening the bag, I groan as I see a coconut bikini top, white bikini bottoms, and a green grass skirt.

“You’re serious?” I question and raise my eyebrow.

“Yep. If I looked like you, I’d wear it, but they don’t want to see me in that.” Mom pushes me to the staircase.

“They don’t want to see me in it either.” I mumble.

“No excuses. Now hurry before our guests arrive.” Mom heads to the kitchen as I head up to my room.

To my surprise, the outfit doesn’t look half bad on me.

I tie the grass skirt around my waist before making my way back downstairs and taking over cutting up the cucumbers for the veggie trays.

I grab the cherry tomatoes and baby carrots, adding them to the tray before placing the homemade dip in the center.

Mom expertly patties out the hamburgers before returning them to the fridge to stay cold.

Pulling Mark away from Mom and her supersonic hearing ears, I ask, “Where’s Danny?”

Unlike my brothers, I respect their privacy and try to keep their whereabouts and their conquests a secret from our parents, despite them finding out later down the road.

Mark makes sure Mom can’t hear before whispering in my ear. “Probably at Rachel’s.”

I roll my eyes while replying, “Of course.”

Rachel is his on again, off again friend with benefits. Last I knew, she wanted more, but he said no.

At twenty-six, he isn’t ready to be tied down, especially with kids. He has more life to live. His words, not mine, but I respect his decision to know that he isn’t ready for that kind of responsibility.

Mark changes the subject and asks loud enough for Mom to hear. “Can you help me with the furniture? You know my fingers are too big for those small ass strings.”

“Sure, no problem.” I follow him outside and grab the cushions from the storage bench and help him tie them on the chairs.

The strings are pretty short, but I never have an issue tying them. Just another perk of being a girl with small fingers.

Mom yells from the kitchen. “Addy, can you answer the door?”

“Sure, Mom.” I sigh as I walk inside and head to the front door as it is opening.

I guess it is time to push my worries to the side and smile for the party.

Grandma and Grandpa pull me into a group hug. They speak simultaneously. “How’s our favorite granddaughter doing?”

I laugh at their decade old joke. “I’m your only granddaughter, but I’m fine. Would you like to sit inside or outside?”

Grandpa answers for both of them. “How about outside in the shade?”

Grandma pulls me towards the back door. “You look cute, very festive.”

“Thanks, Grandma. It was Mom’s idea.” I wouldn’t be wearing this if I had a choice.

I get them situated in a couple of chairs under the umbrella with drinks before helping Mom fill up the coolers with cans of soda and ice.

We make sure dad’s cooler is filled with bottles of beer and topped with ice. I see him talking with Grandpa, so I open one and carry it over to him.

“Thank you.” He takes a large gulp before turning his focus back on Grandpa’s story.

Grandpa is rambling on and on about how people have too much stuff and keep buying more and more useless shit, making it to where people are slowly destroying the planet.

When the doorbell rings, I walk away, not wanting to get sucked into that conversation.

Mom is nowhere to be found, so I put on a smile and play hostess.

Opening the door, a real smile forms on my face when I see that it's my aunt and uncle.

Showing them outside to the patio, I point out the stack of pool towels and the coolers full of drinks.

Without having time to relax, the doorbell rings again and I repeat my actions.

Since these guests have never been to our house, I show them the guest bathroom, the drink coolers, and the stack of pool towels.

I open a can of soda and position myself by the front door, so when it rings, I can immediately open it and show our guests around.

Mom gives me a smile and praises me after I show more guests where everything is. "You're getting good at that."

"Is this a test? Am I being graded on how well of a housewife I'll be one day? Because I'm not sure what my future will hold."

I hear myself getting defensive, which I immediately apologize to Mom for. "Sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Not at all, honey, but can't a mother praise her daughter for having manners and being a gracious host?"

Mom grabs her purse from the foyer table and takes her keys off the hook by the door.

"Of course, Mom. You aren't the only one that is stressed today."

I know she just wants things to be perfect. "Where are you going?"

"The airport. The boys are supposed to land in fifteen minutes. Would you like to come with me to welcome them

home?” Mom asks before walking towards the garage door.

“No thanks, plus it will give you some alone time with them before the party guests bombard them.”

There is no way I want to be there when they get off the plane. My heart is racing just thinking about seeing Ryder in a little while.

“It might be good to get some alone time with them before they start drinking.” Mom stares at me, hoping to change my mind.

I don't let her stares influence me. “You need this more than I do. I'll make time in the next few days to talk to them.”

Mom opens the garage door before turning around. “If you insist.”

She seems to prolong her departure.

Why wouldn't she want to get to the airport ahead of time?

“I do.” I say with a smile on my face, hoping she stops asking.

“Okay. Bye. I'll be home soon.” She hesitates for an extra moment before closing the garage door behind her.

Mark chuckles while popping the tab open on a can of soda. “Geez, she made you work for it, didn't she?”

“Yeah, it was like pulling teeth just to get her to leave without me.” I chuckle as I down the rest of my soda, throwing the can in the recycling bin.

“She had a valid point, though. It would do you some good to speak to Sam before he drinks and is distracted by the party.”

Mark raises his eyebrow and tilts his head in my direction. It reminds me of a puppy that is seeking approval.

I chuckle awkwardly as my mind reminds me that Sam isn't the only one I need to talk to. I'm not about to fill Mark in on that classified information, so I do the only thing I can think of- I change the subject.

“Not drinking today?” I motion to the can of soda in his hand.

“Fuck no. I know how rowdy those two are going to be and they are going to need someone sober to keep them in line.” Mark doesn’t crack a smile, so I know he is being serious.

“Mom and Dad are going to be here, and so are Grandma and Grandpa.” I counter.

“Mom and Dad are going to be drinking. Hell, Dad already is, thanks to you.” Mark’s tone is authoritative, but I brush it off.

“I gave him one beer. Plus, he needed it. Grandpa was going on and on, and I know how much Dad hates that. I am just trying to keep the peace and make sure everyone is happy.”

Because I know shit will hit the fan at some point tonight. It’s a matter of when, not if it will happen.

“We both need to make sure Mom is happy and oblivious to any trouble that may or may not happen, or else the both of us will pay the price tomorrow.”

Mark walks outside to join the party.

Once Danny and Rachel make it to the house, I greet them before instructing Danny to show her around. I fill him in on everything that has happened while he was gone.

“Why didn’t you go with Mom? You need to talk to Sam and Ryder before everyone is drinking.” Danny chastises.

“Mark isn’t drinking. He’s the sober one that is going to keep shit from happening.”

I watch as Danny rolls his eyes.

“Not even Mom can prevent the shit storm that is brewing. Just warn me beforehand so Rachel and I can disappear for a bit.”

I flip him off before making my way outside to the party and to all our guests.

Chapter Six

THE SUN IS SHINING, people are mingling, and the party is going well.

I am pulled off my lounge chair by my grandma. She drags me over towards the grill.

“Grandma!” I have to use the back of a chair to help regain my balance to prevent falling onto the concrete.

Grandma shoos the guests away before looking behind her to make sure no one is around us.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had the chance to catch up on what is happening in your life. Is there a special someone in your life? A boyfriend maybe?”

Her eyes are demanding, searching mine for any hint of an answer.

I don’t know what to say to her. Do I tell the truth and let her know that my love life is boring or do I lie and risk ruining whatever chance I could have with Ryder?

Before I can answer Grandma’s question, Mom pulls me away to help carry the trays of food to the table on the back porch.

“Thanks for saving me there.”

I know Grandma means well, but my love life, or lack thereof, is not a topic I want to be discussing today of all days.

Mom looks over to where Grandma has my aunt cornered. “I’ll always save you. I know how persistent she can be when she wants to hear the gossip.”

After looking around at all the guests, I change the subject off of Grandma and the gossip.

“Where are Sam and Ryder?”

Mom’s gaze feels intense, like she is looking for an ulterior motive in my eyes. “They brought their bags up to their room and are changing into swim trunks. Don’t worry, they will be down in a few minutes.”

“I’m not worried. After all, this entire party is for the two of them and if they try to skip it, I know you will chase them down and drag them back here.”

I laugh, knowing Mom will do everything in her power to make sure they are here to enjoy the party and all of our family.

The crowd claps and cheers as Sam walks in with his arm wrapped around the waist of a woman wearing a barely there red bikini top and unbuttoned jean shorts.

True to his nature, Ryder follows close behind with a woman on each arm.

Since when is he interested in redheads?

I feel hurt beyond words and betrayed. Sure, he’s had a life for the past six years, but this is not what I was expecting to see so soon after his return.

It’s stupid to feel this way because I have never officially told him about my crush and he has never looked at me more than a younger sister, but the sting of rejection is there.

He looks good, though. Ryder’s hair is shorter than it was in Vegas and styled in a messy bed-head sort of way, giving off the illusion that he just got out of bed.

His body is more toned than when he left, and I can’t help but to let my gaze linger. His skin is still the golden tan I remember ogling while he worked in the sun.

Sneaking around the outskirts of the party, I head inside and grab my phone to send the text I never thought I'd be sending in a million years.

'If you still want to go along with the plan, be at my house in five minutes. Wear your trunks, it's a pool party.'

The only reply I get is a thumbs up.

I wish I didn't tell Mom that I wouldn't drink today, because I'm going to need something stronger than a soda to get through the rest of this party.

Just as I step back outside, Grandma ends up cornering me as I am refilling my cup. I look for a way to escape, but I am trapped.

"There you are. They took you away from me before you could tell me about your dating life. So, is there someone special in your life?"

Tearing my gaze away from Ryder and the redhead that is currently pushing her enlarged fake breasts into his arm, I answer, "Well, there's someone I have been getting closer to."

I don't outright lie, but I let her believe I am in the early stages of dating someone.

Grandma's face lights up with happiness as her grin stretches across her face.

"The fuck you are," Sam interrupts, visibly angry.

"I'm twenty years old. I'm old enough to choose if I want to date or not." I roll my eyes, knowing he will fight me on this until the day I die.

"Where the hell are Mark and Danny? Why have they not informed me of this?" Sam looks around the backyard, trying to locate our older brothers.

"Besides the fact that you haven't been home in six years, it's none of your fucking business and because they're too busy making their way through the single women in the surrounding towns since they've exhausted all women here locally."

Sure my reply is harsh, but at this moment all rationale has flown away.

I watch as hurt crosses his face and instantly regret what I just said. Turning around, I head inside to calm down before my guest arrives.

As soon as I see him, I breathe a sigh of relief.

He has a giant smile on his face, like he has been waiting months for me to agree to go out with him.

Thankfully, we've been friends for years, so we know where each other stand regarding our feelings.

Fake dating someone isn't the way to get Ryder. I'm about to tell Trevor to head home when I hear moans coming from the laundry room.

Noticing my uneasy glance towards the door, Trevor doesn't hesitate to swing the door open wide, revealing the redhead sitting on our washing machine as her legs are wrapped around a shirtless Ryder.

Ryder quickly spins around, shocked to be caught.

I can't hide the hurt that attaches itself to my face.

Ryder opens his mouth to say something, but Trevor interrupts on my behalf.

"Sorry man. We'll leave you two to it."

Trevor closes the door and pulls me upstairs to my bedroom.

"Let's calm down and talk this through rationally before you do or say something that you might regret. Have you talked to him about your feelings yet?"

I'm surprised that Trevor is being so levelheaded. Where is the take action Trevor that I'm used to?

"No, but really the laundry room? He didn't waste any time finding someone here. I didn't even stand a chance."

Even though Trevor and I aren't really dating, we have grown close to each other over the years. Him being hired on

as a farmhand helped our friendship grow even more.

“I know it hurts, but you can’t let this situation make your life a living hell, especially since I’m assuming he’s going to be staying here for a while?”

I shrug. “To be honest, I don’t know. I haven’t talked to them and Mom hasn’t talked about their plans.”

I wonder if they even know their plans or if they’re just going to relax and enjoy the summer.

“Okay, so no need to let it bother you right now. Let’s go enjoy the party while the sun is hot and the music is playing.”

I can always count on Trevor to have a good time.

Giving him a hug, I whisper, “Thank you.”

“Hey that’s what a best friend is for.”

He gives me a wink before pulling me down the stairs and out the back door. He might not be the man of my dreams, but he sure knows how to cheer me up.

Trevor has been an unexpected friend to me these past few years. He got drunk at a party, told me he was bisexual, and confessed his feelings for the football quarterback in the next town over.

He didn’t mean to spill his heart, but I sympathized with him. I told him all about my crush on Ryder, hoping he was too drunk to remember the next day.

Of course, he remembered, but didn’t make me feel bad for spilling my secret when he had spilled his.

Neither of us could be with the ones we really wanted and, as a funny suggestion, he said we should both date each other until we can be with who we want. I never took him up on that offer.

Until today.

He dives into the deep end of the pool, and after untying the grass skirt, I slowly make my way down the steps, being careful to not get my piercing wet.

I shamelessly watch as Trevor comes up for air, water dripping down his muscles, glistening in the sunlight.

I am instantly reminded of the nights we spent together.

It was strictly for sexual release, but they were memorable on their own. He made me feel special, and it was a way to keep our minds off reality and who we would rather be with.

He meets me at the bottom of the steps and I am surprised when he pulls me into his chest and kisses my cheek.

My hormones go crazy, like a compass near a magnet.

I want to pull him up to my room and get a much-needed release, but my heart yearns for Ryder.

Now that he is back, my pussy will only get wet for him.

Damn the effect he has over me.

Ryder's busy in the laundry room, my mind reminds me.

I hear Grandma aww in the background. This sets off a chain reaction of cheers, awes, and one audible angry gasp.

"THIS is the douchebag you are seeing?" Sam yells from across the pool, grabbing Ryder's attention at the same time.

How nice of him to rejoin the party at this precise moment.

I shrug and smirk as I see the tiny veins swell in Sam's neck and forehead.

Looking over, I see jealousy cross Ryder's face.

It seems pointless considering he has redhead A in one arm and redhead B in the other arm.

Sam continues to yell. "What the hell? Do you not remember all the shit he put you through?"

I know I'm being a bitch, but he should know how his and Ryder's absence affected me.

"He's changed. You would know this if you came home, or hell, even called or texted every once in a while."

I was closer to him than Mark or Danny and he just up and left, even though I supported his decision to be there for his

friend.

Never did I imagine he would cut off all communication from me. I felt lost and heartbroken and if I am being honest, I'm still heartbroken by it.

He clenches his jaw to control his anger. "Don't start, Addy."

"Why didn't you call? Why couldn't you send a quick text? You knew what I was going through, and yet you didn't seem to care."

Hot tears run down my cheeks.

Trevor swipes them away, but new ones immediately replace the old ones.

"Get your fucking hands off my baby sister or else I will rip them off!" Sam threatens, but Trevor doesn't pay him any attention.

"Don't change the subject! We're talking about you. Trevor has done nothing wrong." I defend.

"He's done nothing wrong? What about all those days you came home from school crying because he bullied you?"

Sam yells, getting everyone's attention.

"Or when he, along with the entire football team, plastered your picture and phone number in every male bathroom in town and you received texts and voicemails for weeks until Mom and Dad changed your number?"

He ignores the shocked looks coming from our family members.

"Was that not him doing something wrong? And yet you stand next to him defending him."

I look around and see every one of our guests staring back at us.

Shit, Mom is going to be furious at us for ruining the party.

I open my mouth to rebuke his comments, but Dad's stern voice booms from behind the grill.

“Addison Mae, enough,”

Dad never calls me by my first and middle name.

I know he means business when he calls me Addison Mae, but this isn't fair. I didn't start this fight, but I intend to finish it.

Opening my mouth to protest, Mom cuts me off.

“Addy, drop it for now and try to enjoy the rest of the party.”

Mom puts her hostess skills to use and gets the party started again.

I want to stomp my foot and throw a tantrum like a child, but I know better than to push Mom's buttons right now.

As Trevor and I climb out of the pool and head to the stack of dry towels, Trevor speaks low enough so only I can hear him.

“Do you want to come hang out at my house? I promise there won't be any drama. We can even watch a sappy chick flick if you need a good cry.”

“That sounds great. Clearly, I need to give everyone some space- including myself. We may need to schedule some shopping, too.”

“You know I am always up for a shopping trip. Maybe we can head south and take a trip to the mall. I'll even drive.” Trevor suggests.

“Thanks, that's just what I need to get my mind off of a certain someone. I'll walk you to the front door so you can safely get out of the house while I change. I'll only be a minute.” I reply quietly.

This is not how I imagined today going. I was hoping for a very different outcome, but I'm grateful for Trevor's friendship.

I give him a hug and head straight to my room, ignoring the stares from Ryder and my brothers.

Thankfully, Mom let me put a lock on my door a couple of years ago, so I twist the lock behind me to make sure I am left undisturbed before grabbing the dress I had on earlier.

After making sure I have everything I need, I slowly sneak my way down the stairs and out the front door while my brothers' voices drift from the kitchen.

I run down the driveway and jump into Trevor's passenger seat. I let out a laugh as I am reminded of all the times I snuck out and ran from my brothers.

Chapter Seven

THE LOUD BUZZING of my alarm jerks me awake.

Five forty-five in the morning.

My stomach growls with hunger pains. I skipped lunch and dinner, so it's no wonder I am starving.

Everyone should wake up in the next hour or two, just one joy of working on a farm.

Staying in my pajamas, I quietly make my way downstairs and cook a big breakfast for everyone; eggs, bacon, sausage, biscuits, and grits.

My stomach continues to growl loudly, so I grab a piece of bacon. The grease is hot and burns my tongue, but my stomach doesn't seem to mind.

Ryder's voice sounds from behind me. "You make bacon look even better than it already is."

Letting out a small yelp, I turn around and see him sitting on a stool at the bar. I am surprised Ryder is the first one to join me downstairs.

Usually, he's a late sleeper.

Awkward silence surrounds us for what feels like an eternity. I continue to cook in silence and when I am finished, I carry the platters of food over to the table.

He is the one to break the silence. "You look great. The years have been very kind to you. I especially like the

piercing.”

I reply dryly. “It was hard work and determination.”

As much as I want to talk to him, I don’t want it to revolve around my looks.

Sam joins us, interrupting the awkward silence. “Addy, can I talk to you for a minute? I promise not to take long since you were nice enough to cook for everyone and we don’t want to eat cold food.”

“Uh, sure.” I turn to watch Ryder leave the kitchen and head to the table as Danny joins him.

Sam waits until we are alone before continuing.

“I just want to say I’m sorry for not calling or texting while I was at school. I know it’s lame to apologize after all these years, but to be honest, I never thought it would upset you as much as it did.”

His tone matches his remorseful look, and I can’t help but to accept his apology.

“I accept your apology, but it did really hurt, and it’s going to take me time to heal from it.”

This isn’t something I can just get over.

“I know that now and I really am sorry. I hope in time, we can move on from this. Let’s go eat.”

Sam heads over to the table, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

Mom whispers in my ear as she fills up her coffee mug with the freshly brewed coffee.

“Give him some slack. He was going through culture shock while trying to be a good friend to Ryder.”

“I know.” I sigh before slowly walking to the table and taking my seat at the table.

It’s been a while since we’ve had a big family breakfast with all the children and Ryder.

I can see the love and joy shining in Mom's eyes and for just a moment, I forget about the drama and pretend that we are back to how things were before the diary incident all those years ago.

To be expected, my brothers immediately ask about my relationship with Trevor.

Sam is the one to start that conversation. "So, how did this thing with Trevor start?"

"He was there for me when I least expected it. We were able to connect from something we had in common."

Ryder interrupts. "And what was that?"

His tone has a hint of defensiveness mixed with jealousy in it.

"It doesn't really matter. We've been friends for a while and have really become quite close. He's been working on the farm and helping wherever he's needed."

"You need to be careful or you'll be the one that gets hurt in the end." Sam warns.

"No, I won't because, like Trevor, I value our friendship and won't do anything to jeopardize it. Also, like Trevor, I'm realistic and am just enjoying being young and twenty-one. Besides, my heart is stuck on someone else."

I look up from my plate and am surprised to meet Ryder's gaze.

"Who?" all three brothers ask at the same time.

I shove the last bite of my sausage in my mouth. "It doesn't matter who it is because none of you will ever be happy for me. Yesterday made that crystal clear."

Mom puts her hand on my shoulder. "They're just being typical protective older brothers."

I look over and see her holding back a smile.

Getting up, I put my dishes in the sink and head upstairs to get ready for the day.

Knowing that it's going to be another hot day, I throw on cut-off shorts and a sports bra.

I head back downstairs and notice no one around. They must be upstairs getting dressed, so I grab my cowboy boots that are sitting next to the back door and slip them on.

There are many perks to growing up on a farm, but one downfall is the never ending list of chores.

Sam and I used to always joke that the reason our parents had four kids was to help with all the chores.

I start my chore list by feeding the chickens before I gather the eggs.

When we were growing up, Sam would feed the chickens and I would gather the eggs, but after he left, I started doing it all.

Danny has been taking over more responsibilities with the farm since Mark is now a bigshot and doesn't have time in his life for mundane chores.

He's in charge of plowing, planting, and harvesting the big plots while I box up crops to take to the market after my chores are done.

Over the past six years, we have learned to be in sync with one another and with Trevor joining our small team, it has gotten better, but it isn't the same as what Sam and I had.

Nowhere close.

When Ryder came to live with us, it was like he was always part of the team. He stuck with Sam and me, helping us finish our chores quicker so we could hide in the barn until it was lunchtime.

I would lie on the hay and close my eyes, eager to get a few more hours of sleep while Ryder and Sam talked about the girls they thought were hot and who they wanted to hook up with.

I tried not to listen to their conversation, but it was hard not to. Plus, a large part of me was curious about what type of girl Ryder wanted.

It was the complete opposite of what I looked like.

Tall, skinny, and perfect.

Truth be told, that's what every guy wanted in school.

Shit, that's what every guy wants now.

Before I can depress myself further, I finish the chores on my list and disappear to the barn.

I find a soft bale of hay in the darkened corner and lay on it.

After a few minutes of relaxing with my eyes closed, the barn door squeaks open and Sam and Ryder's laughter drifts over to my corner.

Sam's voice is loud enough to hear in my dark corner. "I thought I saw her come in here."

He sounds a bit disappointed.

"Maybe she walked through to get to the lake?" Ryder suggests.

"Nuh uh. She likes the pool more than the lake. I don't think she's been to the lake since my dad put the pool in."

Sam's voice gets further away as they walk towards the back door of the barn.

Sam's correct, though.

I hate the lake.

You can't see what's in the water and it freaks me out. The pool is perfect and I don't have to worry about critters in the water.

Grandpa still teases me since I'm not your typical farm girl, but I just like being able to see through the water.

"I can't believe she didn't leave us any chores. Now how are we supposed to look busy?" Sam complains.

Ryder chuckles. "I highly doubt your mom is expecting you, or rather the two of us, to help with the chores. We just got in yesterday. Plus, Mark isn't here to help."

“That’s because he has a career now. We don’t. Our schedules are wide open. I wonder...” Sam pauses.

“What?” Ryder questions with a hint of intrigue laced in.

“Mom has said nothing about what Addy is going to do now that she has her associate’s degree. If she continues college, where do you think she picked? Has she said anything to you?”

Why is he worried about this suddenly? He could have asked me this morning.

Ryder clears his throat before replying quietly. “No. I haven’t talked to her in a couple of years.”

Unlike Sam, in the beginning, Ryder messaged every once in a while to see how I was. I always said I was fine, whether I was or wasn’t. I didn’t see a reason to elaborate and confess how I really was feeling.

“What the hell, man? You’ve been messaging my sister?” I can hear the anger in Sam’s voice.

“Just once or twice a year. She went through some tough shit before we left, and I wanted to make sure she was doing okay.” Ryder replies honestly.

I’m surprised that Sam’s voice is calm, cool, and free of any anger or jealousy. “Well, what has she said?”

“She only sent one sentence every time I messaged, and it was always the same bullshit. ‘I’m fine’ I never pried to see if she was telling the truth. But that doesn’t matter because I don’t think she’s my biggest fan right now.”

Regret is the best word to describe his tone right now, and it almost makes my heart crumble into pieces.

Before I can react or interrupt their conversation, Sam speaks up. “Because of the laundry room incident? Or the thing with Maya? Either way, she’ll get over it.”

I wonder what he told Sam.

Did he see the hurt on my face?

Does he know I still have a crush on him?

Scratch that. Does he know I am completely in love with him?

“Yeah.” Ryder hesitates, but he doesn’t sound confident. “I’m going to see if Danny needs any help. I’ll meet up with you later.”

Once the door closes behind Ryder, Sam sighs loudly. “You can come out now. I know you’re in here somewhere.”

I stay in my spot. It’s comfortable and I don’t want to get up right now. “Why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

It takes Sam a minute, but he eventually finds me in the corner. He sits on a bale of hay near my feet, leaning his back against the weathered barn wall.

“So, this is your new spot? It’s cozy here.” Sam nods his head approvingly.

We stay here in comfortable silence like we used to as kids. It’s nostalgic and makes my heart clench as I realize just how much I missed this over the past six years.

Sounding sad, Sam breaks the silence. “So, why didn’t you tell me you kept in touch with Ryder?”

“I didn’t keep in touch with him. Like he said, he would message every once in a while asking how I was. I never initiated anything, and those messages stopped after the second year.”

Although my heart desperately wanted me to reach out. I typed thousands of messages just to erase them before I could hit the send button.

“So, this might sound lame, but how have the past six years been?” Sam smiles and I try to return it.

Now he cares? Why couldn’t he be interested years ago?

Hell, even yesterday would have been better than today.

“Honestly? It was shitty. I not only lost my closest brother and a friend when you and Ryder left, but I also lost my best friend. Maya only wanted to hang around me because she wanted to be closer to you and Ryder. Go figure.”

My heart pounds as those long forgotten feelings return.

“You chased Ryder when he left so he wouldn’t have to be alone, and suddenly I had no one. I was the one that was left all alone. It was the worst time of my life. But I couldn’t be sad. I had to be strong, and I had to change or else I would have completely lost myself.”

Tears fall from my eyes.

How many tears have I shed for them already?

“She really stopped being your friend because we left?” Sam asks in disbelief.

“Yes, and it hurt almost as bad as not receiving one phone call or one text from you in six years. Why couldn’t you call?”

More tears fall as I think back to all the times I prayed for him to return my call or text.

I sit up and look Sam in the eyes. I want to see the emotion and truth in them.

“I have no excuse or reason that justifies my actions. All I can do is say I’m sorry and hope you know that I truly mean it.”

Ryder overhears our conversation and joins in.

“Addy, we never knew our actions caused this much pain. Never in a million years could we have ever imagined this is how things would turn out. Please forgive us.”

My reply is sincere and truthful.

“I forgive you, both of you, but it’s still going to take time to get back to how things were. Things are different now and I’m friends with Trevor- like it or not. He offered to take me away for a few days, but I can’t leave the farm just for Danny and Dad to take care of again.”

Sam and Ryder looked shocked that I turned down Trevor or they could have been shocked that I told them about it.

Sam stands. “I better go see if Mark has already left. He wanted to talk to me after we finished with the chores.”

Sam nods at us before leaving through the front door of the barn.

Ryder's gaze turns dark and intense as he eyes my outfit and my new piercing. "Nice outfit; you are looking absolutely delectable."

When I don't respond, he asks, "Who's the guy you've loved for years?"

His blue eyes search mine for the answer.

Isn't it obvious?

Sam practically told him when he read my diary.

It's been him for years, and it probably will be him forever.

I let out a disappointing sigh. "If you don't know already, then what's the point?"

Ryder pushes me against the wall and presses his lips to mine. In sharp contrast to his soft lips, his kiss is firm and demanding.

This is the kiss I've been waiting years for. My heart thumps loudly in my chest as my body craves more from him.

Ryder's voice is gruff and full of lust. "I want you, Addy."

Those four words hit me like a bucket of ice water, instantly cooling the lust flames burning inside me.

"You mean you want my body."

He doesn't argue.

"I'm more than just my body. I deserve more than a quick hook up with someone that's willing to hook up with my ex-best friend."

Ryder backs up a couple of steps.

"I have never, nor will I ever, hook up with Maya."

Deep inside, I want to believe him, but I can't. I saw how cozy the two of them were while getting in the elevator.

I leave before he can change my mind. I guess being away for six years didn't change him after all.

Chapter Eight

MY PHONE DINGS with a text message. I pick it up and see it's from Trevor, letting me know he is waiting for me outside.

Perfect timing since Ryder just jumped into the shower and Sam is still getting dressed after his shower.

I don't want to hear their reasons why I shouldn't be going out with Trevor.

This past week, I have done a great job of avoiding awkward situations where Ryder and I find ourselves alone together.

It was becoming increasingly hard, so when Trevor texted last night asking if I wanted to ride with him to the mall, I jumped at the opportunity. There aren't many ways to excuse myself and pretend I am needed somewhere else at that exact moment.

Walking outside, my smile widens as I see Trevor in his dad's candy apple red sports convertible, with the top already down.

"How did you get your dad to agree to this?"

His dad is more protective of this car than anyone or anything, including Trevor. The only time Trevor has driven this car was the night of our prom and we didn't put the top down because I didn't want to mess up my hair.

"My car needed maintenance. He knew we had plans today, so after making me promise to not destroy the car, or

even get one tiny scratch on it, he said I could borrow it today.”

Trevor’s grin stretches across his entire face. He’s like a kid in the candy store.

“That’s amazing and just what we need to forget about things for a while.” I laugh as I slide into the leather seat.

Sam walks outside with an angry look on his face.

“Uh, should I go? Or...” Trevor begins.

Laughing, I quickly say, “Yes, just go. Hurry, before he comes over here.”

I don’t want our trip to the mall to be ruined by an overprotective brother and his best friend.

Trevor hits the gas and the engine purrs to life. It doesn’t take long before scorching hot highways replace the long dirt covered roads.

Turning down the music, Trevor asks, “So, how has your week been? Have you talked to you-know-who?”

“Not really. We said a few words, but I’m thinking it’s a lost cause. Maybe I should find someone else to help me move on. No offense to you, but maybe I need someone that can truly love me.”

And not just my body.

“I would say to give him time, but he’s had years. No one can be that oblivious, especially since Sam read your feelings straight from your diary. Shit, you might be an old lady before he figures his shit out.”

Trevor laughs and I try to join in, but his words cut me deep.

I don’t want to wait the rest of my life before getting a chance to be with Ryder. If I can’t have him now, then I need to move on and finally live my life free from my unrequited love for him.

Turning up the music, I sing along to the songs to get my good mood back. This is supposed to be a Ryder free day and

dammit, I plan on enjoying it to its fullest potential.

After an hour's drive, we get to the mall and Trevor pulls into a parking spot far away from everyone else.

Before I can comment on it, Trevor holds up his hand and says, "I promised my dad no damage and I'll be damned if anything happens to it."

"I'm not complaining. I just find it comical."

I slip out of my seat and close the door before he can playfully smack my arm.

He puts the roof up on the convertible and snaps it in place, before rolling up the windows and following me towards the large doors to the mall.

"We need smoothies." Trevor announces suddenly.

"Smoothies? Why smoothies?" I ask, confused.

"We just do." Trevor grabs my hand and pulls me towards the escalator.

"Well, to be honest, I feel thirsty." I admit once we're standing on our own rectangle stair on the escalator.

"Good." Trevor's voice is shaky, but he tries to hide it.

What's going on with him?

Luckily, there's no one in line, so he pulls me up to the counter and orders a fruity sounding drink before looking all around the concourse.

To not waste the cashier's time and to understand Trevor's unusual weirdness, I order the same thing he does and pull him to the other counter while we wait for our drinks.

"Who are you looking for?" I ask, looking around for anyone I might know.

"I thought I saw... never mind." He shakes his head before turning his attention back to me.

"Who?" I spin around, looking at everyone passing by.

Who could he have thought he saw?

A friend?

Family?

Maybe an enemy?

Does he even have any enemies?

Our drinks don't take long to make. After thanking the worker, I take a sip and moan as the pineapple flavor explodes in my mouth.

"This is incredible."

My mind wanders to Ryder. He would love this drink too since pineapple is his favorite fruit.

Shaking my head, I scold myself. I've got to keep my mind off Ryder.

Trevor and I walk side by side, sipping our drinks as we window shop. We pass shoe stores, hat stores, stores with lotions and other smell goods, candle stores, and various clothing stores.

"That dress would look great on you. It might even help attract attention, if you want that sort of thing."

Trevor wags his eyebrows towards me, making me laugh at his silly antics.

"I don't need that sort of attention. You-know-who has been giving me enough of that. I want something meaningful, something long term. Just something more."

I should have known long ago that Ryder was only into looks. Although, years ago, I would have killed for some looks I've been getting this past week.

Trevor and I simultaneously watch as his crush walks into a clothing store with a couple of friends.

"Is that Ethan?" I ask, but Trevor quickly covers my mouth with his hand.

"Shh!" Trevor whispers loudly.

"Why? Is this a secret? Are we not allowed to be here too?"

I've never seen Trevor act like this before. The closest time was the night we became friends.

"Please, just shush." Trevor whispers while frantically looking back towards the store.

People huff loudly and voice their discontent as they have to walk around us.

Pulling Trevor in front of a storefront window so others can freely walk by, I hear Trevor murmur, "Fucking giant ass mall and it annoyed them to walk around someone."

I laugh before turning back towards him and becoming more serious.

"You aren't making sense right now. Why can't he know we are here? It's a coincidence that we're all here on the same day."

It's Saturday and typically many people come to the mall on the weekends. Especially from our small town.

"Can we follow him?" Trevor asks like a child, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Sure." The words come out as I roll my eyes at his face lighting up.

I can't believe he's acting like this.

I follow close behind Trevor as he walks into the trending shop, making sure we keep our distance from Ethan and his friends. We browse the racks; well, I browse and he pretends to look while keeping his eyes on his crush.

"Try something on and see if you can hear him saying anything," Trevor whispers.

Turning around, I see Ethan, along with his two friends, walking into the fitting room area.

Being a good friend, I grab some clothes to try on and take the room next to him.

"When are you going to ask him out?" One friend yells from the far end of the fitting room area.

“I-I-I’m trying to get the courage.” Ethan stutters.

The other friend chimes in. “Trevor is pretty cute. You sure know how to pick ‘em.”

Ethan gushes. “He’s so hot, but he’s here with his friend and I don’t think I can handle the embarrassment if he rejects me in front of her.”

The first friend yells out, “According to our sources, he won’t reject you. He likes you just as much as you like him.”

“Then why hasn’t he texted me? I gave him my number months ago.” Ethan asks quietly.

I can hear the worry in his voice, and it makes me want to tell him to go for it, but then they will know that I was eavesdropping on their conversation.

That could end up being worse for Trevor, so I stay quiet.

Slipping on the skin tight long sleeve dress, I look at myself in the mirror. The shimmering black color looks great on me and accentuates all my tiny curves.

I spin around to check out my ass and am surprised to come face to face with Ryder.

How did he slip into my fitting room without me hearing the lock unlock?

“What are you doing here? Did you follow me?”

My voice is low and full of anger. Today was supposed to be a Ryder free day, and I was actually enjoying it.

“Yeah. We wanted to know who you were meeting up with.” He admits honestly, without showing an ounce of remorse.

“So, why did you barge into my fitting room?” I probe further.

His smile disappears as his face becomes serious. “We have unfinished business.”

I angrily whisper, “No, we don’t.”

How dare he ruin my day and then try to bring up shit I am trying to forget about?

“Well, I say we do.” His jaw clenches as I roll my eyes at his chauvinistic remark.

“Then finish your business so I can get on with my day.” I hiss.

Ryder takes a deep breath while rubbing his temples.

“Why don’t you trust what I say? When did you jump to the conclusion that I was a liar? When I say I want you, I mean I want *you*. Not your body. Although it is a very sexy body.”

Ryder looks at my reflection in the mirror. His eyes are dark with lust.

Quickly, I tear my eyes away from him. I’ve wanted him to look at me like this for as long as I can remember.

I’ve wanted to feel desired by Ryder. Now that I see him looking at me like this, it’s not enough.

Why?

Why am I doing this to myself?

Thinking for a moment, I think of one question I need to know the answer to.

“I was here all along and you never wanted me. Not once. So, why now?”

His eyes lock onto mine.

“I was trying to give you time to grow up and experience things in your own time. I didn’t want to come on too strong. Plus, you are my best friend’s sister. I didn’t want to take advantage of the situation.”

“It’s not taking advantage of the situation if we both have feelings for one another.” I counter.

Before he can respond, his phone chirps with a message.

Ryder sends a quick message and murmurs, “He always has the worst possible timing. We’ll finish this conversation later.”

Ryder gives me one last look before sneaking back out of my fitting room.

I quickly change back into my clothes before heading back to the racks where Trevor is standing next to Ryder.

I try to speak in code to keep Ryder in the dark. “I think you have a great chance. The target has its eyes set on you.”

Trevor’s entire face lights up. “Really?”

He literally jumps for joy.

“Give it a shot.” I tell Trevor before turning to face Ryder. “Where’s Sam?”

The two of them are rarely apart, especially this past week.

Ryder doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he takes a large sip of my smoothie. “Mmmm pineapple. My favorite.”

He grins at my surprised look before taking several more sips.

“So, where’s Sam?” I ask again.

“He’s around here somewhere.” He grins as Sam walks around the corner and finds us.

Sam looks at Ryder and asks, “Where did you disappear to?”

Without hesitating, he replies, “I found Addy and Trevor and was just speaking to them for a minute. We were about to come find you.”

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that he can come up with a lie so quickly, but Sam, Ryder, and I used to come up with quick lies to tell Mom all the time.

Plus, technically, there is truth in what he said. He found me and he was only speaking to Trevor and me for a moment.

“Addy, do you and Trevor want to get a bite with us?” Sam asks once we are out of the store.

“Well, we were going to do a bit more shopping.” I look at Trevor and see him nod in agreement.

“So, can we meet back up in an hour?” I ask sweetly.

“Sure. Ryder and I will think of a restaurant and I’ll text you what we decide.” Sam and Ryder turn and head towards the other end of the mall.

“Where to?” I ask Trevor, knowing I actually need to buy things before dinner or else Sam will get curious.

“You lead and I’ll follow.”

Trevor laughs as I raise an eyebrow, so I turn around and walk towards my favorite lotion store.

Chapter Nine

WITH OUR ARMS full of bags, we head back to Trevor's dad's car to head to the restaurant.

"Why did you buy pineapple scented massage oil?" Trevor asks for the umpteenth time.

"Because it smells amazing and I can use it on my legs and feet."

I repeat the same explanation for what feels like the millionth time.

"Not because a certain someone loves pineapple?" Trevor insinuates.

Popping the p sound, I say, "Nope."

To be honest, Ryder played a part in choosing the pineapple scented massage oil, but not in the way Trevor is alluding to.

I want to turn Ryder on, but not with my body.

Scented massage oil can be sensual and since he loves pineapple, it will be very appealing to him.

Plus, my legs and feet will reap the rewards.

"Whatever you have to tell yourself."

Trevor laughs maniacally while driving to the restaurant.

The restaurant isn't too far away and only takes a few minutes to drive to. Sam and Ryder are already waiting outside for us when we arrive.

Since they have already made a reservation, our table is immediately ready.

I follow the hostess to our table and am grateful that Trevor slides into the booth next to me while Ryder and Sam take the other side.

There is only one word to describe eating dinner with Trevor, Sam, and Ryder: awkward.

Sam and Ryder don't like Trevor and luckily the two of them don't voice their opinions, but Trevor knows how they feel.

After getting our drinks and food, I try to keep the small talk going, but after six years, I feel like I barely know them anymore.

“How were your classes out in California?”

I really don't want to hear how great things were, but I am quite curious, and it keeps the conversation off me and Trevor.

“We got to build cars and fuck around all day. It was awesome.” Ryder grins as Trevor gasps.

“What was your major again?”

Trevor's inquiry has me hoping he isn't considering going to school out in California.

Sam chimes in. “Mechanical engineering.”

Trevor hmms as he no doubt commits that major to his memory.

As Sam and Trevor talk, I awkwardly gaze across the table at Ryder.

He is watching my every move.

I lick my lips and watch as his gaze lowers to my mouth.

Smacking my lips together, I see his Adam's apple bob.

Trevor leans over to whisper in my ear, “Don't let this opportunity pass. Take advantage of it.”

Turning my head to whisper in his ear, I reply, “I'll make a move when you do.”

Trevor accepts my challenge, grabs his phone, and sends a racy text to a contact listed as ‘Crush’ with three hearts.

“Your turn,” Trevor says loud enough for Sam and Ryder to raise their eyebrows in a questioning manner.

“Later,” I mumble as I take a bite of my hamburger steak with mushrooms and onions.

After a couple of hours filled with long awkward silences, Trevor and I say goodbye to Sam and Ryder.

Ryder tries to convince me to ride home with them since they are going back to the house, too, but I don’t want to abandon Trevor.

Plus, I want to enjoy the cool night breeze as we drive home with the top down.

Trevor waits until Sam drives off before speaking.

“Wow, that was the longest dinner of my life.”

Laughing, I nod my head in agreement. “And awkward.”

“At least it seemed like you and Ryder were getting in some quality staring matches.”

Trevor starts the car and heads towards the highway, picking up speed as we get further away from the city.

“Ugh! What am I going to do?” The question is rhetorical, but Trevor answers anyway.

“Give him a chance and tell him how you really feel. If he doesn’t listen or tries to turn it back on you, then sit on his face. He can’t argue when your pussy is suffocating him.”

My face flames in embarrassment.

“Oh. My. God. Trevor! I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Try it and you will thank me.” Trevor shrugs as I turn up the music to a nearly deafening volume.

I can’t be thinking about this right now.

My pussy slickens as my mind betrays me, painting the perfect picture of me orgasming from Ryder’s tongue.

Distracting myself, I spend the next hour singing along to songs and waving my hands through the chilly breeze.

All too soon, I am grabbing my bags out of the trunk and hugging Trevor bye.

The house is quiet when I walk through the front door. I make my way up to my bedroom and deposit my bags on my bed.

Kicking off my shoes and socks, I head to the bathroom to enjoy a nice and hot, long bath without my brothers interrupting.

Turning the water to hot, I grab my honeysuckle scented bubble bath from below the sink and turn the shower radio on.

My muscles relax, my skin softens, and I feel as if I am in heaven. When the bath water turns cool, I drain the tub and turn the shower on. Being so relaxed has my hormones going haywire, so I decide to do something I haven't done in months- masturbate in the shower.

An image of me sitting on Ryder's face pops into my head. Damn Trevor for putting that out there in the universe.

I admit, it turns me on and is exactly what I need right now.

My nipples harden in anticipation as I pinch them simultaneously. Aroused and excited, my pussy aches for my electrifying touch.

Tantalizingly slow, my hands travel south, caressing my breasts before traversing along my smooth stomach down to the apex of my thighs.

My hand quivers as my fingers glide through my folds. I let out a long moan as pleasure radiates through my body.

Needing more, my thumb strokes my clit as two fingers pump inside my pussy.

This isn't the first time I've masturbated, but there is a renewed sense of hope and urgency.

I want to come and I want it to be Ryder that brings me there.

Ryder.

Strong, funny, and sexy as hell.

My fingers pump faster.

Ryder.

My mind and heart want him and need him just like my lungs need air to live.

Panting and moaning out loud, I coax my orgasm closer.

My fingers massage my g-spot as my thumb presses against my clit.

“Ahhh fuck!!” I scream out as my vision turns hazy, and I am pushed over the edge.

My walls clench my fingers tight as my pussy gushes. My breathing is erratic and my heart is pounding from the orgasm.

Turning the water to cool, I finish showering and dry off, ready to collapse on my bed and call it a night.

Wrapping the towel around my body, I grab my dirty clothes and head back to my room.

I nearly bump into Ryder, who is standing in my doorway when I walk out of the shared bathroom.

“Next time, do it in your bedroom and not in the shared bathroom. I’m hard as steel, and it grossed your brother out.”

His voice is brusque and turns me on.

What the hell is wrong with me? I just had an orgasm. Can’t my body chill for a little while?

Sam clears his throat behind me. “Ryder, why are you standing in Addy’s doorway?”

“I was just telling Addy her extracurricular shower time grossed you out.” Ryder smirks as my face blushes.

I never intended for anyone to hear me, especially Ryder.

Slowly turning to Sam, I get defensive. “Fuck off. I have needs too. I had to listen to both of you more times than I care to remember. Get over it.”

Although, I didn't mind hearing Ryder.

Pushing past Ryder, I close my door loudly and change into my pajamas. Taking my time, I rub lotion all over my body before using the pineapple scented massage oil on my feet.

I massage my arches and feel them loosening up. Putting the bottle on my dresser, I grab my phone and lay on my bed.

Trevor texts, telling me he and Ethan have been texting back and forth and he is absolutely perfect.

A smile forms on my face as I am reminded that I helped them get together. I set the alarm on my phone and turn off the light before crawling between my cool sheets.

I lay in the dark and listen to Ryder laugh at something Sam says. His laugh ignites the pleasure fire deep within my soul.

My hand slips under the waistband of my shorts as I contemplate whether to masturbate again.

Desire always seems to win.

I kick the covers off of me as my fingers slowly and teasingly caress my folds, spreading my moisture up to my clit.

“Mmmm.” I moan as my clit comes to life, urging me to continue.

Two things I never thought would happen to me in one day: Ryder hearing me masturbate in the shower and Ryder sneaking into my room as I have my hand in my pajama shorts.

Yet here we are.

I stare at Ryder as he stares at my shorts.

“Fuck me.” He groans out loud.

He is frozen in his spot, unable to look away.

“What are you doing in my room?” I whisper.

Ryder whispers back. “I came to ask you something.”

“What do you need? I’d like to get back to what I am in the middle of.”

I don’t know how or why I suddenly became so brazen, but I love it.

“I forgot.” Ryder admits.

“What? How did you forget in less than a minute?”

Annoyed, I pull my hand from the warmth of my core.

Ryder points to my glistening hand. “That’s how.”

I start to wipe my juices on my shirt, but Ryder wraps his hand around my wrist. Before I can comprehend what he’s doing, he sucks my fingers into his mouth, tasting my juices.

“Holy shit, that’s hot.” I blurt out.

“You taste delectable.” Ryder murmurs.

Turning my head, I see his erection poking through the front of his jeans. The new brazen me, slips my hand back under my shorts, gathering more of my juices for him to taste.

“Fuck yes.” He sucks my fingers back into his mouth.

Him lapping up my juices is the hottest thing I have ever seen. I’m so turned on I’m almost in a permanently horny state.

“More.”

I hope he can decipher my one word command.

I quickly undo his button before unzipping his jeans. While he kicks off his pants and boxers, I pull my shirt off and kick off my shorts.

Pleasure hums through my body. “I need you. Now.”

Ryder looks me in the eye to make sure this is what I really want before climbing on top of me. He tears off the edge of the

condom wrapper with his teeth. The move is so sexy it makes me want him to do it again and again.

I watch as he slowly slides the condom down his shaft, impatient for what I hope is going to be an extremely pleasurable experience. Pulling him closer to me, he chuckles.

His cock slides through my folds and breaches my entrance.

“Come on. What are you waiting for?” I ask eagerly.

“I’m trying to ease it in so I don’t hurt you.” His voice is tender and full of concern.

“I’m not a virgin, you know.”

I love he wants to take it slow to not hurt me, but I feel as if I am going to burst at the seams.

“Yeah, I know that, but I am larger than most.” Ryder gingerly pushes deeper into my chasm.

Sure, he might have the largest dick I’ve ever seen, but I have to keep his ego from getting too inflated.

“Eh, I’ve seen bigger.” I say nonchalantly.

A frown forms on his face as he is probably imagining how many dicks I’ve seen.

Besides porn, Trevor’s and Ryder’s dicks are the only ones I’ve seen in real life. I’d laugh if I were in any other situation.

To not give him a false representation of my sex life, I add, “But that was porn, and yours is the biggest I’ve ever had.”

Sure, it still might sound like I’ve had a lot, but Ryder is the last person who will judge me.

“Will you go out with me? Tomorrow?” Ryder asks once he is balls deep inside me.

“I have chores tomorrow.”

Why is he asking me this now? I don’t want to be thinking about chores.

“How about lunch? Chores will be done by then and we will both be hungry. We have to eat.”

Ryder's cock twitches inside of my aching pussy, causing my abs to contract from the pleasure.

"If I agree, will you stop talking and fuck me already?"

I try to tilt my hips to get some action, but his hips pin me to my mattress.

"Only if you really want to go out with me." Ryder groans as I tighten my walls around him like a vise.

"Yes. I'd love to go out with you. Now please fuck me and take me out of this torture." I whine but am rewarded.

Ryder's cock pounds into my pussy harder and faster than I could ever fantasize. I know neither of us are going to last long, as we're both struggling to hold on just a moment longer. His thick, veiny cock hits all the nerves, bringing me more pleasure than I can handle.

I cry out as the pleasure becomes unbearable. My orgasm quickly approaches, and I can only hope Ryder can tag along.

Breathing hard and fucking me just right, Ryder lifts my hips to quicken his thrusts.

Squeezing my eyes shut, my orgasm slams through me like a ton of bricks. As pleasure shoots through my entire body, I can barely register Ryder grunting through his release.

Hearts pounding, bodies covered in sweat, we collapse on my bed, gasping for air.

"That was..." I begin, but Ryder interrupts.

"Incredible." Ryder finishes for me.

"Incredible," I repeat.

Ryder rolls off the bed, throws the condom in the trash can under my desk, redresses, and gives me a chaste kiss on my lips.

"I'll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams."

Ryder slips out of my room as quietly as he snuck in before I could even reply.

"Fuck me," I say as I roll under the covers.

Ryder has just ruined me for every other guy out there. Now that I've had him, I'm sure no one else will ever make me feel this sated and giddy.

Sending him a quick text, I ask where he plans on taking me tomorrow.

I laugh at his reply as I close my eyes and dream about my lunch date tomorrow, wondering where he is going to take me.

Chapter Ten

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd feel disgusted about doing something my heart desired, but that's the only clear emotion I can decipher today.

A soft knock on my bedroom has me turning down my music. Mom's voice sounds from the other side of the door.

"Addy?"

"Come in." I call out to her.

Mom opens my door and peaks her head inside.

"I'm going to get my nails done. Do you want to come with me?"

Getting out of the house is probably the best thing I can do. If I stay inside my room all day, I will just have constant reminders of last night, and as much as I enjoyed it, I know it was wrong.

If Ryder and I are going to be something, then we need to start things on the right track. We need to establish a strong foundation.

And I don't think that's a possibility.

"Umm, sure. A manicure and pedicure day sounds perfect."

I grab my phone off my end table and turn off my music before slipping on my sandals and following Mom to the garage.

Noticing Dad's truck gone, I ask, "Where did Dad run off to?"

Mom reaches up to click the large button on the garage door opener that is clipped to her visor before backing down the driveway.

"Him and Danny went to the farm equipment auction to see if there was anything worth buying."

There's always something worth buying.

Last year, Dad bought a brand new harvester. It was pretty expensive, but it's been extremely useful this past year.

"Maybe Dad will find a farming robot that can do everything itself."

Mom laughs at my joke.

"He'll buy something today, even if it's something small. You know he can't go to an auction and come home empty-handed."

"That's true. Do you remember the first year that they had the auction? Dad, Danny, Sam, and Ryder went, and they were outbid for everything they wanted. Dad didn't want the trip to be a waste since it was three towns over, so he bought every gas he could find."

Mom chimes in. "I remember because I'm the one that had to find room for all of them. Don't tell your dad, but I ended up giving ten of them away to Mr. Johnson the next morning."

I wondered where they all went. Dad thought someone was stealing them.

"How many did they end up buying? Twenty?"

Mom shakes her head. "Thirty-seven."

My mouth drops open. "Thirty-seven?"

"I gave ten to Mr. Johnson and ten to Grandpa to give to his neighbors."

"Dad was confused for the longest time, wondering where they all went."

Mom looks over at me and grins, which makes me laugh harder than I have in a long time. Mom and I laugh for the entire trip to the salon.

After Mom parks the car, she says, “Let’s go get pampered.”

We are immediately shown to the manicure tables where we pick out the color of nail polish we want.

I choose a light blue that is barely a shade darker than sky blue and a fine glitter top coat while Mom chooses the brightest shade of candy apple red the salon has.

“I see that you’re going for the fierce color.”

Mom looks at the red polish before looking at me. “It’s your dad’s favorite. He-”

Before Mom can explain further, I shake my head. “Nope, I don’t need to know more than that.”

The last thing I need to be thinking about is Mom and Dad’s extracurricular activities.

The nail technicians chuckle as they get started on our nails.

Mom grins. “It’s a part of life and it’s very important in a healthy relationship.”

“That may be so, but I don’t need to hear about my parents’ love for one another or what they may or may not do.”

Mom’s expression changes for a moment, and I instantly worry that I’ve insulted her. Luckily, her smile returns.

“You dad and I have always tried to show you kids how a real relationship works. You have seen us laugh together and even cry together. There’s even been a few arguments that you four have witnessed.”

Mom and Dad rarely ever argue. I can’t remember the last time they have raised their voices at one another.

“You and Dad must be soulmates because you two fit together perfectly.”

I can only dream of finding someone that gets me like Dad gets Mom. They are two perfect pieces of a puzzle.

Mom's low chuckle sounds like she wishes what I was saying was true.

"We are by far from perfect, but that's okay. There isn't a such thing as a perfect person. Everyone has their flaws, their own mistakes, and their own problems. The goal in a healthy relationship and marriage is to find someone that accepts you for all of them."

She lets out a sigh.

"We've had our fair share of difficulties in our marriage. Our love life hasn't been the easiest, and it's taken years to come to understand one another. To be honest, we are still learning and growing- both as individuals and as a couple."

I know she is giving me her best motherly advice, but I can't help but to see the differences between her relationship with dad and my whatever it is with Ryder.

"But did he hook up with your ex-best friend?"

Her face softens. "No, but he wasn't a saint either. I'm not trying to give you a false idea of your dad. He never cheated or anything, but he was very experienced when we got together and I was in your shoes."

"How so?"

She pauses as the nail technician switches to her other hand.

"Well, I was waiting for your dad to realize my feelings for him. He didn't understand subtlety. So, one afternoon, when he was at the ice cream shop, I walked right up to him and kissed him."

I let out a gasp. "What did he do?"

"He was speechless, as were his friends. I told him I was tired of waiting for him to get his head out of his ass. The next day, he came to my house with a bouquet and asked my father for his permission to marry me."

How did I not know this about my own parents?

“That is possibly the sweetest story ever.”

Mom’s eyes glaze over as she takes a trip down memory lane.

Can Ryder and I have a relationship like Mom and Dad’s?

Can we learn and grow as a couple?

Does he even want that?

I can picture a happy life with him. Whether we are helping with the family farm or forging a path on our own, I know we have the potential to have a great future together if we’re both willing to try.

The nail technicians finish with our manicures and lead us over to the pedicure chairs.

Mom and I get comfortable and position our hands to where the polish will dry without sticking to anything while our feet soak in the warm water.

When we are left alone, I lean my head back and close my eyes.

My thoughts are on Ryder, like they usually are.

Last night was explosive. Ryder and I really connected. It was better than my imagination ever conjured up and something I’ve been waiting years for, so why do I feel disgusted?

I turn my head towards Mom. “Mom, I feel conflicted. I’m ashamed and disgusted with my actions right now, even though my heart wants to be happy.”

Mom doesn’t pass judgment. That’s one reason she’s my confidant and best friend.

“What’s going on?”

I lower my voice to a whisper so no one can overhear our conversation.

“Not to get too into detail, but Ryder and I got together last night. Before you warn me of anything, it just sort of

happened. We got swept up in the moment, but we used protection.”

Mom ponders for a moment. “I’m glad you two were safe, but I’m failing to see what the problem is. You’ve wanted Ryder for years and I think he’s wanted you just as long.”

I don’t have time to process the fact that she thinks Ryder has wanted me as long as I’ve wanted him. I immediately think of all the problems that have run through my mind instead of my mind resting and getting some much needed sleep.

“Well, for one, he was making out with one girl in the laundry room at the pool party. Two, he’s ignored me for the past six years. And three, don’t you think I deserve someone better?”

Mom is usually the best judge of character, so if she thinks I deserve someone better, then it’s usually justified.

“I think you and Ryder could be happy together, but you have to forgive his past mistakes and stop dwelling on them.”

She pauses and watches my reaction.

How can I stop thinking about the past? If Ryder wanted to be with me, then why did he move across the country and never come home?

That’s probably a better question for him and not Mom.

Mom continues. “It’s not my business who Ryder was kissing.”

I interrupt. “But that wasn’t too long ago.”

A smile forms on her face.

“If I recall, you both were being petty. He brought girls, so you brought Trevor. Both of you were jealous of the other and only wanted to hurt each other. You two are letting fear get between you. Get some courage and let him know how you really feel.”

“And what if he turns me down?”

My voice is softer than a whisper, so I don't think Mom heard me, but when I glance her way, I see her raised eyebrow.

“Addison Mae, you can't be that stupid. You and Ryder were together last night. I don't think he would jeopardize his friendship with Sam if he really didn't want to be with you. Sure, he has things to figure out, but so do you.”

Our conversation ceases as the nail technicians walk over to us to get started on our feet.

Pushing my worries to the back of my mind, I look at all the nail polishes on the wall.

“I think I might do the same color as my nails, but in a French tip.”

Mom hmms as she tries to picture the non-traditional design. “Ooh, that will look so pretty. Maybe I will steal your idea and do a red French tip.”

I perk up a bit after our serious conversation. “Yes! You should. We can be matching- designs, not color.”

“Then it's settled.”

With our designs picked out, we lean our heads back and enjoy the rest of the pedicure. The nail technicians trim and shape our nails, exfoliate, scour, and massage our feet, and help us get back into our sandals before painting our toenails.

“I don't know why we don't do this more often. My hands and feet feel incredible and they look pretty, too.”

Mom pays the bill as I step outside to enjoy the light summer breeze. Although it's unusually warmer than past years, the breeze is refreshing.

Birds chirp and cows moo in the distance.

The bell on the salon's door chimes as Mom opens it.

“Since I haven't heard from Dad yet, how about we head home and I order us a pizza?”

My stomach growls at the mention of pizza. “Yes, and cheese sticks and wings.”

Mom laughs. “I can do that. I may even throw in some brownies.”

That’s music to my ears. Mom knows I’m a sucker for brownies. I love them all- plain, double fudge, caramel, extra chocolate chips, walnuts.

My mouth waters as my mind displays images of brownies.

“We may need to order extra brownies. You know they are also Ryder and Sam’s favorites too.”

Ryder used to tease me and play fight for the last brownie, but all I had to do was bat my baby blues and he was a goner.

After a while, he caught on to my game and learned that all he had to do was give me a smirk and I’d forfeit the last brownie.

He was the sweet older friend and would then offer to split it with me.

I wish I could say the same about me, but I would eat the whole thing and not feel one ounce of remorse.

But Ryder didn’t seem to mind. If he was still hungry, he’d eat another slice of pizza, pop a bag of popcorn, or eat one of the many candy bars that Mom would keep supplied for us.

Mom clears her throat. “That pretty large smile on your face should be all the proof you need to know what your heart truly desires. Trust your instincts.”

I nod my head, but don’t speak.

Mom is right.

I should trust my heart. Sure, there’s a chance I could get hurt, but Ryder’s heart is also on the line, and I wouldn’t do anything to intentionally hurt him.

And he wouldn’t risk hurting me and getting on my brother’s bad side.

Would he?

Chapter Eleven

LIFE IS PRECIOUS.

Life is cruel.

Life is finite.

And we are reminded of this when we least expect it.

One minute we are excited, happy, and looking forward to the future, and then the next minute it's all stripped away, leaving us no hope and no happiness. The only things that remain are fear and uncertainty.

The sun is shining and I'm thinking about the pizza, cheese sticks, and brownies that we're going to order when we get home.

Mom turns on an upbeat song and we sing along with one another. The ringing of Mom's cell phone causes us to stop singing.

She grabs her phone out of one of her purse pockets. "It's Dad."

After hitting the ignore button, she turns the music back up and gives me a wink.

"We have to keep them wondering if a storm is brewing. Plus, we're almost home. I'll call him back when we get parked before we order the food, in case they are starving."

I shake my head and laugh. Of course, they're going to be starving. They always are and since it will probably be dinner

time by the time they get back home, they will be ready for food.

“Since Dad and Danny are at the auction, he was probably calling to say they bought all the equipment and need help lugging it all home.”

Sure, it might be a stretch that they bought everything, but they probably bought something.

With the farm growing and us now having Trevor’s help, we could use another tractor or plower.

Probably both, if Sam and Ryder decide to stick around and help with the family farm.

My heart leaps at the thought of Ryder staying.

Ryder:

My nerves jump with excitement as I picture seeing Ryder and confessing my feelings for him. I want to forgive the past and give him a real shot. I want us to give a relationship a chance.

Mom’s phone rings again. She looks at the caller ID and lets out a long sigh.

“This is weird. He only calls back to back if it’s important. Sorry honey, but I’ve got to get this.”

She pulls over onto the side of the road, puts the car in park, and turns on her emergency flashers as she answers Dad’s call.

Her voice is cheery and full of love. “Hey, babe, is everything alright? What’s going on?”

The gasp that comes out of her mouth can only be described as pure, unfiltered shock.

Her smile completely disappears and her eyes narrow as she listens intently to what Dad is saying. Her eyes widen and become shiny with tears a second before large tears roll down her cheeks.

I wipe them away and whisper, “What’s Dad saying?”

Obviously, it's not good whatever he is telling her. My mind immediately goes to the worst-case scenario, and that's death. Someone must have died.

Is it Grandma or Grandpa?

She doesn't answer my question; she only shakes her head a half dozen times as more and more tears fall down her face and fall to her shirt.

I can't swipe the tears away fast enough, so I grab a tissue from the center console and dab her cheeks.

Mom's body shakes as sobs catch in her throat.

I've never seen Mom like this before. I feel scared and helpless, unable to help her because I don't know what is going on.

"Mom, what's going on?"

When she leans forward and rests her head against the steering wheel and continues to sob, I grab her phone from her.

My voice is cautious and full of concern. "Hey, Dad, what's going on?"

It's not Dad's voice on the other line. It's a strange woman's voice and I immediately think the worst.

"Hi, my name is Vanessa and I'm a nurse at Northside Hospital. I'm calling in reference to William and Daniel Hall."

My brain tries to connect Northside Hospital to Dad and Danny, but it can't.

"I'm William's daughter and Danny's sister. What's going on?"

"William and Daniel got into an accident about a half hour ago and were transported here via ambulance."

Oh. My. God.

This is horrible. No wonder Mom is an absolute mess.

My mind conjures up several scenarios of what happened and none of those thoughts end up okay.

"How are they?"

The nurse clears her throat. “In simple quick terms, Daniel’s arm has broken in three places. He’s currently in surgery. William’s, um, your dad’s condition is more severe.”

More severe?

What is that supposed to mean?

More severe than an arm that’s broken in three places that requires surgery?

Is he alive or is he dead?

As if she expects my line of thinking, she adds, “He’s alive, but it’s in everyone’s best interest if your family can get here as soon and as safely as possible.”

Knowing that we are only ten minutes from the hospital, I say, “We’ll be there shortly.”

I hang up the phone call and glance over at Mom. I slowly rub circles on her back to give her some comfort.

“Mom?” I say quietly, knowing time is of the essence.

She hiccups and looks towards me. Her make up is running and her eyes are already red and swollen.

“Dad and Danny need us right now. I understand this is a scary time, but the nurse said we need to get there as soon and as safely as possible. I’ll even drive to the hospital if you want.”

She takes the tissue from my hand, flips the visor down to look at her reflection in the tiny mirror, and cleans up her makeup.

Her eyes close as she takes several deep breaths to control her crying.

She mumbles to herself. “Everything will be alright. It has to be.”

With a new sense of urgency, she closes her visor, sits up straighter, and looks at me. “I’m going to need you-”

I interrupt. “I’m here, Mom. Whatever happens, we will get through it as a family. I will be by your side the entire

time.”

Mom gives me a small nod before turning off her flashers and getting back on the road before taking the turn that heads towards the hospital.

The past several minutes replay in my mind like one long, never ending movie as Mom pushes her foot down on the gas pedal to drive faster.

We make it to the hospital in six and a half minutes.

Mom parks in the first available parking spot she can find.

We don't speak to one another. We run through the emergency room doors and make a beeline to the receptionist's desk.

Mom immediately says, “We are here for William and Daniel Hall. Do you know what happened?”

The nurse, Vanessa, shakes her head. “All I can say is that they were in an automobile accident. The police over there can answer more questions.

Vanessa looks at the computer screen for a moment before meeting Mom's gaze.

“Daniel is still in surgery, so he can't have any visitors just yet. William is down the corridor. Only one of you can visit at a time right now. When things get a little less hectic, I will need you to fill out some paperwork, but it can wait.”

I look over at Mom. “You go check on Dad and I will talk to the police and fill out the paperwork. I'll try calling Ryder, Sam, and Mark as well.”

Mom follows another nurse through the doors while I step outside to make these unfortunate, but necessary, phone calls.

I call Mark first, knowing he is the furthest from the hospital.

He answers on the first ring. “Hey Addy. What's going on?”

I try to relay as much pertinent information as I can in as few sentences as possible.

“Hey, Mark. I need you to come to Northside Hospital. Dad and Danny were in a car accident. Mom and I just got here and all we know is Danny has a broken arm and is in surgery. Mom is checking on Dad now.”

To my surprise, Mark doesn't ask any questions. I hear his computer shut down before he says, “I'll be there as soon as I can. Have you called Sam?”

I shake my head despite him not being able to see me. “Not yet, but I'm planning on it as soon as I get off the phone with you.”

“Alright. Call them, and I'll be there soon.”

He hangs up, and I make the next call to Sam.

It rings and rings.

“Please pick up.”

Sam's voicemail is heard on the other end.

“Damn it.”

I hit the button to redial Sam's number.

Once again, it rings with no answer. I refuse to leave this information in a voicemail, so I hang up.

“Ugh. What are you doing, Sam? Answer your damn phone.”

Taking a deep breath, I scroll up to Ryder's name in my contact list and hit the dial button.

He answers on the second ring.

“Hey Addy, miss me already?”

His voice is sensual, and if it were any other situation, I might flirt back, but this time I don't wait to cut to the chase. “Ryder, are you with Sam?”

“Um, no, but hold on.”

The sound of knocking on a door can be heard through the phone.

“Sam? Are you decent? Addy’s on the phone and asking for you.”

Hoping Ryder can still hear me, I say, “Actually, I need to talk to both of you at the same time. It’s pretty important.”

No one speaks for several moments, and I grow impatient. There’s still a lot I need to do, and they are wasting precious minutes.

Fucking hell, this is grating on my last nerve.

I yell into the phone to get their attention. “Guys!”

Sam huffs. “What’s so important, Addy? I’m trying to dry off because I just got out of the fucking shower.”

Is he for real?

Didn’t he hear me say this was important?

“If this wasn’t so important, I’d give you a piece of my mind, but that will have to wait until later. Dad and Danny were in a car accident. Mom and I just got here and Mark is on his way. We’re at Northside.”

I don’t wait for Sam or Ryder’s response. I hang up the call and head back inside to get the paperwork and talk to the police.

No one is at the desk, so I head straight to the officer.

“Hi, I’m Addison Hall. The nurse said you might answer some of our questions. My mom is checking on my dad, but she should be back out here soon.”

I hope.

The police officer nods like he was expecting me. “I’m officer Jones.”

“Do you know how my dad and brother got into the accident?”

The officer looks over my shoulder as Mom slowly and dejectedly walks over to us.

She doesn’t look like she received good news, but maybe she is feeling low after sobbing so much. Crying saps your

energy faster than a wink of an eye.

Officer Jones waits until Mom is standing beside me to speak.

“They were driving east on highway twenty-eight when they were run off the road by a group of street racers. Their vehicle flipped several times before striking a tree.”

Mom gasps and my eyes widen with fear.

If Danny broke his arm in three places, how bad is Dad beat up? I’m almost afraid to ask.

I turn my attention to Mom. “How was Dad? Is he alright?”

Mom doesn’t look at me, but I can see the tears in her eyes. She shakes her head.

She takes several minutes to speak, and when she does, her voice is barely above a murmur.

“The doctor said he was trapped pretty badly. He has several cuts on his arms. His leg and ankle are broken, but the biggest injury is his head. He has a large gash, and when paramedics arrived, he was unconscious.”

That’s worse than I was hoping.

“Are they trying to wake him up?”

Once again, Mom shakes her head.

“They’re keeping him that way, at least until all of his scans are done and the test results are in. They need to see if anything else is wrong, at least where his head injury is concerned.”

Mom reaches for my hand, giving it a small squeeze. “You can go back to see him, but I have to warn you that what you see won’t be easy.”

My heart pounds as my stomach tightens.

A wave of nausea washes over me and all I can think of is throwing up.

My dad is the strongest man I know. He's usually always laughing and having a good time.

He's never sick or hurt.

Never.

Can my heart handle seeing Dad unconscious, lying in a hospital bed?

Chapter Twelve

I RUN from my problems and any uncertainty or uncomfortable situations that I come across, and truth be told, I've never been able to face my fears.

It's easier that way.

To pretend.

In my mind, I'm fearless and not scared of anything, but in reality, that's the furthest from the truth.

I'm scared of great white sharks.

Sure, it might be a ridiculous fear when we don't live anywhere close to an ocean, but the fear is still there, nonetheless.

I'm scared of dying alone. Irrational, sure, especially given my age. I have a lifetime to be surrounded by friends and family.

And maybe one day I'll be married and surrounded by a husband and a child or two.

But most of all, I'm scared of losing my parents, my twin pillars of strength and wisdom.

I'm a huge Daddy's girl and the thought of losing him is ripping my heart to shreds.

I want Dad to walk me down the aisle and give me away to my future husband. I want him to teach my kids how to fish and to take them on tractor rides.

I want him to watch his grandkids get married and have families of their own.

There's so much I still want to experience with him, but it feels like those hopes and dreams are being pulled away.

Mom stares at me expectantly, waiting for me to turn away from her and walk down the hall to Dad's room.

A large ball of emotion lodges itself in my throat, making it hard to speak. "Mom, I can't see Dad unconscious. I'm not strong enough."

Mom softens her expression and rubs her hand along my upper arm.

"Addy, your dad needs us to be strong for him. The doctor said it will be good for him to hear our voices. I'll be right here waiting for you. I'll be your shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen to your worries, and a comforting hug."

I shake my head as tears form in my eyes and run down my cheeks. My voice cracks. "Please, Mom, don't make me do this. Not like this. Not right now."

The sigh that comes from Mom's mouth is full of sympathy. "Okay, honey, that's fine. Why don't you go outside and wait for your brothers? I'll finish talking to Officer Jones and filling out the paperwork."

I nod and whisper, "Thank you."

Heading outside, I sit on a bench and wait for Sam, Ryder, and Mark to arrive.

How did this day turn out to be so shitty?

How did having family dinner plans tonight turn into a living nightmare?

How did so many right things turn wrong suddenly?

I say a little prayer, hoping with every ounce of my being that Danny and Dad will be alright.

Danny should heal just fine and be back to running the farm in a couple months, but not knowing the full extent of

Dad's injuries leaves me wondering if we will even be able to maintain the farm long term.

When I see Mark's car turn into the parking lot, I swipe my tears away and stand.

He hastily locks his car doors and runs towards me. "What are you doing out here?"

Not wanting to confess how much of a chicken I am, I keep it brief. "I'm waiting for Sam and Ryder to get here, then I'll come back inside. Mom is in there to the left. She can point you toward Dad's room."

"How is he? Have you seen him yet?"

More tears spill down my face and I shake my head. "I haven't seen him yet, but you go ahead."

He gives me a nod and rushes inside.

"Mom."

I hear him call out before the doors close and cut off his conversation.

Sitting back down, I lean my head back, close my eyes, and try to let the sunshine soothe me.

The sound of squealing tires causes my hearts to race as I immediately remember Officer Jones saying Dad and Danny were run off the road by street racers.

Opening my eyes, and looking towards the sound, I see Sam's car turn into the parking lot.

Why would he race here knowing that Dad and Danny were just in an accident?

My heart flutters as I see Ryder step out of the passenger seat. His eyes search mine for any hint of how things are going inside the hospital.

Sam runs over to me while Ryder stays at the car, staring at me.

Sam's voice is frantic. "Where is everyone?"

Without breaking my gaze with Ryder, I point towards the main doors of the hospital and say, “Inside.”

Sam blows out a huff of a breath and turns to head inside. I walk towards Ryder, curious why he is keeping his distance.

“Hey.” I say softly when I get to the front of Sam’s car.

His reply is sharp and emotionless. “Hey.”

His gaze darts around as he looks at the hospital behind me.

“Thanks for coming.” I try to share my appreciation, but he doesn’t respond.

He is almost emotionless, except his lips form a tight line.

What is his problem? Did he not want to come?

The silence drones on, bypassing the comfort stage and landing in the awkward phase.

Why won’t he talk to me?

Why won’t he say anything?

Not even an “Everything will be fine.”

I follow his gaze and look over my shoulder at the hospital doors. A yearning feeling washes over me like I should go in and try to gain the courage to see Dad.

It becomes overwhelming, like my heart strings are being pulled.

If things are as bad as the nurses and doctors are letting on, then I need to put my fears and concerns to the side and be the adult that I am and go see Dad.

But my heart doesn’t want to face reality. At least not alone.

“Will you come inside with me?”

The words are out of my mouth before my brain can process what I’ve just asked him.

“You don’t need me.”

There's a bite to his tone that leaves me more confused than his statement itself.

There's only one word to sum up what I'm feeling. "Huh?"

Ryder narrows his eyes and glares at me. "I said,"

He takes a deep breath and blows it out of his mouth before continuing. "I said that you don't need me to go in there with you."

That statement couldn't be furthest from the truth.

I need his strength.

I need his wisdom.

And most of all, I need his comforting touch.

"But I want you to."

His jaw clenches. "Well, I don't want to."

My breathing becomes ragged as anger fills my veins. "Why not?"

Why is he acting so different than he was last night?

Does he regret being with me?

His anger rivals my own, causing his face to turn red. "Why do you need me, Addy? You're an adult, for crying out loud. It's time you act like one."

I'm more pissed that he insults me rather than answers my question.

"Why are you being such an asshole right now?"

He rolls his eyes and crosses his arms across his chest. "I'm not being like anything."

I narrow my eyes at him. Is he this delusional?

"Uh, yeah, you are. This isn't you. It's like you changed overnight."

He closes his eyes for a long moment and clenches his jaw before glaring at me. "And how would you know what I am like? You haven't talked to me in years."

Hurt courses through my body, and I feel the need to defend my past actions. “You never called me either.”

And the only texts I received were basic how are you ones. Nothing in depth or personal.

He throws his hands up in exasperation.

“I texted you all the time in the beginning, but I was tired of being the one to reach out when you only gave me half assed bullshit replies.”

Has he been bottling up these feelings all these years? Or is there something else going on here?

“I thought we were moving past all of this. I thought you, me, and Sam forgave one another for everything that has happened in the past.”

He shrugs. “I guess I didn’t. I’m leaving. There’s no reason for me to stick around. Tell Sam I took his car and will return it later today or tomorrow.”

I plead with him as tears pool in my eyes. “Ryder, please don’t go. Not now. Please don’t leave this conversation like this.”

My heart shatters as he turns around and gets into the driver’s seat without taking another look at me.

He backs the car out of the parking spot, leaving me alone with my thoughts, fears, and tears running down my face and soaking my shirt.

Sam’s voice sounds from behind me. “Addy.”

I hastily try to blink the tears away and turn around to face my brother with the courage of a thousand bull fighters. “Ryder wanted me to let you know he took your car and will return it later today or tomorrow.”

I don’t know why I’m relaying the message to him, but the words are out before I can take them back.

I want to hate Ryder. I want to hold on to the hurt I feel to forget about the hurt I feel for Dad.

Sam frowns, but slowly nods methodically. “I knew it was going to be hard for him.”

That’s not what I was expecting Sam to say. “What?”

Sam nods towards the bench near the hospital’s entrance and I follow him. After several silent moments, Sam sighs.

“Ryder hasn’t been near a hospital since his parents’ deaths, let alone inside one.”

The anger I was feeling dissipates almost immediately and I feel like an asshole. “Oh.”

Sam runs his hand through his hair, shakes his head, and continues.

“Ryder hasn’t taken the time to fully grieve or accept what happened, even after all these years. Even after I assured him I’d come back here with him. He’s never had to face those feelings.”

That makes so much sense right now.

Ryder has kept the feelings of loss locked up tight and me asking him to come inside the hospital brought up feelings he’s not ready to face.

I feel like a complete bitch and want to chase after him, but there are things here I need to take care of first. I’m not going to run from my fears- it’s time I face them head on.

Sam seems to know what I am thinking because he adds, “I know we’re going through a tough time with Dad and Danny, but so is Ryder. We should show him some compassion.”

I try to be sympathetic and understand what Ryder is dealing with, but the mention of Dad and Danny set me off.

“Dad was like a second dad to Ryder. He should be here for not only me and you but also Mom, Mark, Dad, and Danny because he knows how hard it is to have to face situations like this and we’ve been his family for years now.”

Sam stands and jams his hands into his shorts pockets.

“You’re entitled to your own feelings, Addy, but try to put yourself in Ryder’s shoes. Imagine being an only child and losing both your parents at the same time.”

Given Dad’s current state, that hits too close to home. We might not exactly be in Ryder’s situation, but it’s too close for comfort.

Sam heads inside and leaves me alone.

I try to push my thoughts and feelings to the side and prepare myself for what I need to do.

Make that two things I need to do.

I grab my cell phone and try to call Ryder.

“Please answer.” I murmur to myself, holding my breath as the phone rings and rings.

After several rings, Ryder’s voice sounds and the call goes to his voicemail.

If I were Ryder, I wouldn’t want to speak to me either, but he shouldn’t be alone right now.

Feeling the way he does right now makes him more likely to do something stupid, or want to be with the wrong sort of company- female company.

Would he do that to me after last night?

I redial his number and once again it goes straight to voicemail.

“Damn it.”

My fingers make quick work of typing out a long, heartfelt message to him, letting him know that I’m sorry for pushing him, and I’ll be here for him when he’s ready to talk.

I just hope he doesn’t wait too long because I’m not sure my heart can handle anymore heartbreak.

Taking a deep breath of the hot summer air, I steel myself and walk through the hospital doors.

Chapter Thirteen

NOTHING CAN PREPARE you for your worst nightmare.

No amount of self reflection or positive thinking can turn a bad situation into a good one.

Mom warned me that Dad was hooked up to the various machines.

I tried with all my might to think back to several movies and television shows that I've watched that had hospital scenes.

I tried to picture Dad laying in the hospital bed with his eyes closed and a calm peaceful look upon his face.

Hell, I even tried to picture him a little scraped up from the car accident.

But as I slowly walk down this long hallway to the room where Dad is lying unconscious, my heart tries to pound its way out of my chest.

I don't want to do this- especially alone.

Machines beep in the distance and the nurses' conversations drift through the air.

As I approach Dad's room, I notice his door and blinds are closed to give him, and us, more privacy. Taking a deep breath of the cold sterile air, I wrap my hand around the door knob.

I whisper to myself, "I can do this."

With a twist of the door knob, I'm free to open the door and see Dad, but I can't open the door. An invisible force within me prevents me from pushing the door open.

My heart isn't ready for this. Any of this, but there's nothing I can do but push on and face the uncertainty.

Taking another deep breath, I push the door open, surprised at how dim the room is.

There isn't a window or any source of natural light in this small, intimate room. Besides the hospital bed, there's only a small uncomfortable looking chair in the corner.

It takes my eyes several moments to adjust to the lack of light, but when they do, what I see is worse than I ever imagined.

Tubes are coming out of Dad's nose and an intubation hose is coming out of his mouth. Sensors are on his arm and finger, monitoring his blood oxygen, pulse, and blood pressure.

An IV is hooked to his arm, pumping his veins with what I can only assume are painkillers and sedatives.

The cover is draped over Dad, but his left leg is left uncovered and in a cast from his knee down to his foot. The many machines softly beep as they keep tracking Dad's stats.

My mouth falls open as a sob catches in my throat.

Dad looks weak and frail. He's pale and if I didn't know any better, I would also say he looks lifeless.

My gut tightens and threatens to expel the little food left undigested in my stomach from earlier today.

I take a step towards Dad as tears blur my vision.

Each step feels heavier than the last, like I'm carrying the weight of ten thousand hay bales on my shoulders.

After what feels like an eternity, I make it to the side of Dad's bed. I lightly wrap my hand around his much colder one.

Giving his hand a light squeeze, I wait for a response. Anything to let me know he knows I'm here.

I hold my breath as I wait for a squeeze back, or even a twitch of his finger.

But nothing happens. He doesn't move. He just lays still and is as silent as a cold wintry night.

“Please wake up Dad.”

Tears sting my eyes as I rub my thumb on the back of his hand.

My heart aches, my stomach is tight, and my tears burn as they flow like a raging river.

“Dad, I can't do this. I need you to be fine. Please, please, please.”

The unbearable weight on my shoulders makes my knees weak. I fall to the ground next to the bed and let the tears fall.

Today has turned out to be the opposite of what I had hoped. Dad and Danny are hurt, leaving the future of our farm up to me and Sam. Ryder is ignoring me and won't return calls or texts.

I need someone to tell me everything will be alright, to lend me comfort in my state of confusion, and to let me cry on their shoulder as I question life.

My hands clench at my heart as an image of Ryder pops into my mind.

I want Ryder.

I need Ryder.

But he doesn't want or need us. My mind reminds me by replaying the scene of him driving away.

I dig my phone out of my back pocket and scroll through my contacts, stopping at Trevor's name.

My finger hovers over the screen of my phone as I remember how mad Sam was to find out I was hanging out with Trevor.

Would Trevor want to know what happened to Dad and Danny?

He has been working with us for a while now and he's like an extended member of the family. Trevor has eaten Easter and Thanksgiving dinner with us and Mom even hangs up a stocking for him at Christmas.

Should I even call him?

An image of him smiling while driving the tractor pops into my mind and for a second, I don't feel as sad.

My finger pushes down on the screen.

Trevor answers before the ringing can sound on my side of the phone call.

"Hey Addy." His tone is sympathetic and full of sorrow.

I whisper into the phone. "Do you know?"

His voice isn't as upbeat and cheerful as it usually is.

"Yeah. Your Mom called me a few minutes ago. She said you were visiting with your dad."

The way he says visiting makes me scoff. Sure, I guess you can call it visiting, but usually a visit is a pleasant experience and a two-way conversation or interactions.

"I really hate to ask this, but-" I shake my head.

I might be desperate for comfort, but I can't ask him to drop whatever he's doing to come to the hospital, despite a large part of me wanting to.

"I'm pulling into the hospital parking lot now. Why don't you meet me in the lobby?"

"Thank you."

I give Dad's hand another squeeze before walking back out to the empty lobby. Where did everyone go?

Where's Mom, Mark, and Sam?

Trevor runs through the hospital doors, looks around, and makes his way over to me when his gaze locks with mine.

He holds his arms out towards me and I feel myself being drawn to him. He wraps his arms around my back in a comforting hug.

My body melts into his as I let the tears and emotions flow.

He doesn't rush me or tell me to get a grip on my emotions. He just holds me and lets me cry on his shoulder.

After several long minutes, my tears subside and dry up. Standing up, I take a deep breath.

“You dropped everything and raced to the hospital to be here for us. Thank you.”

I give him a friendly smile.

He looks around at the empty waiting area. “Where is everyone?”

I shrug. “I'm not sure. They were here when I went in to see Dad, but when I came out, they were all gone.”

Trevor cracks his knuckles. “Maybe they are checking in on Danny. Have you seen him yet?”

I shake my head. “I was so caught up with Dad and worrying about what's going on with him, I haven't had time to go see Danny yet. Plus, the nurse said he was in surgery when she called us.”

Trevor loops his arm with mine and pulls me towards the check in desk. “Let's go see how Danny is doing, and then maybe we will run into your family.”

“Good idea.”

I'm glad he's able to keep a cool, calm, and collected head when mine is fuzzy and refuses to be an adult.

The nurse gives us Danny's information and points us towards the elevator.

We take it up to the third floor and follow the signs on the wall to room three hundred and sixteen.

All the lights are on and Danny's voice echoes off the walls.

“Hey Doc, where's my family? I figured they would be bursting at the seams to come see me.”

A male's voice grunts out, "I don't know. We can try to call them."

I lean against the door frame. "No need. We are all around here somewhere."

"Addy!" His tone is cheerful despite his arm being in a cast and a large scrape across his cheek.

He looks at me before glancing over at Trevor. "Wow, even though I was the one in the accident, you look like shit."

I chuckle. "Leave it to you to be the one to crack jokes."

The doctor finishes his paperwork and leaves us to visit with Danny.

Trevor pulls on my arm until I am practically pressed up against his chest. He leans in and whispers, "I don't think they have told him about your dad."

I feel the blood drain from my face. Trevor must be right, otherwise I don't think Danny would be feeling this upbeat. I shouldn't be the one to drop this awful news on him, but Mom is nowhere to be found.

"Danny," I take a few steps towards him, but I can't find the words to fill him in on what's going on with Dad.

He interrupts. "Where's Mom?"

"I don't know. Her, Sam, and Mark weren't in the lobby when I-

More tears form, and I watch as the cheerful, carefree expression on Danny's face morphs into one full of confusion.

"Addy, what's going on? Where's Dad? Is he alright?"

I shake my head as the image of Dad lying unconscious pops to the forefront of my mind. "D-d-da-dad is in a coma."

He sits up straight and narrows his eyes at me. "What? What happened?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but the accident was rougher on Dad than you."

Mom's voice sounds from the hallway. "Trevor, thank you for coming."

I turn around to see Mom give Trevor a hug.

Danny clears his throat and interrupts. "Can anyone fill me in on what happened and what is going on with Dad?"

Mom squeezes my arm as she walks past me.

"When the truck flipped, his leg got trapped by the door and the dashboard. He must have hit his head pretty hard because he was knocked unconscious."

Mom sighs and walks over to his bed before sitting by his feet.

"The doctors put him in a medically induced coma so his body can heal and they can do tests to check for internal bleeding or other complications."

Hearing all the details makes me feel unsteady on my feet. I excuse myself and make my way to the chairs outside of Danny's hospital room, claiming one as my own.

I lean my head back against the wall, close my eyes, and take several deep breaths.

Trevor sits down next to me and whispers, "Your dad is a strong, resilient man. I'm sure he will make a full recovery. He has the entire Northside Hospital staff on his side. Not to mention your entire family."

"Thank you." My whisper is soft, but I know he can hear me.

He waits for me to open my eyes and look at him before raising an eyebrow and asking, "For what?"

A small, sad smile forms on my face. "For everything. For your comforting words, for being here, for letting me cry on your shoulder."

His shrug is as carefree as a leaf blowing in the breeze. "That's what shoulders are for. Not to mention friends."

I close my eyes and rest my head on his shoulder.

He scoots down in his chair to get to a more comfortable height for me, so I don't get a crick in my neck.

"Thanks."

He doesn't speak for several moments, but the silence doesn't become awkward. I relish in the comfort his shoulder seems to give me.

"Hey Addy?"

"Hmm?" I ask without sitting up or even opening my eyes.

"Where's Ryder?"

His question causes my eyes to shoot open. I'm not sure what I was expecting him to ask, but it sure wasn't that.

"That's the million dollar question, now isn't it?"

He seems to notice my tenseness and bitterness because he adds, "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to pry, but I would have thought he would be here for Sam...and you."

"Yeah, I would have thought so too, but he's going through things as well."

Still, a phone call or text response would have been the polite thing to do.

"Well, you can figure that out later. You dad and Danny should be the priority."

My reply is nonchalant. "Yeah, I suppose."

The sound of running footsteps echoes down the hallway. I sit up to see who's crazy enough to be running in a hospital.

My heart flutters as I watch Ryder running towards me. "Addy, I-"

He stops talking and a frown forms on his face as his gaze moves from me to Trevor and then back to me.

Ryder rolls his eyes and mumbles. "Of course it's him."

He turns around and runs back down the hallway from where he came from as my mind tries to connect the dots from the words he just spoke to the look he gave Trevor.

Chapter Fourteen

LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES.

Love is unfiltered and raw.

Love is impulsive.

Love is crazy and intoxicating.

Giving no thought to my actions, I run after him, not caring if my running is goofy looking to others.

I follow the lines that are painted on the floor that lead to the lobby and waiting area on this level, hoping I can catch up to him. Not seeing any signs of him at the elevators, I head towards the stairwell.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I rush down both flights of stairs, hoping to cut him off before he can get outside.

Breathless and panting, I run through the main lobby, ignoring all the stares from the nurses and visitors, and sprint through the main doors.

Despite me rushing after him and running down two flights of stairs, Ryder is faster.

I scan the parking lot for Sam's car, but it's nowhere to be found.

"Damn."

Taking a deep breath, I grab my phone and scroll through my contacts to call Ryder. My hands shake as I fumble with my phone.

After hitting the dial button, I press the phone to my ear. It takes a moment for the call to connect, but it just rings and rings.

It's clear to me that Ryder will not answer. I hang up and dial his number again.

The ringing drones on and on as my hope for him to answer my call quickly diminishes. Hanging up, I try calling him for the third time and it goes straight to his voicemail.

I listen to his seductive voice as he drones on and on about being away from his phone, but he promises to call back.

After the beep, I leave him a voicemail. "Damn it, Ryder. Please call me back. Don't leave like this. Please, I-"

When my voice cracks, I disconnect the call from his voicemail and shove my phone deep into my pocket.

I can't believe I was so stupid.

Sure, I didn't know that Ryder was coming back to the hospital, but I shouldn't have laid my head on Trevor's shoulder. It was as innocent as anything could be, but Ryder didn't know what was going on and it was easy to misinterpret.

Why did he have to show up at that exact moment?

Why couldn't he have called me to tell me he was coming back?

Why didn't he let me explain nothing was going on with Trevor?

So many emotions are rushing through my heart-frustration, disappointment, sadness, and regret.

Things should be different.

I have to make things different.

There are only a few places where Ryder can go to hang out. I can borrow Mom's car for a little bit and drive around town, so I can finally set things right.

With my mind made up, I head back inside and head for the elevator to take it back upstairs, where my family is waiting.

As soon as the elevator doors open, Mom, Mark, Sam, and Trevor rush towards me with fear on their faces. They almost knock me to the ground, as they are evidently in a hurry to get somewhere.

Before I can ask what's going on, Sam's voice cracks, "It's dad."

"What about Dad?"

By the time I wrap my mind around what Sam said and get the question out, the four of them are nowhere to be seen.

"What the hell?"

The nurse standing behind the desk points through the doors that lead to Dad's room.

"They went through there."

"Thanks." I reply before running after them.

The four of them are standing outside Dad's doorway as several nurses and doctors surround Dad's bed while they communicate in medical lingo.

Another nurse wheels in a cart containing a defibrillator.

The doctor walks over to us. "I'm going to have to ask you all to go wait in the lobby. I will come out and give you an update in a little bit."

He closes the door, but I get a good look at Dad before my view is cut off from the closing door.

Dad looks horrible- worse than he did before, and I never thought that could be a possibility.

Clanging metal tools and banging drawers sound from behind the closed door as several voices talk at the same time.

Mark pulls me away as a doctor yells, "Clear!"

Mom shakes and sobs as she sits in one of the empty chairs in the lobby.

I take the seat closer to the wall next to Sam and let my tears fall. No one speaks as we try to process our own feelings.

I'm sad about the pain that we're all having to endure right now.

I'm worried that Dad might not make it through this without some long term complications.

And most of all, I'm angry at the universe for letting this happen.

Dad is a generous man who will do literally anything for anyone. He helps the community members and the family's long standing church.

He donates to charity and even helps the local schools with fundraising.

He doesn't deserve this. Any of this.

My tears flow like a raging river, soaking into my shirt. My heart aches like it is being ripped into a hundred pieces. In a way, I guess it is. I'm so torn with my emotions all over the place that I can't tell which way my heart is being pulled.

I'm worried about Danny and being able to keep up with the farm in our busy season. I'm anxious about how things were left with Ryder. I'm frightened about Dad's current state and what that will mean in the future.

Trevor plops down in the seat between Mom and I. He places his hand on my leg but removes it after I stare at it.

He gives me a comforting rub on my back. "If you need to talk, I'm here for you. I don't know if I'll be much help, but I am a shoulder to cry on."

At the mention of his shoulder, my thoughts immediately shift to Ryder.

What could he be doing?

Why hasn't he called me back?

Anger builds in my chest, becoming more and more unbearable the more questions my mind throws at me.

Standing up, I head towards the visitors' bathrooms to wash the makeup and tears off my face.

I stare at the unrecognizable reflection in the mirror. My eyes are puffy and swollen in a deep pink color. My makeup shows the after effects from crying so much, and my shirt looks like I just walked through rain showers.

Grabbing a couple of paper towels, I start by cleaning up my makeup. The toughness of the paper towel feels rough against my sensitive skin, but after a few wipes, my smeared makeup is removed and my eyes are dried.

Staring at my reflection, I take one deep breath after another, trying to let go of the anger.

It doesn't help. The anger has attached itself inside every nook and cranny of my veins, leeching every ounce of hope and joy it could find.

I need to find a healthy way to get rid of these emotions, especially all the anger.

Walking used to be therapeutic for me growing up, so I can walk around and look for the gift shop to get Dad some balloons and a stuffed animal. I don't think Mom will mind, since she is dealing with her own emotions right now.

After throwing the paper towels in the trash can, I head in the opposite direction of the lobby.

Nurses and doctors pay me no mind when I walk past them, as they are busy with their own jobs and tasks.

Other visitors give me sympathetic looks.

When I'm about to give up looking for the gift shop and head back to the main lobby, I stumble upon the hospital's chapel.

I literally stumble and have to catch myself as my foot hits an uneven patch of the flooring.

The chapel door is closed, but no sounds are coming from inside.

I glance around to see if anyone is nearby to see me crack open the door and slip inside.

I'm not super religious, but I used to go to church with Mom and Dad growing up. Now, I usually spend my Sundays working all day.

I slowly walk to the first small pew, careful not to mess anything up as I move one of the Bibles to the side so I can take a seat.

My gaze locks onto the extra large wooden cross that is hanging on the wall. A symbol of hope, love, and sacrifice.

My anger consumes me and wraps me in a blind rage. How can someone so loving and caring be in a coma and on the brink of death?

Why Dad?

Why does our family have to be the one that has to deal with this?

Why weren't the street racers the ones to be hospitalized?

Hot tears form in my eyes and my vision turns blurry.

"Why God are you punishing me? Why am I cursed?" A ball of emotion lodges itself in my throat as my voice cracks.

I feel deflated and defeated.

There's nothing more I can do to make things right. No amount of begging will miraculously make Dad better. No amount of begging will bring Ryder back.

I feel like it's just a lost cause.

A voice clears from the doorway behind me.

Spinning around, I am shocked to see Trevor leaning against the door frame.

I stand up and ask, "What are you doing here?"

Did he hear what I just said?

"Your mom was worried that you were gone so long, so she had me check on you. I called into the women's bathroom and didn't hear anyone in there, so I kept walking."

He might not have heard what I said if Mom just sent him to come look for me.

“I didn’t know where you went, but I heard your voice coming from down the hall.”

Was I that loud? I didn’t think I was speaking loud, but if he heard me from down the hall, I must have been speaking loudly.

He takes a few steps towards me before continuing. “Addy, you aren’t being punished and you aren’t cursed, either.”

When he sits in the pew next to me, I sit back down and stare at the cross.

“Sometimes bad things happen to good people.”

“But why did it have to be Dad?”

My stomach tightens as more tears fall.

“I don’t know, Addy. I wish I did, but I don’t have that answer.” He lets out a soft sigh and stares at the ground.

“No one knows, but what I do know is that your dad has a team of great doctors helping him, a family that will support and care for him, and a congregation that will pray for him.”

“Thank you.” I whisper, feeling a little less angry than I was when I came in here.

He clears his throat. “Addy, I, uh-”

I turn my head to look at him. What is he about to ask me or say to me?

He looks uncomfortable, like he is about to confess his love for me or something.

“What’s going on?”

He shakes his head. “Nevermind.”

“No, don’t do that. Please tell me what you were going to say.”

He tilts his head until his gaze is locked onto mine.

My heart pounds in my chest as my mind reminds me I've seen this look from him before. It was the first time that we spent the night together and he stared at me as if I was the most beautiful woman in the world.

When his body leans in closer to mine, I hold my breath, hoping he isn't about to kiss me.

His voice is low, barely over a whisper. "I just want you to know that I'm here for you. Whatever you need. Whenever you need it. Whether it be an ear, a shoulder, or something more."

The glimpse of hope in his eyes lets me know he wants me to need him for something more.

I'm speechless and frozen in my spot, unable to move or process the words he just spoke.

Sure, we have been close friends and even more for a few nights, but my heart only wants Ryder.

Chapter Fifteen

I ALWAYS THOUGHT the coffee commercials were full of shit.

You know, the ones where adults smell a freshly brewed pot of coffee and instantly perk up like a cheerleader giving a pep talk to the entire school. The commercials always claim that smelling a pot of coffee is the best way to wake up.

Yeah, I didn't buy into the hype.

For me, smelling the thick slices of hickory smoked bacon frying in the pan was the best way to wake up. I'd even substitute the bacon for some breakfast sausage crumbles that Mom fries up with some gravy.

Now that is the best way to wake up, but when life throws you for a loop, you have to learn to deal with the twists and turns that come along the way.

Like realizing the coffee commercials held some semblance of the truth.

When life kicks you around for a bit and you are only barely surviving, you learn you need the natural pick me up of coffee in the morning to function like a human and not a zombie.

The smell of coffee is also my clue that another night has passed and we are still where we have been for the past week.

Mom's voice drifts to me while I am in the state of in between. In between dreaming and consciousness, where the realities from the past week try to slip in, but my brain tries

desperately to hold on to the fantasies that play out in my mind while I'm dreaming.

“Addy, time to wake up.”

I pop open my eyes, being temporarily blinded by the bright lights coming in through the lobby windows before squeezing them shut.

Mom's laughter is a breath of fresh air, trying to remind me of what life was like before the accident.

“I brought you an extra large cup of coffee.”

The smell of coffee drifts through my nostrils, perking me up like those commercials have portrayed for decades.

“Mmm. Thanks Mom.” I take the offered cup and take a sip of the hot liquid.

Standing up, I stretch my tired muscles and joints. “I guess I need to get home. There's a lot to get done this morning.”

I look around at the near empty lobby that has become a home away from home for Mom, Sam, and me over the past week.

Well, just Sam and I. Mom sleeps in the chair next to Dad's bed. Mark had to go back to work, but checks in every evening and brings us food.

Noticing that Mom and I are alone, I ask, “Where did Sam go?”

“He's visiting with Dad.”

This early? The sun is barely warming up on the horizon.

“How is Dad doing this morning?”

Dad's heart attack was unexpected, but his doctors have told us many times that it's a good thing he was already in the hospital when it happened or else we would have been planning a funeral.

Mom smiles, and it's the first time I've seen her smile in almost eight days.

“He’s actually in good spirits and eating breakfast right now, even though he’s itching to get back home and get back to running the farm.”

Leave it to Dad to be eager to get back to working twelve or more hours a day. “Dad needs to slow his horses a bit and worry about healing and getting better, and that’s it.”

Mom sits down and chuckles. “That’s what the doctor said. Recovery is going to be a very long road and Dad can’t rush back into things. He’s going to have to go to therapy and change his diet.”

“Well, we’ll all chip in more wherever we can to make sure Dad isn’t overdoing it. When are they estimating Dad coming home?”

Not that I’m wanting to rush things, but it will be nice to sleep in a bed. Hell, I’d love to just be able to sleep laying down and not sitting up in a hard plastic seat.

“The doctors are hoping for later today or tomorrow morning. They just want to be sure his tests are still good because he was in a coma for several days and had a heart attack and his body has been through the ringer.”

“Right. Well, I’ll be back as soon as I can. Is there anything you need from home?”

When she shakes her head, I grab the car keys from her and make my way outside to the parking lot.

Sam and I take turns coming home to shower and do some of the daily chores before racing back to the hospital.

The drive is like any other that I’ve taken over the past week. It’s mainly morning talk shows on the radio and practically no traffic.

It only takes a few minutes until I am pulling into the garage.

I always start by listening to the answering machine for any messages that may be important.

Grandma’s voice is the first message. “Hey dear, we’re just checking in to see if you need anything. We don’t want to be a

bother, but wanted you to know that we are thinking of y'all. Call if there's anything we can do."

The next message is from the neighbor letting us know that one cow got out and was roaming his property down near the creek, but he put her back and fixed the fence for us.

The rest of the messages are from family and friends wishing Dad a speedy recovery and letting the entire family know that we are in their thoughts and prayers.

I text Mom the messages from the answering machine before getting started on the chickens. I throw out their feed before collecting their eggs.

One thing that's for sure is that we have enough eggs to feed us for months.

I pick the handful of tomatoes that are ready to be picked and carry everything back inside. I place the eggs on the counter and wash off the tomatoes before placing them on a towel to dry.

The sound of the front door opening has me reaching for the large kitchen knife that is in the knife block next to the stove.

No one should be coming here this morning. Mark is at work. Danny has been staying at Rachel's place since being released from the hospital. Ryder is... well, no one knows where Ryder is.

He could be back in California for all we know.

It could be Danny coming home to grab more clothes or to do laundry, but Sam and I made him promise not to do any work for at least another week.

"Hello?" I call out, trying to mask my fear for courage.

No one answers me.

I wrap my hand around the handle of the knife and slowly creep around the kitchen island towards the front door.

My heart pounds in my chest as my breathing becomes ragged. Thankfully, it's not nighttime and dark in here or else

I'd really be scared.

Ryder pops up around the corner and I let out a loud scream.

“Oh my God! Ryder, what the fuck? You almost gave me a heart attack.” With my free hand, I place it over my heart and try to calm my racing pulse.

I turn away from him and return the knife to its place in the knife block before leaning against the island.

Giving Ryder a once over, the first thing I notice is that he looks like complete shit. His once tanned face looks paler and shallower, like he hasn't eaten all week. The bags under his eyes suggest he hasn't been sleeping well.

“Well, you look like shit.” I say bluntly.

He doesn't laugh, cry, or show any emotion. His gaze stays locked on mine in an unspoken battle.

There are a million things I want to say to Ryder- to apologize for, but nothing comes out. After a week of tumultuous emotions, I am left feeling drained and empty.

I just want this nightmare to be over and for the family to enjoy life again.

Ryder runs a hand through his longer than normal hair while blowing out a breath through his mouth. “Addy, I-”

When his gaze drops to the floor, I step closer to him, not speaking for fear of him pulling away. I wrap my hands around his.

When he looks up at me, I say, “I wish I could turn back time and not do certain things, or that I actually had time to explain what was going on before you left, or even have time for the two of us to actually talk rather than react.”

He shakes his head. “I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions.”

“Well, it was easy to do, and we were all under a lot of stress.”

My mind replays the conversation with Sam right after Ryder left.

I add, “I never should have put that much pressure on you to come inside. I should have realized that it was harder on you, and I’m sorry for being so selfish.”

He takes a deep breath. “There’s nothing for you to apologize for. I should have pushed my own fears and insecurities to the side and been there for you and your family.”

“Thanks to Sam, we all understood that you needed to do things in your own time.”

Whether or not I liked it, Sam was right. Ryder was having to deal with so many emotions, both old and new.

A small smile forms on his face. “I’m glad I have him as a best friend.”

I hesitate, but my curiosity gets the best of me, so I ask, “So, how are you feeling?”

“I spent the past week dealing with the grief and emotions that I kept locked up tight.”

“I’m sorry you had to do it alone.”

Sam or I could have been there with him, if only he had asked.

“I needed to do it alone. I needed to face the fact that I’ve been running for so long and it wasn’t helping in the slightest. I spent most days at the cemetery just talking and crying. That’s probably why I look like shit.”

I immediately feel horrified that those were some of my first words to him.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “It was the truth, but to be honest, you don’t look so good either.”

My eyes widen, but I laugh. “Is that so?”

His lips curl up into a grin. “Well, you’re still just as beautiful as always, but your eyes show your lack of sleep.”

My mind skips straight over the part about me being beautiful, almost as if my mind is afraid of getting hurt by Ryder again. My heart, on the other hand, swells with love.

“That’s what sleeping in a hard plastic chair will do to you, but Dad should come home today or tomorrow, so I’ll finally get to sleep in a bed again. Speaking of, I should probably get back to the hospital to see him.”

“I’ll come with you, if that’s okay with you.”

His reply catches me off guard and I reply with uncertainty in my tone. “Uh, sure.”

“And I was wondering-” He stops speaking as I open the refrigerator to grab a cold bottle of water.

He waits until after I take a sip of water and gaze back at him. “Addy, would you like to go on a date with me?”

“What?”

“Tomorrow? You, me, and a date?”

“Well, I-”

Mom’s voice interrupts me from the front door. When did she even get here?

“I think that is a great idea. It will be good for the two of you to get back to a normal life.”

I skip the date part and ask the question that’s on my mind. “How did you get here? Why are you here?”

Not that I care she is home, but Sam and I made this arrangement so Mom could stay at the hospital and not worry about anything but Dad and his wellbeing.

“Oh, Danny gave me a ride because I wanted to get some things ready for your dad’s return. The doctors said his results came back excellent, so they’re releasing him this afternoon.”

“That’s some of the best news I’ve heard all week.” I can finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Mom gestures towards Ryder. “So, now that you have nothing to worry about, you can accept Ryder’s date.”

My gaze locks with Ryder’s, who’s already looking at me with hope in his eyes.

“Sure. Let’s do it. Let’s go on a date tomorrow.”

Mom claps excitedly before walking towards her bedroom.

I leave the car keys for Mom on the kitchen island before Ryder and I head out to Sam’s car.

“Hey, do you know who’s been keeping up with the flowers on my parents’ grave?”

My steps falter. Of course, I do because I’m the one that visits his parents’ grave every few weeks and brings new flowers to keep it looking nice.

My face blushes. “I just wanted them to have fresh flowers.”

He laughs as his eyes glisten with emotion. “I should have known it was you. You are the most incredible woman I know. Thank you.”

I offer him a smile. I only did it because they were like a second set of parents to me and I didn’t want them to be forgotten.

Chapter Sixteen

WAKING UP, I'm as giddy as a girl can be, and it's not because I finally got a full night's sleep in my own bed.

Today's date with Ryder has me antsy, excited, nervous, and wanting to vomit all at the same time.

I recall Maya feeling these exact emotions right before one of her first dates. Although, she learned to not let first date jitters affect her, or maybe her body got used to them since she had hundreds of them.

With all of my previous first dates, I've never felt like this before. It has to be because this date is with Ryder and I've been waiting for so long for this to happen.

Since my stomach is in knots, I decide to bypass breakfast, heading outside to tend to my chores once I am dressed for the day.

The sun is peeking over the crown of the trees, evaporating the dew that sits atop the blades of grass and nestles in the leaves of the plants.

This time of the morning is my favorite. Everything is waking up; the birds, bees, squirrels, plants, and humans alike, but it's still quiet enough to revel in the peace and quiet.

Heading into the large, crowded chicken coop, I gather the eggs, placing them into the same basket I have used for several years.

This is my favorite basket, solely because Ryder looped a piece of braided hay in the bottom, swearing it would bring me good luck. I stupidly believed him and held onto the hope it gave me.

Back then, we only had a handful of chickens.

Nowadays, we have more chickens than this coop fits comfortably. Danny and I have been meaning to build a bigger chicken house with a larger outside pen for them to roam around, but we haven't had the time.

Guess it's time to make it a priority.

After our date, my mind chirps.

Sam and Ryder can chip in to help too, since Danny can't do much for another several weeks.

After gathering the eggs, I throw the chicken feed around their pen, scattering it across the entire area before bringing the full basket of eggs to the back door.

Starting on my next task, I slowly water the tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, potatoes, and peppers, making sure the water thoroughly saturates the roots before checking for ones to pick.

I end up with my arms full of fresh produce.

Heading inside, I place the vegetables in the sink before heading back outside to bring in the basket full of eggs.

I immediately place the eggs in the container that sits on the countertop next to the stove.

Returning to the sink, I gently wash off all the dirt from the various vegetables before scrubbing off the prickles on the cucumbers and placing the produce on the drying towel.

The house is eerily quiet. Where is everyone? Are they still sleeping?

The loud roar of a four-wheeler engine brings my attention to the backyard. Danny must be about to go for a ride, since he doesn't have to work on anything today.

Two more engines purr to life. That would explain where everyone is.

Mom walks into the kitchen, followed by Dad walking with his crutches.

Dad kisses my forehead before starting a pot of coffee. "Morning, sweetie."

"Morning. Y'all slept in late." I smile while looking at the clock on the wall, noticing that it is already almost ten-thirty.

"It was nice being able to stay in bed a little while longer." Mom lovingly smiles towards Dad.

This makes my heart swell. After all these years of being married, they are very much still in love like they were on day one.

Mom fixes two cups of coffee before getting ingredients out of the fridge to prepare lunch.

"Thank you for getting these cleaned." She says as she grabs several potatoes, placing them on the cutting board to slice into chips.

Knowing that it will only take a half hour for Mom to fix lunch, I hurry with the remaining chores so we can eat an early lunch together.

I check the salt levels in the pool before turning on the floor vacuum. While it cleans the floor of the pool, I use the long-handled pool net to skim the bugs, pollen, and grass from the top of the water.

Dad sticks his head out through the barely opened back door. "Lunch is ready. I can finish that for you later."

"No, you can't. Besides, I just got done. I only need to put everything up."

I pull the vacuum out of the water and grab the net, putting them back in the storage closet before heading inside to wash my hands.

Mom has made chicken salad sandwiches with homemade potato chips with a side of our family's own canned pickles.

“Are we not waiting for the guys?” I ask, surprised that Mom and Dad fix their plates and head to the table.

Usually, Mom waits until everyone else has fixed their plates to fix hers and Dads.

“They won’t be back for a while,” Dad replies mysteriously.

I sit in my seat and take a bite of my sandwich. No one says a word as we eat in silence. We more or less gobble it down like this is our last meal.

My thoughts shift to the guys.

Why didn’t they ask me to join them on their four wheeling adventure?

Sure, I’m a girl and their younger sister, but I usually go along with them. Hell, almost every country girl I know rides a four-wheeler.

After eating, I excuse myself and head upstairs to shower and change for my date with Ryder. I do all the girly things that we do before a big, important date.

I shave, exfoliate, and moisturize every inch of skin before blow drying my hair and spraying myself with a pineapple scented, glitter body spray.

Hanging up my towel, I slip on my silky robe as I head to my closet, hoping to find something to wear.

Instinctively, I lay clothes out on my bed, trying to find the perfect outfit for tonight.

“Too casual,” I say as I put several shirts in a pile.

“Too dressy.” More clothes go in the no pile.

I sort the stack of shirts into the no pile and a maybe pile. When I run out of shirts, I carry the no pile back to the closet to hang back up. My eyes skim over my summer sun dresses.

Is this date going to be semi-dressy or more of a casual going to the movies type of date? Why couldn’t he tell me where we were going?

I recall his text from last night. ‘I want it to be a surprise.’

“Ugh!” Frustrated, I flop down on my bed, hoping the perfect date outfit comes to mind in the next few minutes.

Mom pokes her head into my room. “Need some help?”

“Yes! I have no clue what to wear. I don’t even know where we are going! Is it jeans, a tee, and boots casual? Or a dress and sandals situation? Why wouldn’t he give me a hint of what attire I would need?”

I hear myself freaking out, but I want this date to go perfectly. We have waited so long for this that I can hardly breathe for fear that it will be ripped out from under me.

“Well, lucky for you, I know where you two are going, so I know the perfect outfit.”

As my expression changes to shock, Mom grins wider.

I quickly sit up and ask, “Where is he taking me?”

“I can’t tell you that, but I can tell you this is the perfect outfit.”

Mom opens my dresser drawer and pulls out my light wash denim shorts and throws them at me.

She heads into the closet, looks around for a moment before coming out holding my never worn, brand new black sleeveless blouse. The inner layer of the shirt is fitted while the outer layer is mesh and flowy.

Grandma gave this to me as part of my graduation gift years ago. She said it would help me look professional, yet cute for interviews, whether it be for college admissions or a job.

“Are you sure on this top? Isn’t it too dressy for jean shorts?” I frown as I try to picture these clothing items on a mysterious date.

“Yes, I’m more than sure. Trust me. It’s perfect.” Mom walks to my bedroom door. “And wear minimal makeup. It’s supposed to be a scorcher out there today.”

“Thanks!” I yell as the door closes behind her.

At least I know it's going to be an outdoorsy date.

I quickly change and sneak out of my bedroom.

Per the instructions Ryder texted me, I sneak out the front door, with Mom's help, and walk a little way down the road to where I see a recently showered Ryder leaning against the passenger door of Dad's nicer spare truck.

He is wearing a fitted white tee, a pair of well-fitted jeans, and a pair of black slip-on Chuck Taylors.

I laugh as I realize we're wearing matching shoes.

"Wow, you look absolutely beautiful." He opens the passenger door for me before placing a soft kiss on my cheek.

I feel my face blush at his sweet gesture as I let my gaze linger on his bulging biceps.

"You look pretty good yourself."

Strong, muscled arms have always been my weakness, and damn it if he doesn't have the best ones I have even seen.

I can't explain why I love muscular arms so much. Maybe because they can make me feel safe and secure while wrapped in them, or maybe because muscular arms mean he can pick me up.

We all know that women find it hot to be picked up by a man, especially if it leads to an orgasm or two.

Ryder smirks as he catches me checking him out. "Like what you see?"

"Of course, or else I wouldn't be staring." I slide onto the bench seat as Ryder closes the door behind me, deciding to buckle up in the center.

I always thought it was so cute when couples sat next to each other in a truck instead of being separated. Ryder seems to like this as well, because his face lights up when he sees me in the middle.

Ryder's hand rests on my smooth thigh as he drives us towards our mystery date. We make small talk, not touching

on serious topics like his time in California, or our future paths.

My face lights up as he parks the truck in the dirt parking lot of the county fair.

Trevor and I were supposed to come to this together, but with the accident and the extended hospital stay, I completely forgot all about the fair. I'm glad Ryder chose this as our first official date.

After paying for our admission, we walk around and look at the various booths. There are paintings, wood sculptures, candles, Christmas ornaments, and even jewelry.

Ryder buys me a charm bracelet with a heart charm with the year engraved on the back of it. Even though I tell him I don't need any jewelry, I love that he is insistent on me having a memento from our first date.

This new side of Ryder is shocking yet welcomed. It's like a breath of fresh air that is satisfying and addicting.

After looking at all the crafts offered in the booths, we head towards the back of the fairgrounds where most of the rides are located.

"There is one thing I have always wanted to do, and I think you will look sexy as hell doing it, too." Ryder points to a ride that is hidden under a large tent.

Walking in the direction that he is pointing, I see a lot of hay. Looking past all the hay, there is a mechanical bull ride set up in the middle of an inflatable rink.

Ryder laughs as my eyes enlarge.

I shake my head as I stare at the ride. "There is no way I can do that."

I know what you are thinking. Shouldn't cowgirls know how to ride an animal?

I may be a cowgirl, but I've never ridden a bull and I don't like riding horses. They are unpredictable and smell of high heaven.

Sure, this might be a mechanical bull, but I haven't ridden one of them either.

"Of course you can, and if you fall off, you can always try again. I'll go first so you can see what not to do." Ryder offers.

Since there is no line, Ryder is immediately let through once we get up to the gate. He does a quick, full body stretch before mounting the beast. If I thought he looked sexy before, he is an Adonis on top of this bull.

Once situated, the attendant stands behind the control panel and pushes the start button.

My gaze watches as the bull slowly moves back and forth. Ryder easily rocks back and forth in rhythm with the motion. When he turns to look my way, I give him two thumbs up.

"Do you want to control the movements?" The attendant asks since no one else is around.

An evil grin forms on my face. "Yes! How does it work?"

He gives me a quick rundown of the joystick and speed lever before letting me take control.

I jerk the joystick and watch in amazement as the bull jerks the same way the joystick did. Turning up the speed, I push the joystick to the left before quickly jerking it to the right.

Ryder still stays on the beast with little effort. I double my efforts, watching as I am able to catch him off guard as he falls to the inflated ground.

I cheer as he stands up and makes his way over to me. "You did great!"

"Let's see if you can do better." Ryder challenges.

Climbing onto the mechanical bull, I am glad Mom chose shorts and a flowy sleeveless blouse. I can't imagine how horrifying this would be if I were wearing a dress and flew off of this beast.

Everyone would see my ass.

I get into position and grip the fake saddle just as the bull starts to move. Unlike Ryder, I take a little longer to get the

rhythm down, but soon I am able to rock back and forth with the motions.

The rocking speeds up, but I can still keep my form. Looking over at Ryder, I see him controlling the joystick. He grins as the bull jerks forward, almost causing me to fall off.

“Gotta try harder than that!” I yell towards him.

I should have known he would take it as a challenge. The beast jerks backwards, making me bounce on the hard plastic.

Damn, that is probably going to hurt tomorrow.

After a couple more minutes, Ryder successfully knocks me off the bull. I land on the inflatable rink laughing.

Ryder helps me stand and walk towards the exit. We thank the attendant before making our way to another ride.

“That was so fun! I can’t believe I’ve never done that before.”

The smile on my face seems to be permanently etched there.

“How about the winner of the next game gets to choose where we eat dinner?” Ryder suggests.

“Sounds fun.” I pull him over towards a game I know I can win; the water gun game.

We have played similar games at the arcade in the mall when we were younger, and I always won.

“Game on. May the best person win,” Ryder replies with a smug look on his face.

We wait until we are the only two people here so we can have the game to ourselves.

I sit on the far left, and Ryder sits in the middle. The attendant explains the rules to us like we are children.

The competitive side of me wants to win and gloat that I am still the best, but the other side of me wants to see what Ryder has planned for the rest of the night.

Surely, he would make plans for dinner and not leave it up to chance, right?

As soon as the round begins, water squirts from my gun and hits the center of the target, since I am already pushing the buttons. I am surprised to see that Ryder has learned this trick as he is already in first place.

Keeping the water stream aimed at dead center, I take the lead and grin.

Yep, I still got it.

After a few moments, I angle my stream of water just left of the target to allow Ryder to get back in first place. The bell rings and I see the Ryder is the winner.

Jumping up, he looks proud of himself for beating me. “Hell yeah! Finally! I’ve been waiting to beat you at this game.”

His excitement has me excited for him, and at this moment, I’m happy that I let him win. His prize is a very soft teddy bear that is holding a red rose, which he immediately hands to me.

I link my hand with his as we take our time walking back to the truck. “So, what do you have in mind for dinner?”

“I have a plan.” Ryder responds casually.

We walk past kids running around eating cotton candy, older couples sitting on benches enjoying the atmosphere, and young teens waiting in line for rides with their friends.

Getting to the truck, Ryder once again opens the passenger door for me before heading around to the driver’s side.

Leaning my head on his shoulder, he makes his way down the street to our favorite barbecue restaurant.

“It’s really crowded. Do you think we will find a table?” I ask once we make it through the crowded doorway.

“We aren’t eating here,” Ryder says, leaving me more confused than ever.

“We aren’t?” I question, my confusion evident in my tone.

“Nope. We’re ordering it to go and then I have another surprise for you,” Ryder beams, as I give him another questioning look.

We order pulled pork sandwiches with a side of french fries for both of us. It only takes a few minutes for them to make it and for us to get back in the truck, heading to yet another destination.

Chapter Seventeen

RYDER BACKS the truck up along the cliffs before setting the emergency brake.

This used to be a very popular hangout for my brothers, and I can finally see why. The views are breathtaking. The sunset surrounds us as we overlook the city.

It's very romantic.

Ryder gets out and opens the toolbox, pulling out a small cooler and his dark blue duvet.

I fall deeper in love with him as I realize he has planned a romantic dinner in the truck's bed, on his dark blue duvet while the sun sets.

He helps me climb up into the truck bed, following me as he opens the cooler and pulls out a couple of bottles of Mom's homemade sweet tea.

As we eat our sandwiches, a question pops into my head.

I blurt out. "Why wasn't I invited on the ride this morning?"

Ryder turns to look me in the eye before replying.

"As cheesy as it's going to sound, I wanted to give you space to take your time getting ready for our date."

He turns his gaze to the sunset before continuing. "Also, I figured keeping your brothers away from the house was the

easiest way to keep them from asking you a million questions about why you are all dressed up.”

This is possibly the sweetest thing he has ever done and I can't help but let out a little “Aww!”

Changing the subject, Ryder says, “By the way, let me tell you again how stunning you look.”

“Thank you.” I reply shyly.

I won't tell him how hard it was to pick out this outfit. Thankfully, Mom came to my rescue.

After eating, Ryder puts our trash into a bag and places it in the toolbox. He pulls me back until I am laying on his arm. I stare at the stars above, not wanting this night to end but looking forward to our next date.

I turn my head and see Ryder staring back at me. My heart beats faster as he leans closer to me.

When our lips touch, I swear I see fireworks.

Literally.

Fireworks boom in the sky above.

“You planned this too, didn't you?” I ask in amazement.

“Actually, the city did, but I figured this would be the perfect ending to our date.” Ryder shrugs.

“I can think of a better way to end our date.” I watch as his eyes darken with lust.

To not offend him or hurt his feelings, I quickly add, “Not to take away from the fireworks and the date you planned for us.”

“I like the way you are thinking right now.” Ryder pulls me into a kiss as more fireworks light up the sky.

We lay in the truck's bed, cuddling while we watch the rest of the fireworks show. After the finale, Ryder surprises me with a heated kiss that leaves me wanting more.

“My room?” I suggest before we find ourselves laying here in public having sex for all to see and hear.

“Sounds like the perfect ending to me.” Ryder gets everything cleaned up and put away before I can even climb off the tailgate.

“I feel naughty for sneaking back home after a date to spend the night with a man in my room. To be honest, it turns me on even more.”

I laugh as Ryder chokes on his saliva.

Ryder hits the gas, eager to get home as soon as we can. “We have to make it back undetected before we can spend the night together.”

Ryder turns the headlights off as we pull into the driveway, parks the truck, and kills the engine before it can alert anyone to our arrival.

He grabs his duvet from the toolbox while I throw our trash away.

I watch his silhouette as he slowly turns the doorknob and gently pushes the door open. I rush over to him, gripping the back of his shirt when he gestures at me to come over.

Voices drift into the garage.

Listening closer, I recognize them as Sam, Danny, and Mom. It sounds like they are talking in the kitchen.

I whisper in Ryder’s ear, “We shouldn’t eavesdrop.”

Ryder whispers back, “It might help us sneak back to your room if we know what they are talking about.”

He’s right. We might hear if they are going upstairs or even coming to the garage.

I lean forward, pushing my body into Ryder’s back in order to hear them better.

“Where is Ryder? And where is Addy? I haven’t seen him since lunch.” Sam sounds agitated.

I never meant for this date to cause problems, and I think Ryder feels the same way.

We just wanted a chance to explore our feelings and go on a date.

The refrigerator door shuts before Mom says, “They went out.”

“Out where?” Sam questions.

“They went out on a date.”

I envision Mom rolling her eyes at Sam’s daftness.

Sam yells, his voice vibrating throughout the house. “WHAT?”

“This isn’t news, Sam,” Mom says calmly in her motherly voice.

“It is to us,” Sam replies with less anger in his voice.

Danny cuts in. “When did all of this start?”

Mom lets out a long sigh. “They have liked each other for many years.”

We hear the scrape of a stool being pulled out before Sam’s voice is heard again.

“How do you know? He’s my best friend, and I didn’t even know.”

“For one, I’m a woman and can see the signs and two I talked to Addy about it a long time ago.” Mom chuckles at what I assume is a shocked expression from Sam and Danny.

“We can’t let this happen.” Sam says roughly.

Mom, being the calm one, is able to diffuse the situation with just one statement.

“It isn’t your decision to make. You just got home from college; you should be trying to mend your relationship with your sister, not creating a bigger divide.”

Ryder and I decide that now is the best time to head upstairs. He heads into his room to throw his duvet on his bed and change into more comfortable clothes before sneaking into my room.

I'm in the middle of unclasping my bra when he closes and locks my door behind him.

“Need some help?” He says, barely over a whisper.

Letting my arms fall to my side, I whisper, “I'd love some.”

His touch is soft and gives me butterflies. He pushes my hair to the right before kissing my left shoulder.

The kiss, so chaste, has me wanting to never let him go. He knows exactly what I need and how I need it.

My bra slides down my arms, falling to the floor.

His arms wrap around me in a hug from behind before caressing my breasts. He gently massages them, leaving my hardened nipples for later.

It leaves me moaning and begging for more.

“Ugh, please. I need more.” My back arches to push my breasts harder into his palms.

He pinches my nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

“Fuck!” I cry out.

Pleasure shoots down to my core, wetness soaking through my panties. I unbutton my jean shorts and push them and my panties down to my ankles.

Stepping out of them, I reach behind me, gripping his cock through his thin sleep shorts, making him groan and thrust his hips into my ass. I use his distraction to my advantage.

Pushing his shorts down, I free his cock before stroking up and down his entire length.

His light, chaste kisses on my shoulder turn into deeper, passion-fueled nibbles. I want him to mark me, make me his.

Angling my head to the right, he lightly sucks on my neck before gently biting my pulse point.

“Your brothers would kill me if I left a big ass hickey on the side of your neck.”

He chuckles when I let out a moan of dissatisfaction.

I turn around to look him in the eyes. Gathering all the courage I can, I say, “Then just fuck me until I can’t walk straight. Fuck me until my pussy memorizes your cock and only craves you.”

Truth be told, I’m already at that point. I only want him and only crave him, but it’s too early to voice those intense feelings.

He lifts me up with his muscular arms and places me in the center of my bed, climbing on top of me as soon as my ass hits the cover. His thigh pushes my legs open wider as his body pins me to the mattress.

Being impatient and horny, I rub my pussy along his thigh.

Laughing, he murmurs, “Relax. We have plenty of time.”

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I pull him closer until his cock is resting in my juices.

“Next round can be relaxed and slow. Right now, I need you to pound my pussy as hard and as fast as you can until we both collapse on the bed completely spent, breathing hard, and sated.”

His eyes widen at my bluntness, his Adam’s apple bobs, and his cock twitches in anticipation.

Gripping his cock, I stroke it a few times before guiding it inside of me. He feels so good that I urge him deeper.

Ryder waits until I relinquish control before thrusting. His hips slam into mine repeatedly. I raise my hips to allow him to thrust deeper.

Our moans mingle as we share in the pleasure. He throws my legs over his shoulders and pounds into me. I eagerly take him deeper and deeper.

This round is hard and fast. We both know what we want and need. Neither of us mind the other’s selfishness.

In fact, his selfishness to come only urges my orgasm to become stronger. His thrusts are deliberate and are hitting all the right spots.

My walls clamp down around his cock as my orgasm explodes. I pull the pillow over my mouth and scream out.

Ryder roars against my pillow as he spills himself inside me. The warm rush sends quakes through my body like an explosive aftershock.

Ryder collapses on the bed next to me, heart racing and breathing heavy.

We don't speak for several minutes.

"How am I ever going to get enough of you?" Ryder whispers as he pushes my hair from in front of my eyes.

I answer honestly. "I ask myself that question all the time."

"You make it harder to stop myself from falling deeper every time you smile at me or say things like fuck me until I can't walk straight."

Ryder laughs, but I can see the seriousness in his eyes.

"Why not jump head first with me?" I ask, letting him know I want more and I want it with only him.

He thinks for a moment before lighting up and asking, "Addy, do you want to be my girlfriend?"

I turn the question back on him. "Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

I'm a little hesitant because I feel like all my dreams are about to come true and nothing worthwhile comes this easily.

Ryder's answer catches me by surprise. "More than anything right now."

Feeling my smile widen, I mumble, "Me too."

I'm happier than I have been in a long time. In fact, I'm happier than I have been in eight years.

Ryder sits up to kiss me, but I push him back down.

Straddling him, I lean down and kiss him as he enters me. Our kiss is slow and erotic.

My hips match the pace as I take my time riding him, slowly bringing us closer to another orgasm.

His hands caress my entire body. They pinch my nipples, tickle my sides, and squeeze my ass before settling on my hips.

He grips my hips as his thrusts get deeper. I know he is getting closer.

His gaze locks onto mine as his grip on my hips tightens to nearly a bruising squeeze, and his cock trembles. He lets me see the love and desire in his eyes.

My feelings echo his tenfold.

I want to tell him how I really feel. That four letter word, but something holds me back.

My walls constrict as I see the struggle on his face that he can no longer hold on.

His orgasm starts a chain reaction in me. Pleasure builds up as his release coats my walls. His continued thrusts stroke my g-spot until my pussy gushes.

“Ahh!” I cry out as my orgasm crashes through me. With my eyes clamped shut, stars burst all around me as Ryder swipes his thumb over my sensitive clit.

“Fuck!” My body shakes as pleasure hums in my every limb.

Ryder chuckles as he leans up to kiss me. The kiss is lazy yet perfect. He pours all of his emotions into it.

I can feel exactly what he feels.

“Addy, I...” Ryder begins, but is interrupted by his phone ringing.

He doesn't get up to answer it. Instead, he kisses my neck, shoulder, and down to my breast before sucking my nipple into his mouth.

Moaning, I rub my core on his cock, feeling his erection coming back to life.

“As I was trying to say. Addy, I...” Ryder hesitates and is interrupted yet again.

His phone dings with a text message.

Grumbling, he digs in the pocket of his shorts for his phone. The light from his phone illuminates his face.

I can see a frown form on his face as he checks to see who is texting him. His face pales.

Worrying, I sit up on my elbows.

“What is it? Is everything ok?” I ask, not knowing who could make him pale like that.

Ryder’s voice is shaking and full of surprise. He whispers, “I’m going to be a dad. I need to get back to California.”

Ryder jumps into action as I sit here, frozen in my spot.

He quickly throws his clothes back on and heads to my bedroom door. Just as he is about to close the door to my bedroom and the figurative door to our future, he whispers, “I’m sorry.”

Is this for real?

I already guessed that he had his hookups back in California. After all, no one is going away to college and being celibate for six years, but to have a pregnant whatever she is back in California?

That is a relationship killer.

I laugh maniacally to myself. What relationship? We literally just went out on our first date and just became official.

My heart shatters into a million pieces as tears roll down my face.

Bad things always come in threes.

Chapter Eighteen

I THROW the pool supplies into the storage building and slam the door shut before heading to the chicken coop.

Like many times before, I feed the chickens before gathering the eggs. Ever since ‘that night’ I’ve refused to use the lucky basket.

Fuck that basket and fuck Ryder.

They are both dead to me, but I refuse to show any emotions.

I put the eggs into a dish towel before grabbing all four corners and making my own makeshift basket to carry into the kitchen.

After placing them on the counter, I head back outside to check the garden.

In the distance, I watch Trevor stalk over to me. Of course, he’s shirtless; his tanned skin is glistening in the hot summer sun.

If I wasn’t on a hiatus from men right now, I’d probably flirt with him. A boost in my self esteem might perk me up a bit, but as it stands, my love life is nonexistent.

Trevor’s been working out more. His bigger muscles ripple from even the slightest movement, but his muscles don’t stack up against Ryder’s.

Trevor leans against the siding of the house and crosses his arm. “Don’t you think it’s about time you move on and get

back to the old Addy that everyone knows and loves?”

Gossip typically flies through the family and word spreads like wildfire. Before I could process what happened with Ryder, everyone was already talking about it and wondering what the future would be like.

“No.” I bark back.

I’m not in the mood to hear his shit right now.

“You’re angry and hurt and no one blames you, but everyone is worried.”

I cross my arms. “This is the new me. You don’t have to like it, but this is how things are.”

He stares at me with scrutiny in his eyes. “Just because you are good for someone doesn’t mean they are good for you. You are young, smart, and attractive. You shouldn’t be going through life in a catatonic state.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, which one am I?”

My question confuses him.

He furrows his eyebrows and cocks his head to the side as he tries to decipher my question. “Huh?”

“First you say that I’m angry and hurt and now I’m going through life in a catatonic state. I can’t be both, so which one am I?”

He pauses for a moment and narrows his eyes at me. “You’re both. You’re angry and hurt, but only going through the motions of life. There’s no excitement in your eyes anymore.”

What’s his point? Why does it matter to him?

“So what?”

“So, that worries me. And in case you haven’t noticed, which I doubt you have, your family is also worried about you.”

“What would you suggest I do? Line up dates with guys I don’t want just to make you happy? Date guys that don’t

excite me or leave me wanting more?”

He walks closer to me. “No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

I prop my hand on my hip, my attitude evident and running rampant. “Then what are you saying exactly? Spit it out, so I can get on with my chores.”

“I think you should keep your options open for your future, both romantically and career wise.”

“I don’t have a career, nor do I plan on really having one. With Dad and Danny getting into the accident, I will probably stay here like Danny and help with the farm.”

“And how long do you think that will keep you happy?”

His questions leave me wondering about my future. I’ve never really thought about it before.

I’ve always been content working remotely while getting my associate’s degree and helping with the farm. I guess in the back of my mind I assumed I would stick around here and work the farm with Danny.

Especially after Sam and Ryder left for college and stayed away for six years, my future became clearer.

Someone has to run the farm, now more so than ever, with Dad having to take a step back, and it seems like Danny and I are the only ones that are willing to keep the family legacy alive.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you upset.” His voice is soft and full of regret.

I shake my head.

“You didn’t. I was just thinking that my future is pretty much already decided. I enjoy working on the farm and Danny and I work great together. Shit, even you have come in and became a vital part of the team.”

He gently lays one hand on my shoulder. “I have enjoyed being a part of the team and I’m even more grateful for your friendship over the years.”

Before I can speak, Trevor takes another step closer to me until our bodies are almost touching. Time seems to slow down as I watch his eyes grow heavy and he glances down at my lips before returning to my gaze.

He slowly leans closer to me and presses his lips to mine. For a moment, I let him kiss me.

I remember the nights we've spent together as we both tried desperately to forget the ones we loved.

I remember putting up walls around my heart and using our time together as a way to de-stress and get our sexual needs met.

And I remember those walls crumbling when Ryder took me on that amazing date and we became an official couple.

Those walls have been rebuilt as I try to navigate life once again without Ryder, but my heart knows what it's like to receive Ryder's love and I crave that more than I should.

I regain my senses and push him back before taking a few steps away.

"Trevor, I can't."

Disappointment crosses his face as he stares at me with lust swirling in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Trevor, but my heart only wants Ryder as fucked up as it is. I'm trying to move on, but it's hard. I value our friendship, but I can't lead you on."

He only says two words. "I understand."

He might say that he understands, but his face is telling a different story.

I try not to let guilt seep into me, but looking at him right now, that's all I feel.

"What about Ethan?"

Trevor hasn't mentioned him lately, so I wonder if something happened between the two of them.

After the mall visit, I was hoping the two of them would go out, since it was so clear that they liked one another.

He crosses his arms tightly in front of his chest. “Nothing’s going on with him.”

“Aww, that’s a bummer. I figured the two of you would be hot and heavy for a while.”

“Yeah, so did I, but I think a part of me always wondered what it’d be like to be with you. Fully and one hundred percent committed.”

Did he self-sabotage his relationship with Ethan to try to have one with me?

I thought we were on the same page, just friends with benefits, since we both really wanted to be with someone else. I guess I was wrong.

“I’m sorry, Trevor, but there’s only one person who I want to be with.”

At his confused face, I correct myself. “Well, one person who I wanted to be with. That ship has sailed.”

“Well, maybe the universe will help fix things for you and you’ll get your happily ever after.”

That sounds like a dream come true. More like a fantasy that I don’t foresee happening.

“And maybe you’ll get your happy ending, too.”

He smirks. “I always get a happy ending.”

I laugh and try to let all the pain and anger go. “I’ve got to finish my chores. Do you have a lot still to do?”

Trevor shakes his head. “I finished everything already, so if you need help, I’ll chip in. If not, I guess I’ll head home and shower.”

“Go on ahead. It won’t take me long to look through the garden.”

Trevor nods his head and gives me a small wave before disappearing around the corner of the house.

I get started in the smaller family garden, looking for any tomatoes and cucumbers that need picking. Only a few tomatoes and two cucumbers are ready to be picked.

I bring them into the kitchen to wash them off when Mom's voice drifts from her bedroom.

"I know Addy is hurting, but I don't think forcing her away will help the problem. She's heartbroken and it's going to take time to heal."

She stops talking and I wonder if she's on the phone because no one says anything.

Just as I'm about to head into her room, she speaks.

"Mom, I appreciate your opinions and your willingness to help, but there's nothing we can do. This is something that Addy and Ryder need to figure out on their own."

Great, so even Grandma knows about the drama. How did she even find out?

The longer the conversation goes on, the more annoyed Mom gets. "I don't think you understand how long or how much Addy has wanted this relationship to happen. She finally got what her heart truly desired and then it was ripped from her."

Mom huffs while Grandma says something.

"A baby is a deal breaker for most young people, especially when it isn't yours. I don't blame Addy for not wanting to be with him. She's twenty-one and if she wanted a baby, then she'd have her own."

A throat clears behind me.

Spinning around, my face turns red at being caught eavesdropping.

Sam raises his eyebrow at me and nods towards Mom's door.

I pull him into the living room so Mom can't hear our conversation.

"What?" I ask, annoyed that he caught me.

He looks around before speaking. “You’ve been avoiding me. How are you doing?”

Is he for real?

“How do you think I’m doing? You heard Mom. I finally got what I wanted, and it was ripped from me.”

Sam looks down at the floor. “Addy, I’m sorry. I never could have guessed this would happen.”

“I don’t think anyone could have guessed Ryder would have a baby on the way.”

A baby.

That is so hard for me to wrap my head around.

A large part of me wants to ask if he’s heard from Ryder yet. I’m curious if Ryder is planning to stay in California and raise his baby or if he’s going to come back here and be a part time father.

I can’t picture Ryder not being in his child’s life, but I can’t picture Ryder as a young dad, either.

He’s not that young. Many people become parents in their mid-twenties.

But not like this.

I always figured Sam and Ryder were two peas in a pod who would always live with one another as true brothers would.

I always pictured us living here in our parents’ house and working the farm, but things change.

Sam’s voice brings me out of my thoughts. “Do you want to talk about him?”

I shake my head. That’s the one thing I don’t want to talk about. The emotions are still raw and despite me trying to keep them locked up, they are bursting at the seams to be let free.

“I talked to him earlier, if you are curious about what he is thinking and going through.”

Sam knows how to keep me intrigued. Of course, I want to know what he's thinking and what he's going through, but my heart won't be able to handle hearing it.

Tears form in my eyes as I picture Ryder rubbing a very pregnant belly.

I shake those thoughts away as my voice cracks. "I can't. It hurts too much. It's still so fresh."

Maybe in a few years, I'll look back on this moment and be able to talk about it, but until then, I have to push the thoughts and memories to the back of my mind and just live life one day at a time.

Sam gives me a sympathetic look. "Okay."

I turn away from him just as the first tear makes its way down my cheek. Heading upstairs to my bedroom, I let the tears flow.

This will be the last time I allow myself to cry for Ryder and the future we could have had.

From now on, there is no more Ryder and there is no more us.

Chapter Nineteen

I DON'T KNOW how long it has been since that fateful night.

My body has been in auto-survival mode. I tend to my chores whenever I manage to wake up, eat some sort of makeshift meal, and shower.

I go through all the motions but with no emotion, before crying most of the night until I pass out from exhaustion, despite me promising myself that there wouldn't be any more tears shed for Ryder.

No one asks how I am or if there is anything they can do to make things better.

From what little I have overheard, they don't know what Ryder is planning or if they do know, they are keeping it from me, so I don't get more hurt.

I scoff, as if that's a possibility.

I don't know what Ryder is planning on doing, but the only thing I know is that he has ripped my heart out and I can't seem to enjoy life anymore.

I lost track of how many texts I have sent to Trevor without ever receiving a text back.

Calling Trevor never worked either. He briefly answered five or six days ago to apologize for not replying to my texts before saying, "I'm with Ethan, but I can talk later."

Later never happened and eventually I gave up.

Why bother when nothing changes?

It's like Maya all over again.

Feelings of rejection resurface, and I spiral downhill. I'm happy for Trevor, I really am, but can't he sense I am going through something?

Is this payback for turning him down?

Should I have just tried to have a relationship with him, despite my heart only wanting Ryder?

Would I be happier now if I kissed Trevor back? Would he be happier?

Ryder hasn't tried to call or text me, and I refuse to be the first one to reach out. As far as I know, no one here knows if he is planning on staying out in California.

Or bringing her and the baby back. My mind chimes in.

There is no way I can stay here and watch him grow a family with another woman. There is no doubt in my mind that he would be a devoted husband and a doting father, but this is the future I always envisioned with him.

Not him and someone else.

Trying to get out of this funk, I applied for several colleges on the East coast last week, but that was only a temporary fix to my mood.

I need to be as far away from him as I can. Florida is my top pick as far as states go. There are miles upon miles of beaches, millions of people, and plenty of opportunity to find something to occupy my time.

Hell, I may even go there just to work. After applying to a college in Florida, I called my aunt who lives there. She's more of an older best friend than an aunt, but after explaining my broken heart in as few words as I could, she immediately understood.

Sure, I will miss Mom and Dad, even Danny, Sam, and Mark, but if they can visit Ryder and Sam in California for holidays, then they can come to Florida for a vacation.

I am brought out of my daydream when Mom knocks on my bedroom door.

“Hey honey. I brought you some lunch. You got a lot of mail, too.”

Mom places a stack of mail on my bed before placing a plate of food on my lap.

“Thank you.” I whisper.

I haven't really been out of my room in a couple of days. Luckily, Mom brings me food to keep me from starving.

Mom hesitates for a moment before sitting down at the bottom of my bed next to the pile of mail.

Looking through the mail, I see a letter from Ryder.

Not bothering to open it, I throw it towards my trash can that sits under my desk. It barely makes it past Mom, but it's the thought that I am throwing my anger away that helps me heal just a tiny bit.

“Don't you want to read that?” Mom asks in her patented Mom voice.

“No.” I reply while flipping through the envelopes from various colleges.

Finding one from Florida, I rip it open.

My heart beats fast as I read the first paragraph. I have to reread it several more times before I realize that I have been accepted.

“Yes!” I shriek, showing more emotion than I have in many, many days.

Mom gives me a big hug, but her enthusiasm is severely lacking.

“Oh! Congratulations! Is that the one you really want?” Mom asks with concern in her eyes.

“Yes. Florida is the perfect place. New people, new cities, and if all else fails, I can work at one of the many amusement parks.”

I would love nothing more than to stay here at home, but there are just too many reminders of him here. Even my room has constant reminders of him.

“How are you going to afford all the costs that’s associated with living there while going to school full time?”

I place the acceptance letter down on my pillow.

“Going to school is a fall back option. I don’t really want to continue with schooling right now, but if it gets me away, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Mom looks at me, confused. “Then what is your preferred option?”

I want to say, stay here and magically wipe all memories of Ryder away, but I don’t.

“I applied for the college before I talked to Aunt Carol. She said I can stay with her for however long I need to and she will help me look for a good job with benefits so I can figure out life away from here.”

“Well, we’re thrilled for you. If you choose to attend, when do you have to arrive for orientation?” Mom asks, looking at the acceptance letter.

“Two weeks, but I might head to Aunt Carol’s sooner than later so I can get used to the time difference.” I lie, and even though Mom knows I am lying, she doesn’t berate me.

Mom looks like she is going to cry, but she keeps them from falling. “While you pack, I’ll go research flights to Jacksonville.”

“That would be great!” I plaster on a fake smile so Mom won’t know how heartbroken I still am.

Mom pats my leg before standing. “I’ll go let the others know. Make sure you let the university know you are coming so they can have your dorm room ready.”

Mom leaves my door cracked and I hear her sobbing on the way down the stairs.

I don’t want her to be sad, but I deserve to be happy too.

Is this really going to make me happy, though? Is leaving everything I know behind really going to make a difference and make my heartache suddenly stop?

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, searching my eyes for an answer.

It might not make me happy, but I will be busy with Aunt Carol and working, so I won't have time to be sad. Plus, being around new people may help ease my heartache.

For the first time in a long time, I actually enjoy eating. Mom's chicken salad sandwich tastes delicious and gives me the energy I need to pack for my move.

I scarf the sandwich down before carrying my plate and mail downstairs. After placing the plate in the sink, I throw my mail in the trash, including the letter from Ryder.

Making a beeline to my closet, I pull out my suitcase and pack most of my summer clothes and all of my toiletries.

My eyes land on the pictures on my dresser, specifically the one with me, Ryder, and Sam the day they went mudding.

Picking it up, I debate throwing it in the full suitcase, but this move is about starting over, letting Ryder go, and finding my happy ending so it's best to leave all reminders of him here.

I put the picture back down on my dresser before sitting on the edge of my bed. Moving across the country is a huge step, but if Sam can do it right after high school, then I can do it at twenty-one.

Mom knocks on my door before opening it. "I found two flights going to Jacksonville. Tomorrow afternoon at four or Saturday morning at ten thirty."

I can see it in her eyes. She wants me to forget about moving to Florida and work through my issues here. I wish I were strong enough to stay here, but there are too many reminders of Ryder.

As much as I want to say Saturday morning, that's still four days away. I can't wait that long.

I glance at my full suitcase and whisper, “Tomorrow.”

Leaving tomorrow will give me a chance to sleep on this decision, in case I change my mind overnight.

Mom’s face falls, but she nods her head. “Then we need to have a nice family dinner tonight.”

“That sounds good to me.”

I feel guilty leaving when Dad is still trying to heal, but Danny can do more and Sam is sticking around to help with the farm, so everything should be fine. If they have any concerns, they can speak up tonight at dinner.

Mom reaches into her back pocket and hands me Ryder’s letter.

“I thought I threw this away.”

“You did, but please do me a favor and read this.”

I shake my head. “No.”

This move is about moving on. Reading his letter won’t help me heal.

Mom sighs. “Please read what he has to say and then you can throw it away before we head to the airport tomorrow. You can leave Ryder in the past and start over in Florida with a clean slate.”

“I’m not promising anything, but I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I can ask for.”

Mom doesn’t budge.

“Is there something else?”

She opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but closes it and shakes her head. “Is there anything special you want for dinner?”

Nothing and everything sounds good.

I wonder if I’ll miss the food here. I wonder if the food in Florida is anything like it is here?

“It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. I’m fine with whatever you guys want.”

Knowing Mom, this will turn into a huge going away party. Hopefully, it won’t be as big of a party as Sam and Ryder’s welcome home party.

“Dad and I will make something good.” Mom gives me one last look before closing my door.

I plop back onto my pillow while holding onto Ryder’s letter. It feels like it weighs a ton, both physically and figuratively. The envelope is stretched out to its max, showing that it’s more than just a sheet or two of paper inside.

I eye my trash can and the urge to throw this letter away and never think of it again grows by the second.

Why would I subject myself to more heartache?

Why would I want to know what’s going on with Ryder and his baby?

Does he really think writing a letter will make everything better?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to weigh the pros and cons.

A shimmer of hope stabs my heart. What if there’s good news in the letter and Ryder is apologizing and wants to be with me?

The good mood quickly dissipates as a frown forms on my face.

Could I be with someone that abandons his child? Could I be with Ryder and see him with a child? Could I be the stepmother that treats the step child like my own?

No, I don’t think I could. It would be a constant reminder of what could have been.

My heart constricts with pain. I wish I were strong enough to let love win. To move past all of this drama, and have the happily ever after that my heart so desperately wants.

I want it and it feels like it might be within reach, if I just read Ryder's letter.

Chapter Twenty

FORGIVENESS FORCES you to grow beyond your comfort zone.

It forces you to confront the lies you tell yourself in order to hold on to the pain.

It gives you inner strength and helps you heal and move on.

I want all of that and more.

Of course, my curiosity gets the best of me and I'm eager to read what Ryder sent me.

I rip open the wound that is my heart and tear open the envelope containing Ryder's letter.

He's never written a letter before, even after the grief counselor told him it would help him heal after his parents' death.

He refused and dealt with the grief in other ways. Well, his way of dealing with it at the time was to push it to the back of his mind, move far away, and never talk about it.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly rip open the envelope. My heart races as I unfold the multiple sheets of paper.

Closing my eyes for a moment and praying that I don't cry again, I take a deep breath and read his letter.

I am shocked, appalled, and emotional.

Ryder's words are straight from his heart and he pours all of his emotions into this very detailed, very long letter. It's

more than I ever expected to see, hear, or read from him.

The first page of the letter starts while he is on the plane to California. He is confused, nervous, and regretful about the night he spent with her while in school.

At least it seems like it was only one night and not a long term relationship.

The emotion in his writing takes a turn as he details the joy being back home has brought him, how much he loved our date and is hoping for more, and how sorry he is that he had to leave me so suddenly.

Tears fall from my eyes as I am thrown back to that night and how blissful we were when we officially became boyfriend and girlfriend.

After everything we've been through with the hospital and wrong timing, I thought we were finally where we were supposed to be.

I glance at the charm bracelet with the heart charm that he bought me at the fair. It is still sitting in the corner of the room where I threw it after Ryder left my room that night. I couldn't stand looking at it hanging on my wrist, so in the corner it went.

Getting back to the letter, the ink in Ryder's letter changes color as he describes seeing 'her' for the first time and how large her stomach is.

Strangely, I feel sorry for her having to go through that much of her pregnancy alone before gaining the courage to tell him he was going to be a dad.

After all, it was only a one night stand and few people plan on getting pregnant when it's supposed to be a no strings attached kind of deal.

My heart breaks for Ryder.

It isn't fair that she is clearly that far along. He missed hearing his child's heartbeat for the first time and seeing his child grow both by a sonogram and her belly.

In his letter, Ryder describes what it is like to see his child on the ultrasound, only to find out moments later that the baby might not be his, as she is much further along than she said.

According to the doctor, her possible dates of conception are months before he even met her, let alone slept with her.

The ink changes to red as his emotions become more hateful that she misled him. Ryder writes he broke his phone by throwing it at a brick wall and couldn't get a replacement one for a couple of weeks.

They had to go to court to get a judge to order a paternity test because she was refusing to get one until the baby was born. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now.

As I read his letter, I wonder if they can even do paternity tests while pregnant?

My mind wanders back to the years of subpar sex education for any memory of paternity tests, but I come up short. Our public school system didn't teach us about any of that.

Grabbing my phone, I search for paternity tests and when they can be performed on an expectant mother.

I read a lengthy article on the side effects from most paternity tests but stumble upon a procedure that is non-invasive and doctors can perform after eight weeks of gestation.

Hopefully, Ryder did the same research I just did so he can have answers sooner rather than later.

I continue reading his letter and laugh when he describes searching for different paternity tests and finding one that won't have any complications to her pregnancy.

The ink changes again as he is sitting in the waiting room of a local doctor's office, waiting for them to get swabbed for the test.

He explains she wanted to refuse the test, but the judge warned her she would be in contempt of court and would serve jail time if she didn't comply.

I'm glad the judge ordered the test because it isn't fair to keep Ryder waiting and wondering about what the results will be.

He writes, 'I am a nervous bundle of nerves and can't even begin to think about which outcome I hope it is.'

I read faster, hoping to get to the outcome.

Is the baby his?

If it is, is he staying out in California?

If it isn't his, is he coming home?

How will things be once he's home and finds out that I'm in Florida?

That thought makes me nauseous.

Continuing to read his letter, he begs for another date, even if the baby is his. He promises he can be a present father while having a future with me.

Begging is not what I expected from him, but I don't know if I am mature enough to share his time with another woman and a baby.

I've tossed the idea around a lot in my mind and I'm still where I started. I have no clue if I can be a part of this situation.

As much as I want a future with Ryder, I want him to myself. I want him to father my children and I want him to love me and only me.

Reading through the letter, he tells me the paternity results will only take twenty-four hours, and it is the longest twenty-four hours of his life.

'I wish you were here to lend me some comfort and wisdom. I wish this never got in the way of us and the future we could have had. I hope we can grow from this experience and know that I will fight for you every day of the rest of my life.'

I don't realize I am crying until my vision gets too cloudy to see through. My tears fall onto his letter, leaving wet circles

in their wake.

That is the sweetest, most romantic thing I have ever read, and I hate that this got in the middle of what could have been an epic romance between Ryder and me.

He wants me and will fight for me every day.

Something flips inside of my heart and for a second, I feel overwhelmed with love. If I go to Florida tomorrow, then chances are that Ryder will come to Florida to get me to agree to be his girlfriend again.

That seems like a huge waste of money.

Plus, I don't really want to go to Florida. That was just a quick plan to get away from all the pain I've been feeling.

Continuing to read through my cloudy vision, I see the results were negative. There is a ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent chance Ryder is not the father.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

Laughing, I continue to cry as I realize Ryder is more than likely coming home, and according to his letter, he wants to be with me.

Looking at the postmark on the front of the envelope, I see it was stamped two days ago.

Reading the rest of the letter, I confirm he is on a flight home today and should arrive by dinner time.

Looking at the time on my phone, I see it is still a few hours until dinner.

Maybe I can drive Mom's car to the airport and wait for him there. I can give him the welcome home that he deserves, even if I have to wait for a few more hours.

I change out of my lounge clothes and throw on a pair of jean shorts, tank top, flip-flops, and a fresh coat of deodorant.

Running down the stairs, I yell for mom.

"Mom!"

No one yells back to me.

When I don't get a response, I yell louder.

“MOM!”

No one seems to be inside the house. Where could they have all gone?

I know Mom was upset and rightfully so, but to completely disappear without a note is unlike her. Opening the inside garage door, I peek my head inside and flip on the light and see all the vehicles parked in their respective spots.

So, everyone must be around here somewhere.

Since the weather is really nice, I check the backyard to see if they are swimming. More than likely, Mom is setting up for my going away dinner.

A large puff of smoke drifts by the back door, followed by several more. It looks like Dad might be grilling some burgers.

Opening the door, I am blinded by the sunlight. When was the last time I was out in the sun?

It's been too long, that's for sure. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping it doesn't take too long for my eyes to adjust.

Shielding my eyes, I call out to Mom. “Mom, I was wondering-”

The words freeze on my tongue, as my question is no longer relevant.

There, standing next to Dad behind the grill, is Ryder. My heart stops beating for a few beats as we stare at one another.

How is he already here? His letter said his flight would arrive around dinner time.

A grin forms on my face as the hot tears fall down my cheeks.

My voice is hoarse, like I haven't drunk water in a week. “You're here. I can't believe you are really here.”

He is really here, in my backyard, and his gaze is only on me.

Ignoring the looks from everyone else, I run into his open arms. I need this hug more than I need anything else right now.

Ryder doesn't complain when I sob uncontrollably into his chest, soaking his shirt.

"Hey baby girl." He whispers in my ear while wrapping me in an enormous bear hug.

His voice is full of happiness and it makes me feel stupid for not telling him sooner how I truly feel.

Looking up into his eyes, his gaze locks onto mine and it feels like everything in the past has been instantly forgiven- on both of our parts.

We both speak at the same time. "I love you."

I laugh as I feel all the pain of the past several weeks just wash away. No hard feelings and no resentment, only love and desire.

To my surprise, he pulls me into a kiss in front of my entire family, Sam included.

I kiss him back with equal fervor. We aren't letting each other go anytime soon. This kiss is the beginning of the rest of our lives, and I want to remember it.

Our tongues duel for dominance, but I miss him so much that I let him lead. We savor this kiss and being pressed against one another.

I can feel all the emotions that's flowing through his body. The same emotions mimic mine.

Picking me up bridal style and walking towards the back door, he yells behind him to my staring family, "We have some unfinished business to take care of!"

Running my hand through the hair at the nape of his neck, I pull myself closer to him as he effortlessly carries me through the house.

I wait until he is climbing up the stairs to my bedroom to whisper, "I hope the unfinished business is a ton of make up sex."

Chapter Twenty One

RYDER CARRIES me through my open bedroom door, kicking it closed behind us before placing me on my bed next to his letter.

His gaze moves to the side as he cocks his head to read my acceptance letter from Florida.

The happiness drains from his face as I watch his smile turn into a frown.

I know we will have to talk about the past few weeks and the hell that the both of us have been through, but right now, just being in Ryder's arms is enough.

“We can talk later. Right now, I just want to forget everything that has happened and just be with you. I've begged and pleaded for this day to come and to have you back, but-”

His soft lips press against mine, silencing my rambling.

Blood and lust rush through my veins as our tongues duel.

Our kiss is impatient and rushed. Our hands pull at each other's clothing.

Buttons pop and seams tear as shirts and shorts are removed from our bodies and discarded onto the floor.

Pushing the papers to the side, I pull Ryder on top of me.

My fingers trail up his arms to his taut chest muscles, down to the ridges of his abs.

The soft, bulbous head of his erection bobs against the soft cotton of my panties.

My hips lift to press his erection harder against my core.

Ryder chuckles as his hands grip my curves and pushes my hips back down to the mattress.

“Easy. We have plenty of time.”

Sure, we have plenty of time, but I’m needing it now. We have wasted weeks of what could have been this.

“I don’t want easy. I need you now.”

His eyebrow raises and instead of finding it humorous, I find it sexy as hell.

Ryder’s voice cracks as he speaks, but he stops.

He looks down at my nearly naked body before speaking.

“But I planned on being more romantic than a quickie in your bedroom. I planned on asking you out on a date and then, if things went well, see where the night takes us.”

I press my finger against his lips. “Shh. We have plenty of time for that later.”

Ryder’s gaze locks onto mine. His expression is full of confusion and uncertainty, like it’s hard for him to believe that I want it right now without a promise of a romantic date or a future together.

Sighing, I sit up onto my elbow. “If it will make you feel better, we can talk first and then get to the fun part, but I suggest we get to the fun part first while my family is still outside grilling and relaxing and can’t hear us.”

He glances towards my bedroom door. A smile forms on his face.

“Yeah, that’s a great idea.”

With a swift flick of his wrist, he loops his fingers under the elastic band and pulls off my panties as I unhook my bra.

I toss it onto the growing pile of clothes on my floor and my panties land on top.

“Now I see why you go commando sometimes. It makes things easier.”

His devilish smirk warms my insides.

I pull his face to mine, eager to get things started.

Angling my head, he trails his kisses down my neck, nibbling and swiping his tongue along the sensitive flesh.

His kisses stir a hunger inside me I never knew was possible.

I wrap my legs around his waist, lining his cock up to my entrance.

Using his teeth, he rips open the condom wrapper, slips it on, and doesn't hesitate to glide his cock into my warmth, stretching my walls to accommodate his girth.

Sliding his hands in between my thighs, he guides my legs to his shoulders, lifting the entire bottom half of my back off the mattress.

He grips my hips and slowly thrusts inside while adjusting his angle to hit all of my sweet spots.

“Ah!” I cry out as the pleasure overtakes my senses.

Ryder's pace quickens as his grip on my hips tightens.

“So close.” I moan out loud as his mouth captures one of my nipples between his teeth.

He lightly bites down before swirling the tip of his tongue around the stiff peak.

Hot, fiery passion builds in my core. I have to bite my lip to keep from screaming out.

The pleasure overwhelms my senses. My walls clench around him as stars burst behind my eyelids.

Ryder quickly follows me into the land of bliss.

He collapses on the mattress beside me; his chest rises and falls quickly as his breathing comes out in ragged pants.

“Sorry. It's been a while and what can I say? You were gripping me as tight as a bull rider trying to stay on for the full

eight second ride.”

I chuckle and roll onto my side to give him a good look.

“And you were hitting all the right spots, but we have all day and night to make up for all the lost time.”

He stares at me with regret in his eyes. “And I promise to make it up to you in more ways than one.”

I rest my fingers on his stubbled jaw as my gaze locks with his. “I’m counting on it.”

Laying my head down on his outstretched arm, I close my eyes and inhale his scent. He still smells the same as he did before returning to California.

Did I really think returning to California would change him?

If I’m being honest with myself, yes. I wasn’t sure if he was coming back alone, with a family, or ever.

My heart clenches with a stabbing pain as I imagine how different my feelings would be right now, if things were different.

He takes a deep breath and says, “Don’t think too hard. We are supposed to be enjoying our time together.”

I sit up, facing away from him. I know I said we can talk later and figure things out as they come, but I can’t lay here in post-coital bliss and pretend everything is alright.

My voice is low and full of sorrow. “Yeah, well, it is hard to enjoy these moments when life could have been completely different.”

Ryder sits up and wraps his arm around my waist. He rests his head against my shoulder and takes a deep breath.

His whispers are full of emotion. “I know, and I am so sorry, from the bottom of my heart. I never meant to hurt you, but in the pit of my stomach, I knew I had to do the right thing.”

Tears form in my eyes, threatening to spill my emotions. “I know, and that is just one reason I love you. At the end of the

day, you always do what is right.”

He places a kiss on my shoulder as the first tear falls down my cheek.

“It’s more than doing the right thing. I can’t imagine having a child out there not knowing me, or me knowing him or her.”

He pauses and swipes my tears away before continuing. “When I have kids, I want to be in their lives. I want it all- the good, the bad, and the ugly. I want the ups and the downs.”

My heart swells as I picture him as a father. He would be the type of dad that plays catch with his son or has a stuffed animal tea party with his daughter.

He would be the type to bend over backwards to make sure the mother of his children was happy and not too stressed.

Ryder will be the one to make everyone laugh just to cheer them up when they are having a bad day.

The type of dad to tuck his kids into bed every night and kiss their foreheads ever so sweetly right before they fall asleep from a long day.

As the images of Ryder being a loving and doting dad come to an end in my mind, I whisper, “You will be a great dad one day.”

With his thumb and forefinger, he gently turns my face towards his.

Our gazes stare at one another while he continues to swipe my tears away.

He raises his eyebrow and I watch as a smirk forms.

“Is that your way of giving me a proposition?”

“No!” I laugh and smack his chest.

The resounding smack echoes off the walls of my room.

He laughs along with me before rolling over on top of me, pushing me back against the mattress.

We share a few light kisses before he flops down on my bed, pulling on my arm until I am laying on my side facing him. He wraps his arm around me, pulling me closer to his side.

I take a deep breath and spill my heart.

“I know you were doing the right thing by going back to California, but it broke my heart. Literally shattered it into a million pieces. I felt so lost without you, like I couldn’t breathe or live without you, and I don’t want to be that girl.”

Ryder tightens his hold around me.

“You don’t know how sorry I am that I hurt you. That was never my intention, especially given our circumstances here.”

“What circumstances?”

What could he be referring to? That we started dating right before he got the news? That my family took him in after his parents’ death and made him a part of the family?

“Well, for starters, you are my best friend’s little sister.”

My eyes roll so hard that it hurts. “Ugh, don’t say it like that.”

“It’s true. I would never hurt you on purpose. For one, Sam would kick my ass. Not to mention your other brothers.”

At one point I would have agreed with him, but now, after they have been gone for six years, I don’t think Sam is as protective as he once was.

“Sam wouldn’t do that. He isn’t like that anymore.”

Ryder narrows his eyes at me. “Do you not remember the pool party and how he acted when he saw you with Trevor?”

Ryder has a point, even though Sam had no right to react that way.

“Go on.” I say, finally conceding.

Ryder holds up two fingers dramatically.

“And two, I practically grew up with you, so I’ve always felt a little protective of you. I’d have to kick my own ass,

which I basically did the entire time I was in California.”

I imagine Ryder as a cartoon character kicking his ass as he runs away from the camera.

“As funny as that image looks in my head, you don’t have to beat yourself up. It’s not like this was planned.”

“It most definitely was not planned.” He pauses until I am looking at him. “Or mine.”

Those two words cause a wave of emotion to flood through me- both good and bad.

I blurt out, “But there was still a chance it was yours.”

His voice is so low I can barely hear him and his lips are a few inches away. “Yeah.”

I ask the one question that has been on repeat in my mind.

“Did the two of you date or was it a one-night stand?”

I don’t know which option would make me sadder. The fact that he could date someone in California knowing how I felt about him, or that it was a one-night stand, and he didn’t use condoms.

That last thought sounds an alarm in my head.

We didn’t use a condom every time we had sex, either.

I am thankful he used one tonight, but it’s clear that when he is in the heat of the moment, he thinks with the wrong head, and so do I when it comes to him.

Not that he is the only one to blame.

His voice brings me out of my thoughts.

“We dated off and on for a couple of years.”

That is like a punch to the gut, but I knew there was a chance that I wouldn’t like his answers.

I might as well rip off the band aid and ask all the questions that I have wondered over the years.

“So, is that the real reason you never came back for holidays?”

“Part of the reason. I didn’t want to come home and remember my family. I didn’t want to come back and see you upset. I was running from all my emotions and grief, but also being selfish of the new life I had created out there.”

Although hearing him say it stings, I’m glad he is finally being honest with me.

I don’t speak. I let his words sink in.

He clears his throat.

“I know it’s an overused saying, but I was young and dumb. Hell, I still am. I made some mistakes and probably will make a hundred more, but I promise to try my best to make you happy every day.”

“And I promise to hold you to that.”

Ryder pins me to the mattress and kisses my jaw. “You do that and I’ll do this.”

As he slowly kisses across my jaw to the lobe of my ear, his fingers dance along my skin, leaving chill bumps in their wake.

I lay here frozen in my spot, not wanting him to stop.

A soft moan escapes past my lips as his fingers draw circles around my nipples.

His slow sensual touches continue as he cups my face and gently presses his lips against mine.

I reach into my end table and grab a condom.

His eyes darken as he watches me bite the corner of the wrapper, tear it open with my teeth, and pull out the condom.

I slowly glide it down his shaft, taking my time to tease him just a little bit.

Before I can guide him to my core, he flips us over so that I am on top.

I ease him inside my warmth and set a frustratingly slow pace, wanting to savor this moment a while longer.

His gaze is on my every move.

I watch as his gaze stares at our juncture.

His eyes darken as his cock continues to spear me.

Slowly, his gaze works its way up my body to my breasts before finally locking onto mine.

“You are so beautiful.” His voice is husky and full of lust.

My face blushes at his comment.

He has his moments where he is so incredibly romantic. In those moments, my heart swells with an abundance of love.

Ryder abruptly sits up, worrying me.

I frantically look around, trying to spot the issue. “What’s wrong?”

He cups my chin and looks me in the eye.

“Addy, I know I’ve asked before and even though it was short lived last time, this time I know it will last. Will you be my girlfriend?”

“Yes!” I yell before adding, “As long as we can finish this first.”

I rock my hips back and forth to emphasize what I want to finish first.

His lips are on mine and before I can register what is happening, he flips us back over and thrusts into me.

“We can finish however many rounds as you want. Your wish is my command.”

I raise my eyebrow at him. This new fun loving, eager to please me Ryder may be worth the heartache I had to endure.

“You might change your mind when you find out just how needy I am.”

He smirks and says, “Show me.”

“Oh, I plan to do just that.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“WILL you just tell me where he is planning on taking me for our date tonight?”

I throw several more pieces of clothing on my already full bed.

Mom lets out a small chuckle. “No, I can’t spoil the fun, but maybe I can suggest you wear something cute and dressy.”

“Cute and dressy? I have nothing cute and dressy.”

I flop down on top of all my boring clothes.

“It would be easier to dress accordingly if I knew what was going on.”

Mom ignores my frustrated pleas.

Tonight is a very special and important night. Tonight is our first official date as a couple.

I understand Mom doesn’t want to ruin the date that Ryder spent all day yesterday planning, but I am her only daughter and she should help me control my freak out.

Mom snaps her fingers. “What about the light blue dress you wore to Aunt Hailey’s wedding a few years back?”

Squinting my eyes, I try to think back to the dress Mom is referring to.

“The mint blue floral one?”

“Yeah, with the flowy little sleeves and the sheer overlay.”

That dress looked great on me and I loved it, but never wore it again.

“That would work, but is our date going to be that nice?”

“Yes. Ryder has planned a very nice, Mom, Dad, and all brothers approved date. He did good with this one.”

I never would have guessed Ryder would plan a date where I needed to dress up this nicely. It is the complete opposite of our last date, which was very casual and fun.

“Thanks, Mom.”

After giving her a hug, she leaves me alone to get ready for my mystery date.

Just like my last date with Ryder, I do all the girly things that we do before a big, important date.

I shave, exfoliate, and moisturize every inch of skin before blow drying my hair and spraying myself with a pineapple scented, glitter body spray.

Ryder is waiting at the bottom of the stairs, just like in every teen drama movie I have ever seen.

He is wearing black dress pants and a light gray button-down shirt with a silver satin tie.

His smile widens and his eyes seem to twinkle as I get closer to him.

He places a kiss on my cheek. “Wow, you look incredible.”

“You look very handsome yourself.”

If I am honest, he looks downright delectable. The dress pants hug him in all the right places, and his shirt is fitted to perfection.

He stretches his hand out towards me. “So, are you ready?”

Taking his hand, I say, “Ready for whatever you have planned.”

I follow him to the front door before Mom’s voice stops us in our tracks.

“Have fun, you two.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Ryder and I say at the same time.

Chuckling, we make our way outside towards Dad’s spare truck- the one Ryder borrowed for our first date.

Ryder opens the passenger door for me before walking around to the driver’s seat.

Just like last time, I sit in the middle seat and fasten the seatbelt around my waist.

Ryder gives me an approving smile when he notices I am once again sitting in the middle seat instead of the passenger seat.

He places his hand on my thigh and drives towards the highway.

“Dad must really like you to let you use his truck again to take me on another date.”

His hand squeezes my thigh. “I think I have your parent’s approval.”

I nod my head. “Yep, they love you.”

As do I.

Ryder adds, “As long as I don’t do another disappearing act and hurt you.”

The sadness that is evident in his voice clenches at my heart.

“They don’t blame you for anything. Hell, I don’t blame you for what happened. Things just happen that are beyond our control. Do I wish you never got that message? Absolutely. But it happened and there is nothing we can do about it except move on.”

Ryder gives my thigh another squeeze. “And that is precisely what we will do.”

I place a chaste kiss on his stubbled cheek. “Good, because I don’t want it ruining our date tonight or the future we can have.”

His gaze meets mine for a second. “Thanks, Addy.”

“Besides, we already discussed it and said our peace. So, moving on, where are we going?”

The edges of his lips curl up into a smile. “It’s a surprise.”

“Seriously? You still won’t tell me where we are going?”

“Fine, I’ll tell you. We are going to dinner at the new French restaurant that your mom was talking about.”

My eyes widen. “Oh, the fancy one?”

“Yeah, we are trying it out tonight and then going to let your mom know how it was.”

I can see why Mom was so excited about our date and why she said it was necessary for me to dress up.

“So, we are essentially guinea pigs?”

His chuckle causes a smile to form on my face. “There’s nothing to worry about. The reviews have all been great and the pictures of the food look incredible.”

I dig my phone out of my clutch and search for the restaurant. Ryder was right; the food in the pictures and reviews looks incredible.

“Ooh, look at these desserts. Can we get a few to try?”

“Sure, order whatever you want.”

I try to muster up my best seductive voice. “Whatever I want?”

He turns to look at me with lust swirling in his eyes as he raises his eyebrow. “Uh, what do you have in mind?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I was just checking.”

“You can order whatever you want, even if it is the entire menu.”

Does he realize how expensive that will be? Based on the pictures, they have enough food options we could feed the entire family for at least a week or two.

“The entire menu?” I ask, with a hint of laughter in my voice.

He shrugs as if it isn't a big deal to order the entire menu. “Sure.”

I nibble on my lower lip. He would give me anything and everything I desire, no matter the cost.

His voice is gruff and sexier than ever. “Keep that up and I might order one of everything to go and have my wicked way with you instead of going on our date.”

I gulp.

That sounds pretty good right now, but I want to see the date he planned.

“Maybe after the date.”

“Sounds like a plan.” His wink sends moisture straight to my apex.

Fuck, I've never wanted him more than I do right now.

In order to calm my raging hormones, I sing along to the songs on the radio as he drives us to the next town over.

He pulls in front of the restaurant and hands the truck keys to the valet.

The hostess immediately leads us to the back of the restaurant, where we take a few steps up to the restaurant balcony.

We stop at a table close to the metal railing that overlooks a lighted garden.

“This is stunning.”

Fairy lights twinkle all around us.

The waiter makes his way over to us to take our drink order.

Ryder and I order a soda.

I wait until the waiter leaves before whispering, “You can order a drink. I don't mind.”

His laugh sounds foreign in this elegant restaurant.

“You act like I can’t go one night without drinking.”

My face blushes bright red. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant since we are in such an upscale restaurant and it appears to be common, so I don’t mind.”

“I’m just kidding. I appreciate the offer, but I just want to spend one very nice dinner out with my girl.”

I open the menu that is on the table in front of me. “So, what do you think we should try?”

Ryder opens his menu and glances over at all the items. “Hmm, maybe we should try different appetizers, entrees, and desserts to give more feedback.”

“That would be helpful to try more things. As long as I can have a few bites of yours.”

He glances up at me from his menu. “Well, that would be a perk of ordering different things.”

His smile is dazzling and causes the butterflies to swarm in my stomach.

All the food items seem so far out of my comfort zone, and as much as I want to try something new and exciting, I have to keep it pretty simple.

“Then I’ll try the French onion soup, chicken confit, and the souffle.”

“That sounds pretty good. Simple, but elegant.”

His gaze continues to look over the menu.

When he looks up at me, I ask, “What are you going to order?”

“I’m going to go way out of my comfort zone and order the bouillabaisse, lamb shank, and the frangipane tart.”

That is way out of my comfort zone.

“The tart did sound delicious, but the souffle sounds better.”

His eyes darken as he watches my tongue swipe along my lip.

“Not as delicious as you.”

I lower my voice until it is barely above a whisper.

“Maybe I’ll let you have a taste.”

He leans across the table to get closer to me.

“You’ll be begging me to have a taste.”

The waiter brings our drinks and temporarily interrupts our moment. I give the waiter my order first before Ryder recites his.

When we are left alone, I chuckle.

“Only fancy French restaurants would serve a soda in an engraved crystal goblet.”

Ryder takes a sip of his drink. “This is the only way I will drink soda from now on.”

“Mom will just love that.” I take a sip as I picture Mom’s face drinking soda from crystal goblets.

“Can you imagine the look on her face and what she would say if we pulled out her crystal glasses and poured a can of soda in them?”

I laugh and for the first time in a long time, I’m giddy and carefree. “Nothing but an appalled death glare.”

“I guess I will have to wait until I am living on my own.”

His statement catches me off guard and my laugh dies off as my smile disappears.

“Oh, are you planning on moving out?”

Why would he tell me this on our first official couple date?

“No!” He says loudly before lowering his voice. “I’m just saying that I wouldn’t do that to your mom.”

A wave of relief washes over me, and I calmly say, “It’s normal to move away. Mark did.”

Ryder's lips tighten into a thin line as he thinks about what I just said. After a moment, he whispers, "Are you going to move away?"

I remember the acceptance letter to Florida and sigh.

"That was the plan, but I don't know what I am going to do now."

We pause our conversation as our waiter places our appetizers in front of us. I try a bite of my soup as Ryder tries a bite of his soup.

"This is fantastic." I let out a little moan as the flavors melt on my tongue.

I give Ryder a bite of my French onion soup before trying a bite of his aromatic soup.

"Both are delicious, but I think Mom will like the French onion soup more."

Ryder nods his head. "I agree, but this one was worth a try."

When we finish our soups, our waiter brings out our entrees.

Ryder's lamb is good, but I am glad he ordered it and not me. The chicken is familiar enough that I love it, but different enough that I will only order it at a fancy restaurant.

Our desserts are sweet and flavorful, leaving me wishing that they were bigger.

After we finish eating, Ryder pays the bill. We walk to the valet and get into Dad's truck.

When he starts driving, I ask, "Now what?"

Not that I didn't love dinner, but knowing Ryder, there is more to this date.

"Now, we move onto part two of the date."

"Which is what?" I ask, hoping he will clue me in on what he has planned.

"A surprise."

At my frustrated look, he winks and says, “It’s close to here, just two to three minutes and then you will see.”

Eager to see what else he has planned, I sit up straighter and look out the passenger side window.

He parks the truck in front of a large metal warehouse. It is pitch black and makes me believe no one is here.

“What is this place? Are we breaking and entering?”

He laughs and walks around the truck to help me get down. “No. They are waiting for us around back.”

“They who?”

He ignores my question, takes my hand, and pulls me to the chain-link gate that is on the side of the large metal warehouse.

“I feel like we are definitely breaking and entering.”

“We aren’t breaking or entering. The gate is unlocked, and we aren’t entering the building.”

“So, we are trespassing?”

He whispers, “No.”

“Then why are you whispering?”

Our activity seems awfully suspicious and I think the police would agree with me.

He points to the side. “Why don’t you look and see?”

My gaze locks onto a helicopter and two pilots that are waiting for us.

“Oh my God! We are taking a helicopter ride?”

“Yep. I figured go big or go home with this date.”

I jump up and down before pulling him into a hug.

“This is incredible!”

We are greeted by the pilots and given our gear. They help us get buckled up and make sure the headsets are working before climbing into their seats and starting the helicopter.

One of the pilot's voices comes through our headset. "We are all set to depart. We will take a quick trip around the city to show you the hot spots."

Ryder and I thank the pilot and settle in for the coolest ride of our lives.

We fly around downtown. The skyscrapers and high-rise buildings are stunning.

I can picture a happy and hectic life with Ryder living in one of these high rises and trying different bistros and bars every weekend.

The pilots fly us over the state's busiest river. Several fishing boats are working late into the night to bring in as many pounds of fish as they can.

We spot a few scattered mini yachts docked in front of mansions.

Ryder's voice comes through my headset. "Now that would be living our best life."

"With your engraved crystal goblets that you drink soda from?"

"Exactly."

We share a smile and for the first time in a long time, I only feel happiness. There is no anxiousness, worry, sadness, or anger. I only feel the happiness flowing through me.

The pilots land behind the same metal warehouse where we started and help us unbuckle our contraption.

We thank them for such a great time and head back to Dad's truck.

I'm not ready for the night to be over. I wish I could freeze time and just be with Ryder.

As Ryder helps me into the passenger seat, I say, "I have an idea. It's the most brilliant idea ever."

Ryder leans in close, our lips barely a breath apart. "Oh, yeah? What would that idea be?"

“How about we finish out the date with a hotel stay?”

Ryder smiles. “That sounds like the perfect ending to the day.”

I scrunch up my face when I realize there’s a problem with my idea. “Except I didn’t bring any clothes.”

Ryder gives me a chaste kiss before hurrying around the front of the truck to the driver’s seat.

When he is buckled up, he says, “Your mom packed a bag for you.”

“What? When?”

“Well, I was going to suggest we get some alone time away from your brothers and I needed your parents’ permission to keep the truck overnight.”

He really thought of everything.

“Great minds think alike. So, they are fine with us staying at a hotel?”

Ryder looks at me as if he can’t believe I just asked that.

“Of course. Plus, I booked a really nice room at a really safe hotel, so they couldn’t object.”

I hate to burst his bubble, but I say, “Well, they could have said no.”

“Sure they could have, but they trust us and want us to be happy.”

I’ve been incredibly lucky to have such supportive parents that love me and want the best for me.

Not to mention, parents that are still very much in love with one another and have never been embarrassed to be affectionate in front of us while we were growing up.

I can see Ryder and myself being like that in many, many years.

He squeezes my thigh, and I lean my head on his shoulder.

It doesn’t take long to get to the hotel. He finds a parking spot right in the front and helps me out.

Leaning the passenger seat forward, he pulls an overnight bag out from the hidden area I always forget is there.

I link my hand with his and walk inside the hotel lobby, smiling from ear to ear.

My smile fades as a very familiar face greets us back.

“Maya is the receptionist?” I ask, not believing my eyes.

I haven’t thought about her in so long. In fact, after the Vegas trip, I vowed to not think of her again.

Maya has a look of disgust on her face as she spots Ryder and I holding hands and a part of me jumps with joy that Ryder chose this hotel for our very special, very intimate time.

The only thing better than seeing her reaction to Ryder and I being together is actually getting to spend the night with Ryder and we have all night to do whatever we want.

Chapter Twenty Three

THE HOTEL ROOM is spectacular and the definition of elegance.

As soon as Ryder and I walk into our room, my eyes glance over at the enormous bed.

Flopping down face first on the bed, I rub my hands along the downy-soft cover.

I look over my shoulder at Ryder. “You should lay on the bed. It is as soft as a cloud.”

He stalks over to me with hunger in his eyes. “How about I lay on top of you?”

I roll over onto my back and slowly open my legs a little.

“I’m waiting.”

Ryder slowly loosens his tie before slipping it over his head.

I watch, slaw-jawed, as he slowly and tantalizingly unbuttons his shirt before taking it off.

He takes way too long to undo his belt and unbutton his pants like he is enjoying teasing me.

I am practically drooling as he ever so slowly lowers the zipper on his pants and pushes them down to his feet.

His erection is already hard and begging for some one-on-one attention.

Sitting up, Ryder helps me pull off my dress before placing it on the pile of his clothes. He reaches around my body to

unhook my bra.

I use this opportunity to kiss the stubble on his jawline. I kiss his neck and am rewarded with a deep growl.

He gently pulls off my bra and places it on our pile of clothes.

As I lay back, he grins and pulls off my blue lace panties.

“How about I show you the rest of the room first?”

It seems like he has something up his sleeve, so I nod and go along with his plan.

Standing up, he spins me around to face the opposite side of the room. In the corner is a two person jacuzzi tub with mirrors that stretch up to the ceiling.

I’ve never had the desire to get it on in a jacuzzi, but it is now on my list.

“That looks like it could be a lot of fun.”

Ryder pulls me back into his chest. He playfully nips at my neck before whispering in my ear. “Fun and then extremely relaxing.”

In the small kitchenette, on one counter, there is a chilled bottle of champagne with glasses and a box of chocolate-covered strawberries.

Ryder leads me into the bright and modern bathroom.

There is a huge tiled walk-in shower with full size bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and body wash.

I turn around and look at our reflections in the large mirror. “Lots of room.”

Who would need this much room in a shower?

Ryder answers my unasked question.

“Lots of room to bend you over and have my way with you.”

The image of him bending me over in the shower causes my face to flame.

My body shivers as arousal builds in my core.

Ryder's fingers move up my sides, leaving chill bumps on my skin.

"So, how about I run us a hot bath and we sip on the champagne and eat some strawberries?"

"That sounds just about perfect."

He scoffs. "Just about? What would make it perfect?"

I make him wait before answering. He spins me around and stares at me with an eyebrow raised.

"The only thing that would make this perfect is if you promise me that there will be more date nights like this in the future."

He lets out a low growl and pulls me towards him until we are pressed tightly against one another.

"There will definitely be more nights like this in our future. Now that I have you, I don't plan on ever letting you go."

"Then let's get the bath started and enjoy the rest of the night together."

I link my hand with his and head back into the open room, with Ryder directly behind me.

He heads to the jacuzzi tub to start the water while I head to the kitchenette to grab the ice bucket with the bottle of champagne.

Taking a few quick steps from the kitchenette to the jacuzzi, I place the champagne on the edge of the tub.

Ryder has his hand under the fast-flowing stream of water to make sure it is the perfect temperature.

I turn around and head back to the kitchenette.

Using a paring knife, I grab a strawberry and cut it in half and place the slices in a small bowl.

Ryder's arms wrap around me as he kisses the side of my neck.

Shaking my head, I tsk and say, “It’s dangerous to startle a woman with a knife.”

He places several kisses down my neck and across my shoulder.

“I made sure you weren’t in the middle of cutting the strawberries.”

“Did you now?”

I cut a few more strawberries and place them in the bowl.

Ryder’s warm breath tickles my ear. “Mmm-hmm. It’s also my job to protect you.”

Placing the knife on the counter, I turn around to face him.

As his hungry gaze roams my naked body, my nipples harden into stiff peaks.

His voice is deep and full of lust. “The bath should be ready in a few minutes.”

I grab the champagne glasses and Ryder grabs the strawberries, and we make our way over to the large tub.

He grabs my hand and holds me steady as I climb into the large tub.

The warm water swirls around my legs. I slowly lower myself into the water. It’s only at my stomach, but the warm water soothes and relaxes me.

“This is nice.” I lean my head back against the headrest and close my eyes.

The water temperature is perfect. Not too hot that it will burn, but not too cool that you wish you could have it a little warmer.

Ryder chuckles. “My view is better.”

Peeking through my barely open eyelids, I turn my gaze towards him.

His gaze is already staring back at me.

“Come in and join me. I might let you wash my back.”

I give him a wink. We both know that there isn't any body wash over here. It's in the shower.

A smile forms on his face and his cock twitches with need.

I seductively lick my lips.

With the grace of a bucking bull at a rodeo, Ryder hops into the tub. Water splashes the walls of mirrors before falling to the floor.

I try to muster up my serious tone, but I fail. Instead of scolding him, I laugh and say, "Ryder!"

He sits down and turns the faucet off when the water level is just under the overflow plate.

After pushing the button to turn on the jets, he drops to his knees and makes his way over to me.

His larger body pins me to the jets with no way to escape.

The laughter dies on my lips as the mood instantly changes.

Our gazes lock onto each other as need and arousal build between the two of us.

The air grows thick with tension.

My heart pounds in my chest as I wait for him to kiss me.

Time seems to stop as he slowly leans towards me, closing the few inches between our faces.

My eyes close just as our lips touch.

This kiss is slow and gentle, not at all what I was expecting.

I wrap my arms around his torso, pulling him closer until his chest is touching mine.

Butterflies swarm in my stomach every time I kiss him.

After a few short minutes, Ryder pulls on my hand until I am across the tub straddling his lap.

I kiss him with every ounce of passion that I have. I want him, and I want him now.

Rocking my hips back and forth, I glide my folds along his shaft.

He lets out a deep moan. “Fuck, that feels good.”

He reaches between our bodies to grab his cock, positioning it right at my entrance.

I slowly lower myself down until he is buried deep inside me, enjoying the feeling of him being fully inside of me. I gently rock my hips back and forth to not splash any water.

Ryder’s hands grip my hips and slam me down onto his cock before repeating the motion.

As his need grows, the faster he pulls me back down onto his cock.

I glance at the water splashing onto the floor.

“I’ll clean it up later.” His voice is strained with his release approaching.

“I have a better plan.”

Reaching behind me, I pull the plug to drain the water.

As the water slowly drains, I continue to slowly rock my hips back and forth.

Ryder grows impatient with the slow pace. He tightens his hold on my hips and thrusts up into me.

He relentlessly fucks me until we are both panting and begging for release.

My walls clamp down as stars replace my vision.

He lets out a low grunt as his warm release coats my walls.

When all the water is drained, I link our hands together and lead him to the bathroom.

He reaches into the shower and turns on the water.

When the temperature is right, we both get in.

He squirts a small amount of body wash into his hands, lathers them up, and slowly washes every inch of my body.

In return, I take my time lathering up the body wash and washing his body.

I spend extra time making sure he is clean. Based on his erection, I'd say he likes me washing his body, especially a certain appendage.

I help him rinse off all the soap before he shuts off the water.

After drying off, I wrap the towel around my body and look in the overnight bag to see what pajamas Mom packed for me. I find a loose t-shirt and a pair of stretchy black shorts.

Ryder comes out of the bathroom without his towel, strutting like he doesn't mind being naked.

He stares at my pajamas. "You're not wearing real clothes, are you?"

I look down at the pajamas in my hand.

"They are just pajamas, so no, I'm not wearing real clothes."

Ryder stalks over to me. "Pajamas are overrated."

With a quick movement, he pulls the towel off of me, picks me up, and throws me on the bed.

He pounces on me and pulls my clothes from my hand. "You don't need these when it is just the two of us alone in a hotel room."

"I feel weird sleeping naked. Do you sleep naked?"

Do I even want to know if he sleeps naked? He shares a room with Sam. He even shared a dorm room with Sam.

He grins as wide as the Cheshire cat and I have a feeling I know what his answer is.

"All the time."

I try not to think too much about it, but I have to point out the obvious. "But you share a room with my brother."

He shrugs. "And?"

“And you don’t think it’s weird to be naked when you aren’t alone?”

He blurts out, “Your brother is usually naked, too.”

Wait, what? Did he really just say that?

“Now, that’s something I never thought I’d hear you say.”

Ryder shrugs and laughs. “It sounds worse when I say it out loud.”

“You think?” I chuckle before trying to get the image of Sam naked out of my head.

I have to shake my head to push that image away. “So, the two of you hang out naked, and here I thought I’d get you to myself. To be completely honest and transparent, I’m not really into sharing.”

He lets out a frustrated growl before leaning down and capturing a nipple between his teeth.

It only hurts for a second before he swipes his tongue across it to ease the pain.

He positions himself so he can look me in the eye. “You do get me to yourself.”

I reach up and place a hand on his cheek. “I know. I was just teasing you. Plus, the thought of you sleeping naked sounds incredibly hot and easy.”

“The thought of you sleeping naked next to me makes me believe we won’t get much sleep.”

“Okay, you convinced me. I’ll stay naked.”

Ryder gives me a chaste kiss before climbing off me.

I chuckle and let my gaze wander over his naked form. “This is the opposite of what you just said.”

Sitting up, I watch as he walks over to the tub to retrieve the champagne and strawberries.

“Ooh, good idea.”

I pull the cover back and climb between the cool, soft sheets.

Ryder places the bowl in my lap and the champagne on his end table before joining me.

I feed Ryder a strawberry before popping one in my mouth. The sweetness of the berry coats my tongue.

He pops open the bottle and pours us each a glass.

After taking a sip, I turn to face him.

“Tell me about California.”

He looks surprised. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

He raises an eyebrow.

I clarify. “Well, maybe not everything. Tell me everything happy; everything there is to do. How were the beaches?”

“They were incredible. The beaches were literally perfect. The sand is so soft, the weather is always warm, and there is always a party happening no matter where you go.”

Ryder’s face lights up as he talks about how wonderful the beaches are.

“Did you ever get tired of all the people?”

“At first it was a tremendous change and hard to adjust to. There wasn’t any silence and at first it was overwhelming. I couldn’t study or sleep. I thought I was going to flunk out and have to come back home and deal with my grief face on.”

He leans his head against the headboard as he recalls what it was like to be new in California all those years ago.

Letting out a breath, he continues. “But as time goes on, you get used to it and eventually you miss the constant noise and constant door banging from people coming and going all hours of the night.”

He still misses California. This was one of my fears all along.

He interrupts my thoughts.

“I missed your family’s home and the quiet peace it brings more than the hustle and bustle of city life.”

I perk up a little. “You did?”

“Of course I did. Most of all, I missed you. I hope one day you will come to California with me so I can show you all the things I’ve experienced.”

“All?”

He chuckles. “Well, maybe not all, but we can make fresh memories to replace the old ones.”

“That sounds almost perfect.”

He pulls back, shocked. “Almost? What would make it perfect?”

Like last time, I make him wait before answering.

“If you kiss me and show me the perks of sleeping naked.”

He grins wider than the Cheshire cat. “That, I can do.”

Chapter Twenty Four

RYDER ROLLS over and throws his arm across my chest. “Are you ready?”

I turn my head towards him.

His eyes are closed and his face relaxed. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was still asleep.

“To leave the hotel or for the future?”

His bright blue eyes open and stare back at me. “Both.”

“I’m not ready to leave the hotel, but I am ready for the future.”

I loved every minute of last night alone with Ryder, and I’m not ready for that to end.

“Then let’s grab our stuff and hit the road.”

Reluctantly, I roll out of bed and grab my change of clothes from the overnight bag and toss Ryder his clothes.

We get dressed in silence, each of us consumed with our own thoughts.

Ryder gathers up our clothes from last night as I brush my hair.

With one last look behind me, I follow Ryder to the elevator and down to the lobby.

Seeing Maya behind the desk, Ryder leans closer to me and whispers, “How about I get the car and you go check us out?”

That's the last thing I want to do, but I nod my head.

"Sure, no problem."

When I get to the counter, I pause and wait for her to finish up her phone call.

I feel awkward standing here. After all, she was my best friend for so long. She knew things about me that no one else did, and vice versa. I never dreamed we would stop being best friends, especially the way it ended.

There isn't a book that teaches you how to deal with an ex-best friend post break up, especially after the way we left things in Vegas.

Her voice is overly sweet in a customer service kind of way. "How was everything?"

"Perfect." I hand her the room keys.

"Great." She types a few keys on the computer keyboard. "Would you like a printed receipt?"

Would Ryder want a receipt?

After a few moments, I decide. "No, thank you."

She presses her lips in a thin line before mumbling, "Then have a great day."

Giving her the biggest smile I can, I say, "Yeah, you too."

I know Ryder and I will have a great day and I don't need to spend this sunny summer day worrying about what could have been with Maya and me.

It's time to let the past go and focus on the future.

Walking out into the sunlight, I see Ryder in the driver's seat.

Climbing into my dad's truck, I scoot over to the middle seat, buckle my seatbelt, and lean my head on his shoulder.

"Thanks for such a great night."

He lays his hand on my thigh. "I should be the one thanking you. Last night was incredible."

The sex was pretty explosive, but the entire night was incredible.

“I was referring to the date.”

His fingers squeeze my thigh. “Uh, yeah, me too.”

We share a light and carefree laugh.

After such a relaxing sex filled night with us discussing all our fears and concerns, I feel relaxed and more confident in our relationship than ever before.

He puts the car in drive and heads towards the highway to head back home.

I turn the dial to change the radio station and finally settle on a pop station.

Ryder glances at me. “Ugh, really?”

“What? There isn’t anything good on.”

“There were a ton of other options.”

Yeah, sucky options.

“I disagree. Plus, I actually like this song.”

I wiggle in my seat and dance along to the beat of the song as Ryder shakes his head.

“No one likes this song.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “Well, I guess I am no one then.”

“You are definitely more than no one.”

I stop dancing and face him. “Oh, yeah?”

The edges of his lips curl up into a smile. “Well, for starters, you are my girlfriend.”

A smile forms on my face. “And you are my boyfriend.”

“And we are about to start our forever.”

He smiles and glances towards me to gauge my reaction.

My heart swells from the love I am feeling right now. “Aww. That is so sweet.”

Never in a million years would I imagine sweet words like those coming out of Ryder's mouth.

Not now.

Not seventeen-year-old Ryder either, when my crush on him came to a head.

Ryder's smile slowly fades as his expression turns serious.

I immediately ask, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just-" He pauses to look my way.

"What?"

He was really happy just a minute ago and now his mood has changed. He takes the exit to our house and stops at the stop sign.

"Are you sure you are okay with this decision?"

I nod my head enthusiastically. "Yep. More than okay. I am looking forward to it."

"Good, because we are almost home and now have to face your parents."

"They will be happy for us."

Ryder seems convinced by my answer.

I know Mom will be happy for us. Dad might be a little apprehensive.

"And your brothers?" His tone is full of uncertainty.

I try to speak as confidently as I can. "They will also be happy for us."

I can't even convince myself of that, so I don't fault Ryder for looking at me as if I just grew another head.

Ryder pulls my dad's truck into the garage. He helps me out and grabs the overnight bag.

When I don't see anyone in the living room or kitchen, I call out. "Mom? Dad?"

Mom's voice yells from deep inside her bedroom. "Coming!"

Mom walks in carrying an empty laundry basket. “The washer is empty if the two of you need it. I figured I’d wash our clothes early this morning.”

Ryder speaks first. “Thanks. I’m pretty sure I need to wash mine.”

Changing the subject, I ask, “Where’s dad?”

“Out back with Danny. They have been trying to put the new chicken coop together since before dawn.”

“They are putting it together alone? Danny is down an arm and Dad shouldn’t be standing on his leg.”

Mom chuckles. “Relax. Sam is out there too. He’s probably doing most of the work, to be honest.”

Looking at Ryder, I see the conflict swirling in his eyes.

“Well, we can just tell Mom and then fill Dad in later when he gets done with the project him, Sam, and Danny are working on.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

Mom interjects. “Tell me what?”

Her gaze immediately moves down to my stomach as if we are about to tell her I am pregnant.

“No!” I yell, startling Ryder.

“Huh? What?” Ryder asks, oblivious to the miniature conversation Mom and I just had.

“Mom, Ryder and I spent hours last night talking and planning our future. We decided that the two of us are going to buy a small camper van and travel for the next year.”

Ryder joins in. “We know it is a lot, but I think this will be good for the two of us since we are young and undecided about our futures.”

Mom seems to consider everything we are telling her, so I explain my reasoning further.

“Last night, hearing Ryder talk about California and his experiences stirred something inside of me. I want to

experience new things and new towns. I was about to go to Florida to experience new things and at least this way I'm not alone, so you won't have to worry as much."

Mom thinks for another long moment.

"What about money?"

Ryder squeezes my hand. He knew Mom would ask this, so I let him take control of the conversation.

"I have money from my past jobs over the last six years and I have the money from my parents."

Mom slowly nods her head as if she knew this was the plan. "I know it is your money, but I don't want the two of you blowing through it."

I speak up. "We won't. Plus, I still have my remote job I can do from anywhere."

I didn't even want Ryder to use any of that money, but like he explained last night, his parents would want him to live a little and travel. That was one of their favorite hobbies as a family and as a couple.

"I have set most of it aside and have no plans to touch it until later in life, but I think this will be good for Addy and me."

Mom props a hand on her hip. "Have the two of you considered the tiny details?"

We just thought of this idea, of course we haven't fine tuned the details. Isn't that the opposite of spontaneity?

Ryder's words drag me out of my inner monologue. "Like what?"

Mom glances from me to Ryder. "Like grocery shopping and where you plan on washing your clothes."

I answer on Ryder's behalf.

"Mom, I understand your concerns, but every city will have, at the bare minimum, a gas station and grocery store. We can fill the tank and the pantry as needed, as well as use technology to look for a laundromat to wash our clothes."

Ryder interjects. “And we promise to be home for all the important holidays and to call at least once a week.”

Mom tries hard not to crack a smile, but the edges of her lips betray her and curl up into a grin.

“Addy, as your mom, I will always worry about you, but you two are adults and if you and Ryder want to embark on this journey together, then you have my blessing and support.”

I run towards her and wrap my arms around her neck. “Thank you!”

The back door opens and Danny’s voice drifts inside. “Grab one for me too.”

Turning my gaze to the back door, I watch as Dad hobbles to the refrigerator and grabs three beers before he turns his attention to us.

“What’s going on?”

I unwrap my arms from around Mom’s neck. “Ryder and I were filling Mom in on what we have decided to do for the next year.”

Dad raises an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We have decided to buy a camper van and travel for a while.”

I wait and watch as his expression mulls over what I just threw out there.

“I think it is-” He pauses and walks towards Ryder.

His expression is neutral, so I can’t tell if he thinks this is a stupid idea or if he will be happy for us.

Dad looks at Ryder and continues, “I think that is a great idea. Go out there and see the world. Well, the states since you will be driving. Just be safe and take care of my little girl.”

Ryder grins. “I will take care of her; no worries there, but will you come with us to pick out a camper?”

Dad’s eyes glisten with emotion. Ryder is the first one to ask him to help pick out a vehicle.

“Of course I will! Someone has to make sure you are getting the best deal possible.”

They share a hug before Dad heads back outside. He has a new pep in his step and it’s all thanks to Ryder.

Mom chuckles as the backdoor closes behind Dad.

She gives Ryder a pat on his back as she walks past him. “He will love you forever now.”

Ryder pretends to be shocked as he turns around to follow her. “I thought he already loved me.”

“Oh he does, but now the two of you will have a father/son bonding experience that he has begged his three sons to let him have.”

She disappears around the corner.

I clarify for her. “She’s saying, in other words, you are now his favorite son.”

His eyes widen. “I am?”

His voice is soft and full of uncertainty.

I walk over to him and wrap my arms around his neck.

“As long as you treat me right, then yes.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me closer until our chests are touching.

His voice is soft and quiet.

“I will spend every day for the rest of my life treating you right. I promise to pleasure you in as many ways as you will allow and as many times a day as I can. I promise to keep things exciting and follow you no matter where life leads us.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was proposing to me. At the very least, that is a declaration of love.

“That started out sounding like a proposal and then turned to fulfilling fantasies back to a proposal.”

He chuckles and squeezes my ass. “That wasn’t a proposal. You will know when I am proposing, and it won’t be at your parent’s house. You deserve a grand event.”

“That sounds kind of embarrassing.”

He leans back to look into my eyes. “You will be so blown away that you won’t have time to be embarrassed.”

His gaze is full of love and longing, and I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.

“It sounds like you have thought about this.”

I’ve thought about my future with Ryder for years and years, although my dreams faded once he went to college and refused to come home.

“Nah.”

I can tell he is trying to protect his male ego, so I raise an eyebrow. “Not even once?”

“Well, maybe a time or two.”

“Well, Mr. Time or Two, we need to do laundry and make a list of all the places we want to see.”

“We don’t even have a camper van yet.”

“We don’t need a camper van to lay out clothes and list places we want to see.”

When he doesn’t respond, I head up the stairs to my room and start listing the places I want to see.

“Niagara Falls, Statue of Liberty, oh the Liberty Bell, the White House and all the monuments, Golden Gate Bridge, Grand Canyon, ooh and Disneyland. Or should we go to Disney World?”

I take a deep breath before continuing. “I want to see the beaches of the Pacific and Atlantic. I want to swim with the dolphins and soak in the hot springs.”

Ryder cuts me off. “That sounds like it might take longer than a year.”

“And what if it does?”

Are we only allowed to travel for one year? Will we stop when we hit one year?

He grins and wraps his arms around my hips before spinning me around to face him.

“We will spend as long as it takes to see everything our hearts can desire.”

My eyebrow raises as I question him. “Really?”

He nods slowly. “Really. As long as I am with you, I am a happy man.”

My grin stretches wider until my cheeks become sore. “Then let the fun begin.”

He pulls me closer to him until there’s no space between our bodies. “I’ve got your fun right here.”

His lips press against mine and as I close my eyes to give into the kiss, my heart swells with more love than I have ever felt before

Chapter Twenty Five

ONE YEAR LATER

This has been the best year of my life by far.

Between waking up next to Ryder every single morning and being able to experience new things, it has been both exciting and thrilling.

“So,” I stretch after getting out of the passenger seat where I’ve been sitting for the past four hours.

The sun is just now setting, casting a red summer glow over the beach.

Ryder scratches his scruffy beard. “Last stop before returning home. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I’m so excited.”

Not only did Ryder spend this entire past week showing me around California, but he surprised me with one last stop before we head back home.

The Santa Monica Pier.

We walk towards the crowd that is heading towards the lights and sounds coming from the amusement park.

I grab Ryder’s hand. “Before we go in, I want to take a picture to commemorate this adventure.”

Ryder rolls his eyes but poses with me. “Don’t you have enough pictures from this past year?”

I let out a loud laugh because he always complains that I take a lot of pictures, but secretly I know he loves them. I've even seen him flipping through them when I'm napping.

I quickly snap a picture of the two of us before slipping my phone back into my pocket.

“Alright no more pictures tonight. I promise.”

He gives me a knowing smile. “Yeah, okay. We'll see.”

I playfully smack his chest. “I mean it. I won't take any more pictures- not even at the top of the Ferris wheel.”

Ryder raises an eyebrow, as if he doesn't believe a word I'm saying. “Even though you've always wanted to take a picture at the top of a Ferris wheel?”

I chuckle. Of course, he would remember that. “Well, okay, maybe that will be the only other picture I take tonight.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me towards our first destination.

“The merry-go-round?” I ask as we stop in front of the circular ride that is just starting to spin around.

He nods. “Yep. You're never too old to enjoy a ride on the small horses.”

I watch as several kids, teenagers, and parents laugh as the horses raise up and lower back down as the ride slowly spins.

It reminds me of the times that Mark, Danny, Sam, and Ryder would take me to the mall when I was barely a teenager, so I could ride the one there.

I would beg to go again and again. Even though they didn't want to be seen riding a merry-go-round as popular teenage boys, they each took a turn with me until I was starving.

Then we would grab a bite to eat in the food court. Most of the time, they would let me order a milkshake for the trip back home.

Ryder wraps his arms around my waist. “What's got you deep in thought?”

I lean my head back against his shoulder. “I was thinking about how you and my brothers would ride on the one at the mall with me.”

Ryder chuckles. “That seems like it was so long ago. We were all so young, but we all just wanted you to be happy.”

He sighs. “I tried anything and everything to keep you laughing.”

I turn around, pressing my chest against his. “I believe that’s when my crush on you really started.”

He smirks as he pulls me closer to him. “Is that so?”

“Yep. See to me, you weren’t just Sam’s friend that was protective of me, you were also the boy who made me laugh, cheered me up when I was sad, and teased me when I would get embarrassed during overly sexual parts in a movie.”

Making his face blush a light shade of pink, I add, “Not to mention you were hot as hell.”

As he goes to speak, the ride ends, the riders get off, and the ride attendant opens the gate to let us in for our turn on the ride.

I walk around to the opposite side of the ride and pick the pure white horse. I always wanted a white horse, but Dad couldn’t find one that looked like the picture in my head.

Ryder stands beside me and I immediately shake my head.

“Nuh-uh. You have to ride a horse, too.”

His face turns stone cold as he looks at me. “No. No way am I climbing up on a fake plastic horse.”

I bat my eyelashes and muster up my most innocent face. “Please? For me?”

Ryder looks around, runs his hand through his sandy blonde locks, and sighs before climbing on the horse next to me.

Before I can say anything, he says, “Only for you and only because you asked.”

I laugh as the ride starts and old feelings flood back through me. Feelings of being carefree, loved, and protected. The way that Ryder has made me feel this past year.

Watching Ryder ride the merry-go-round stirs something inside of me.

He isn't afraid to be seen riding a kiddie ride with his girlfriend or taking photos in front of amusement park signs. He isn't afraid to admit when he is wrong or apologize when we have a miscommunication.

Ryder truly is the best man for me.

As the ride stops, I grab Ryder's hand as he leads me towards the ride's exit.

"Thank you for riding the ride with me and not just standing there."

He gives me a smile. "Anything for you."

And I know he means every word, because over the past year he has given me everything I could want and then some.

When we are away from the merry-go-round ride, he turns towards me and points to the Ferris wheel.

"Are you ready to complete the last thing on your bucket list?"

It's a bittersweet moment, but I'm ready to go back home and get back to the simple life where Ryder and I can plan our future.

"I'm ready."

We head towards the end of the pier and get in line for the Ferris wheel, where, surprisingly, there isn't a long line.

"You would think the line would be longer for the Ferris wheel than the merry-go-round because it's sunset and the view from the top is going to be phenomenal."

Ryder chuckles as we step into our private little car. "Maybe people aren't as excited about sunsets as you are."

"Well, then that's their loss."

I look out over the ocean at the fading light. I've always enjoyed sunsets, but nothing can compare to the sunsets over the Pacific Ocean.

Truth be told, I'm going to miss all the traveling, but settling down seems like the right next step.

I wonder if Ryder feels the same way, or if he's just going along with what I want?

What he wants matters too. Our future isn't only what I want.

I turn to look at Ryder and am surprised that he's already staring at me.

"Addy, just because our traveling days are over, doesn't mean that our adventure and experiences have to end."

Well, that's good to know.

He continues. "I want to continue growing with you and continue to travel and learn new things. I want us to build a life together around trust and honesty."

I give him a peck on his cheek. "I feel the same way. I want to make sure we still keep things exciting, but I hope you know that I'm here for the long haul."

He points behind me. "Look over there at the beach."

On the beach, rose petals form a giant heart and candles spell out the words MARRY ME?

Looking back at Ryder, my mouth drops open as I see a small black velvet box in his hand.

"So, how about it? Will you marry me?"

Did he plan all this for me?

He slowly opens the box, exposing a beautiful diamond ring.

I gasp before yelling, "Yes! Of course I'll marry you, Ryder."

He slips the ring onto my finger and pulls me into a kiss.

This kiss feels different. It feels like the start of forever.

He pulls back slightly and whispers, “I have one more surprise for you.”

I grin, surprised that he could pull off so many surprises. “You do?”

“Mm-hmm.” He nods and smirks, knowing that it will irk me.

“What is it?” I ask in the sweetest voice I can muster up.

“I can’t tell you that.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Okay, then. Where is the surprise?”

He points towards the beach. “Down there, where the candles and rose petals are.”

When the ride finishes, I all but sprint back down the pier to the beach where the romantic proposal is.

There, standing along the water’s edge, is my entire family. Dad, mom, Mark, Danny, and Sam.

I laugh as I take in Ryder’s happy expression. “What are you guys doing here?”

Tears form in my eyes as I look over my entire family. I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed them.

Mom is the first one to run towards me, pulling me into a hug.

“Congratulations sweetie. I’m so happy for you, both of you.”

She lets me go to give Ryder a hug as Dad looks at me with tears in his eyes.

“Aww, Dad, don’t cry.” I walk over to him and give him a hug.

He leans closer and whispers in my ear. “I’m so proud of you.”

My heart feels like it’s going to burst with love and joy.

After hugging Mark, Danny, and Sam, I turn to face Ryder.

“How did you pull this off?”

“I didn’t have to do much. I just explained to your mom that I was going to propose and wanted them here.”

“It was that simple?” I glance at mom who is nodding her head and confirming Ryder’s story.

Ryder walks over to me and pulls me into a heated kiss without worrying about my family seeing.

Wrapping my hands around his neck, I let myself get lost in this kiss for a while.

It feels great knowing that I will get to kiss Ryder whenever I want for the rest of our lives, and he wants it as much as I do.

I pull back, suddenly remembering my bucket list. “Aww man, I forgot to take a picture of the two of us at the top of the Ferris wheel.”

Ryder laughs. “We can ride it again. In fact, we can stop at every fair and carnival on the way back home and take a picture at the top of every single one of them.”

I grab the front of his shirt and pull him into me. “How did I get so lucky?”

He nibbles on my ear lobe before whispering, “I’ll show you all night just how lucky you are.”

I stare into his crystal blue eyes and say, “Now that is something I’m looking forward to.”

*Want more forbidden romance with heart-throbbing men?
Check out book two in the Men of Forbidden Temptation
series, [Marc](#).*

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my husband and son who listen to my rants and constantly answer my many random questions.

And most of all, thank you to my wonderful readers who continue to support my writing no matter how long it takes for me to get the words on paper.

About the Author

Jessica Long writes steamy, fast paced contemporary and paranormal romance reads with strong, independent women. From one lover to four, these heroines will always find their happy endings.

She is addicted to coffee, chocolate, cruising, and everything Christmas. When Jessica isn't reading or writing, she can be found watching movies and playing games with her husband and son.

To connect with her and keep up with all the latest releases, follow her page on Facebook, Jessica Long Author.



Also by Jessica Long

PLAYOFFS AND PERFECT KISSES

FINALS AND SECRET WEDDINGS

MASKED DESIRES

UNTAMED DESIRES

RYDER

MARC

DAMIEN

ALEX

XAVIER