



WOOD BROTHERS

# SCREWED

ABBY KNOX

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# ABBY KNOX



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Edited by Aquila Editing

Cover Designer: Cover Girl Designs

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# SCREWED

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## **Wade**

When a new employee injures herself on the job, I take responsibility. The pretty Presley isn't making it easy on me, though. She's a terrible patient, and won't rest and let her body heal. What choice do I have but to take her home with me so I can keep an eye on her at all times?

## **Presley**

My boss doesn't get it. I can't pay off my father's debt if I can't earn an income. The gorgeous Wade thinks he can make my problems go away, but he has no idea of the mess I'm dealing with. He should stick to fixing houses and let me handle my own issues. Being left alone to fend for myself is all I've ever known. I'll be fine...probably.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Presley

My felon pops's enemies found me.

And I'm out of a job. Again.

I tried to explain to my boss at the gas station that those guys in the expensive suits were liars. That their business cards are phony. That they show up to my jobs regularly, claiming that I used to work for them and owed them money, even though I don't.

"My pops is in debt to them, not me."

My now-former boss believed them — the New York guys in the fancy suits with the Russian accents — over me and apologetically sent me packing. "I'm really sorry, Presley, but I don't need this kind of trouble at my store," he'd said.

Apologies don't change the fact that I'm now without a job and have no marketable skills. Ruby's Diner isn't hiring, and Ruby's catering business only pays per gig, and there are not many events in this town where she needs me.

I've spent all afternoon begging for work at every business in town. The visitor center, city hall, the brewery, the junk stores, the supermarket...nobody has anything for me. I even checked at Rex's Garage. Not that I know how to fix cars or drive a tow truck, but as the mayor's human companion, Rex knows everything going on in town.



“You might check with Wood Brothers; they’re always looking for crew members,” Rex had said.

That’s very generous of him to think I know the first thing about what to do with nails and screws and whatnot.

“I’m sorry, honey. A yarn store just doesn’t have the volume of customers that would demand more workers other than Hayden and myself,” Billie says on my final stop at her yarn and crafting store.

My last rejection of the day. I can’t take any more.

I understand what she’s saying. But I’m done now, and I’m headed home to eat my weight in ramen and cry in front of a re-watch of *Gossip Girl*.

You’d think a couple of wise guys trying to collect a debt would prefer I earn a legitimate income to pay off my Pops’s debts at some point.

But that’s not what they seem to care about. It’s all intimidation. Those guys from New York don’t want my money in drips and drabs. They want me to come and work for them and for their oligarch boss. They want me dependent on them, just like everyone else who works for their boss.

I shudder to think what that means.

I amble down the street, feeling on edge after what happened today. I walk with regular glances over my shoulder, even in this town of 1,001 people.

The sun sets behind me, and I can’t see very well, but a shadowy figure seems to be following me.

Was that the same stranger who got me fired today? He was smoking a cigarette on the stairs of the old courthouse as I zipped from store to store, looking for work today.

I’ve resisted Ivan Guzinsky’s overtures for so long now that I worry that his thugs will up and grab me right off the street now that they found me. Especially now that there’s no employer here accounting for my whereabouts.

I recall what one of them told me when they first approached me last year, right before I left the city and went

into hiding: “No one will miss you. And things will be easier if you come willingly. He knows you like pretty things, like that Prada bag you have there. There’s a lot more where that came from if you don’t put up a fight. Ivan Guzinsky prefers it that way. Less messy.”

That day is burned into my brain. I vomited my meager dinner after that.

My pulse pounding, I decide it’s best if I make contact with as many people as possible tonight. Someone will have been the last person to see me. Someone will miss me. Someone, hopefully, will help me.

When I get to the aromatherapy store, I consider ducking in there for safety. Dammit, it’s already closed.

I look again, and the man turns and heads into Other Brother Ben’s Brewery. I blow out a breath of relief, scurry past the aromatherapy store, and head down the block, past the construction crew at the old Ingalls house. Thank goodness my best friend Grace’s husband, Buck, doesn’t tolerate catcalling from his crew. The Wood brothers have been rehabbing old, abandoned homes all over town, and not once have I been whistled at as I stroll through downtown.

“Downtown” is a bit of a stretch. Not much happens here. No noise at night except for the crickets and the occasional live band at the brewery.

The quiet is too quiet tonight, and I scurry to my crappy apartment in the sagging three-story Victorian.

I felt more secure in my crowded New York neighborhood. I believe in safety in numbers.

I had to leave that high-rise apartment in Manhattan, though, after the Russians came after me.

It’s funny how important people who have been scammed still want their money back, even after the guy who conned them ends up in prison.

Not funny haha. Funny as in, “Gee, I guess I’ll have to leave the city and live a quiet life in a flyover state where nobody would look for me.”

One run-in with those guys was enough. I packed up all my shit, moved to the middle of the country, and picked the first town that spoke to me. The first place that was weird enough for the likes of me but also made me feel at home.

As a testament to Fate's welcoming vibe, a basket sits by the front door of my apartment building with a note that has my name on it, scrawled in permanent marker. I smile, pick up the note, and read, "I woulda brought it up to your door, but I guess that creep landlord of yours finally installed a code entry, praise Jesus. By the way, I peeked in your buggy at the grocery store, which traumatized me for life. Don't you dare write me a thank you note. Just stop by for a visit sometime."

The note isn't signed, but I know who it's from. The aroma coming from the basket makes my mouth water. Old Ernestine cracks me up. She's got to be 85 years old, and she insists on bossing around everyone in town in the most loving way possible.

It was Ernestine's billboard boasting the "Curiosity Spot" that first caught my attention and had me pulling off the highway to investigate. Turns out it's a hill out back of her farmhouse where she has set up a tourist spot and gift shop, claiming that the hill defies the laws of physics. Something to do with the earth's magnetic pull. I don't get it, but I bought a souvenir shot glass on that first visit because it was just fuckin' weird enough for me. Ernestine then invited me up to the house for fried chicken that was so spicy it melted my face off, and I knew I was home.

I lug the basket to my apartment and examine the contents of it as I sit by the window overlooking the street. The golden buttermilk biscuits inside have been sliced and slathered in Ernestine's homemade jalapeño pimento cheese, and I'm drooling before I can unwrap them. A baggie of her chocolate chip cookies is buried underneath the biscuits, still warm. As an afterthought, there's also a container of cut veggies and ranch dressing on the side. The woman feeds me like the grandmother I never had.

I stuff my face and watch the work crew at the Ingalls house below pack up and head home for the day. Buck's truck

has already left for the Paget mansion, where a pregnant Grace is waiting. I want to text her but don't want to disturb their evening. The house is probably still bursting with gifts that they haven't opened yet from the baby shower, and I can't help but smile when I think about that big, gruff guy unwrapping boxes of baby clothes and toys. Buck is so sweet to her; I bet he's already giving her a foot rub and telling her not to overextend herself. Against my will, the image of him kissing her swollen belly pops into my head, and I feel a tightness in my chest.

I'm not in the least bit attracted to Buck, and I'm really happy for Grace. I wonder what it's like to have someone to talk to every night.

I nibble on one of Ernestine's buttery biscuits, loaded down with her spicy pimento cheese, and spy one of Buck's brothers closing up the job site. It's Wade. The middle brother. The grumpier and stressed out one, by all accounts. He's objectively hot, all tattoos and rippling muscles as he locks up tools and other expensive supplies, bags up trash, and moves piles of junk from here to there. Weirdly, his hard hat and safety glasses are kind of a turn-on. However, I'm not a fan of how he gave Grace a hard time when Buck first hired her. Wade was suspicious of her and more or less accused Buck of thinking about getting laid rather than the bottom line.

By Grace's account, she and Wade are on good terms, and he's a great brother-in-law, but the brothers can be a bit hotheaded with each other.

I still haven't forgiven Wade for being rude because Grace must be protected at all costs. That's the thing about best friends: we don't have to grant forgiveness to those who wronged the people we love. Hurt me? Sure, we can work things out. Hurt my friend? Yeah...no. I'll make a sport out of being petty to you for the rest of my days.

My phone pings, and I wipe my buttery fingers on the napkin that Ernestine graciously included with my food before I touch my phone screen.

Grace: My water just broke!

I stand up straight, sending the baggie of cookies tumbling from the basket. Chocolate chip cookies crumble into a million pieces.

I FaceTime Grace right away. “OMG! Do you need me to come to the hospital? What do you need? Anything at all!”

She replies, “I’m good! Buck is handling everything, even the ice chips, lol. He’s getting the good ice from Ruby’s.”

“I’m so excited! Please keep me posted! And don’t you dare let anyone hold that baby before me!”

“After Buck and me, you’ll be the first.”

“I love you!”

“Love you too, Pres!”

Between Ernestine and Grace, I’ve been fortunate to attract good people to me in Fate.

I’ve been less lucky with jobs and money, and don’t even ask about romantic relationships. That’s a complete nonstarter in my current situation.

I gaze forlornly at the cookies on the floor.

Yeah, I’m still eating those tonight.

Tomorrow, I’ll talk to Ruby’s husband, Nick, the foreman at Wood Bros. Construction, and see if they need someone to sweep up.

At this point, I’ll take anything to pay the rent.

What to do about the oligarch’s thugs?

I have no idea.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Wade

My brother Buck left me with a mountain of paperwork, but I'm in a half-decent mood today. After all, I just found out I'm an uncle for the first time. How cool is that?

And how could I fault my big brother for falling behind on things at the business? The man has been understandably preoccupied for the last nine months leading up to the birth.

Besides, I owe him big time after acting like an ass to his then-girlfriend Grace when we'd first met. I didn't trust Buck's instincts about her talents at staging, and they both proved me wrong. Now that she's my sister-in-law and a damn good stager — even by our sister's standards — we're good.

What's not good is my handling of the office duties, try as I might. Buck has been away on family leave for less than three days, and I could use some help organizing this mess.

I sort through the piles and put invoices in one section, insurance forms in another, and receipts in another. Right. I still don't know what to do with any of this other than simply hold down the fort until Buck returns from family leave.

I'm a doer. I tear things down and build things back up. I make kickass custom shelves and cabinets. I can restore hardwood floors, plant trees, and I know how to work a scroll saw. But make me write an email to a vendor, and I am at a loss.

I'm staring at my computer screen, trying to think of how to compose a help wanted ad for the town square bulletin board, when Nick, my foreman, opens the construction trailer door and knocks on the doorjamb.

"Hey boss. We have a problem."

I glance up to see that the guy's usual carefree demeanor is looking ill.

"Not you, too," I joke. "No more having babies on this crew. I can't handle anyone else leaving me twisting."

Nick grimaces. "No, it's not that. Though, to be honest, Claribel has been asking for a baby sibling for a while now, but that may not be in the cards for us."

Oops. I just put my boot so far down my mouth it's coming out of my asshole. "Sorry, man. I forgot."

"No worries. I just wanted to tell you we have a problem with one of the new crew members. He's real young and inexperienced. Doesn't even know how to use a wheelbarrow and dumped some bricks on his foot. And the worst part is, he wasn't wearing the regulation boots."

"Ah shit, are you serious?"

Nick adds, "And he's refusing to be seen by the doctor."

I stand up. "Is he okay?"

Nick shrugs. "Yeah. I'm real worried about his foot, though. He needs to get it checked out, but he's resistant."

I scrub a hand through my hair. "This isn't good. I'll go talk to him. You stay here and fill out an incident report. Do you know how to file those?"

"Sure do," Nick says.

"Great," I say. "Where is this kid?"

"In the break area, putting his foot up. I'll handle the phones here. The rest of the crew has everything covered."

I find my way to the temporary tent out back that serves as a break area for the crew and immediately spot the little guy.

His back is to me, and he has his foot elevated on a chair as he downs a bottle of water.

“How’s the foot?” I stand in front of the guy, arms crossed over my chest, ready to be the big, mean boss before I pack him off to the hospital. I’ll wait until his hospital bills are paid before I fire him. I don’t want to let anyone go who is willing to work, but I don’t want to get slapped with a fine for child labor.

But when that downturned face in the hard hat looks up at me, I forget all about the stern boss act. Sharp eyes look back at me from a soft-angled face with hair tucked inside the hard hat. This is not a young dude. This is a woman.

“My foot’s fine,” she says in a low-pitched voice.

I look at the file and back up at her. “You’re...Jeffrey?”

“Yep. I’m Jeffrey.”

I force myself not to smile at this blatant lie. “Jeffrey, how old are you?”

The kid thinks for a minute. “I’m 26.”

Twenty-six. Sure she is.

“Okay, Jeffrey. You’ve put me in a really awkward position, did you know that?”

She shakes her head frantically. “Please don’t fire me, Mr. Wood.”

Her sweetness tears at my chest. She must really be desperate for a job.

“Call me Wade.”

Out of nowhere, the kid bursts into tears, and her cheeks burn pink. Whoa. I assumed she was very young, but did Nick hire an actual middle school girl?

“Please don’t fire me! I know those guys can be hardasses, but they’re liars. You have to believe me.”

Weird thing to say, but alright. “Listen. Don’t worry about OSHA. We can handle the safety inspectors. You’re not the



first person to be injured on the job.”

The girl looks confused. “Inspectors?”

I squint down at her. “How old are you? For real.”

A bottom lip quivers, and I feel guilty for scaring her. “Okay, I’m 20! But I can do this job, I swear!”

I glance down at her Chuck Taylors. “For starters, you don’t have the correct footwear.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I can’t afford the steel-toed boots.”

“We’ll get you some as soon as the doctor checks you out.”

The kid shakes her head and wipes a tear with her forearm, bumping the hard hat. A long chunk of hair falls from under the hat, and she looks up at me with fear in those striking eyes. “I can’t go to the doctor. Gimme one of those forms that says I refused treatment, and I’ll sign it.”

“I sure will, but then I’ll have no choice but to fire you.”

“Dammit!”

Her pitch rises as she’s clearly given up on pretending to be Jeffrey.

I squat in front of her and say, “You know, we do hire women on this crew. We have a strict nondiscrimination clause. There’s no need to pretend to be a man.”

There’s a long standoff until she finally gives in. “Ugh! Okay, listen. I didn’t pretend to be a guy because I was worried you wouldn’t hire me. I gave a fake name and pretended to be a guy because I don’t want anyone harassing you for hiring me.”

She looks over her shoulder in a paranoid kind of way.

I’m not sure what’s happening here, but I’m sure this girl is in trouble.

“You want to tell me in private?”

She nods.

“Okay. Let’s go to my office and have a chat.”

“That would be good,” she sighs in relief.

When the young woman tries to move her foot off the chair, I’m not about to let her. Instead, I scoop her up in my arms and march her to my truck.

“Where are you taking me? The office is that way!”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. We’re gonna get you fixed up.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Presley

“That wasn’t the deal!”

I shout and squirm in this big oaf’s arms, but I may as well be wrestling out of a straitjacket.

When Wade doesn’t answer, I push against his arm that’s hooked under my knees. “Where are you taking me?”

“To the doctor,” he says with an edge of amusement.

“You said I didn’t have to go to the doctor!”

Wade somehow wrangles the passenger door open and sits me down. I try to bolt from the truck, but he makes the most undignified move ever—palms my forehead, holding me still as I swipe at him ineffectively.

“I didn’t expressly say that.”

“You implied it!” I squawk.

Wade doesn’t care what I want because he reaches past me, buckles my seat belt, and then shuts the door in my face.

Wow, he really does live up to his reputation as a jerk.

I’ve never been so offended in my life. And my foot is screaming in pain.

Why can’t he just take me home, let me have some Tylenol, and try to forget this embarrassing work injury?

Wade slides behind the wheel and turns to me with a smirk. “No, I didn’t imply anything. I omitted the information that you are going to the doctor regardless of how bad you don’t want to.”

“Why are you like this?”

He studies me thoughtfully as he switches on the engine. “Because I wish someone would have taken better care of my baby sister when my brothers and I were serving overseas. She got herself into one scrape after another. Susan’s all good now, but you remind me of her. I feel like I have a second chance to rewrite history.”

Wade throws the truck into gear. “And I want to hear more about these so-called hard-ass guys who like to spread lies about you.”

He thinks he does, but nobody wants me to burden them with my problems. People say they care, but they don’t know what to do with all my bullshit.

“You don’t know me.”

“I know you seem to be on the run, which intrigues me. And you have pretty eyes.”

“Trust me, nothing is intriguing about why I’m on the run.”

Wade lets that comment lie while we drive to the emergency room in Gold Hill.

“Don’t take me to the fancy hospital; I can’t afford those doctors. Can’t you just take me to the doc in a box?”

“No, I can’t. Company procedure. The urgent clinic in Fate is out of network for our employees.”

I want to argue that I’m so new I haven’t signed up for medical insurance yet, but I have a feeling there’s no arguing with this guy.

If I don’t get fired from this job, I’ll have to get a second one to cover medical expenses on top of what my dad owes the Russian oligarch.

A jolt of pain in my foot sears up my leg and I wince, unable to stifle the whimper. “Ow, ow, ow!”

The look of concern that Wade gives me is the first time he’s not appeared bemused or annoyed or teasing. He seems genuinely concerned.

“Hold on tight, sweetheart, we’re almost there.” He reaches over and takes my hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

“I have a name, and it’s not sweetheart. It’s Presley Rose, and I—” I start, but my words are drowned out by the roaring engine as Wade floors it.

Fine. he can hold my hand if he wants to. It’s not terrible.

“Almost there,” he mutters as he races around traffic.

We arrive shortly after he runs a red light, and once again, the man feels the need to carry me from the truck.

I could point out that the emergency room has wheelchairs available for this sort of thing. But as the pain in my foot explodes in sharp stabs, I don’t have the energy to argue. And, okay, despite my protests, my body likes being carried by this man. He smells nice, like a combination of wood shavings and spice.

Also, I’ve never been so fussed over before by anyone, apart from Ernestine’s cooking and Grace’s friendship, until she got married. So I’m happy to eat this up. For now.

But after today, Wade Wood cannot tell me what to do. Nope. Not happening again.

“Are you her next of kin?” asks the admitting nurse of Wade.

“No,” he says. “I’m her boss.”

“You’ll have to wait out here,” the nurse says.

Oh no, I’m not going back there alone just to be talked into more expensive medical procedures than necessary. “Sir,” I say to the nurse, “my next of kin is in prison so this man is all I have.” The nurse’s face is sympathetic but resolute. “I’m sorry, but it’s hospital policy.”

I've had it up to here with policies, be they hospital or employment. "And he's my fiancé!" I blurt.

The nurse looks from me to Wade, sighs, then gives in and waves Wade through the double doors with me.

When Wade leans over and holds my hand again, I'm not ready for the jolt of electricity that skitters through my body.

From my hospital wheelchair, I sneak a glance at Wade's dark expression. My cheeks burn for who knows what reason.

"I was going to tell them our family built this entire wing of the hospital, but I like your argument better," he says. That mischievous smile warms me all the way to the stabbing pain in my foot.

Soon enough, I'm in an exam room, awaiting X-ray results. And because Wade is a gentleman, he averted his gaze as the nurses helped me remove my clothes and put me in a hospital gown.

"So, fiancée," he asks. "What kind of cake are we having?"

Wade's got jokes. Awesome. And he's possessive as hell. His big body overwhelms the folding chair someone brought in for him, and he's scooted it up right next to me, and still grips my hand.

"White chocolate raspberry," I quip.

He nods and cocks his head to the side. "Good, but I prefer a cream cheese icing."

"Why choose?" I say.

He laughs. "White chocolate and cream cheese combo sounds amazing."

My stomach rumbles at all this cake talk.

"Are you hungry?"

Embarrassed that I haven't eaten anything today because I've been saving the rest of Ernestine's biscuits for dinner tonight, I don't give him an answer.

“You’re being ridiculous. Hang tight, babe. I’ll be right back.”

I should protest. Wade’s already done too much. He’s taken too much time out of his day to tend to the world’s crappiest employee. But much like riding around in his arms, it feels good to be taken care of. I’ll allow it. For now.

“I’ll try not to hoof it in my elegant new gown,” I say, smoothing down the scratchy cotton fabric that hangs open at the back.

I know the fiancé talk is for the benefit of the hospital staff that rushes around. But the kiss on the forehead is a bit much.

Instantly, my nipples harden against the scratchy cotton, and when he pulls away, I have to fight the urge to pull him back for a real kiss.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Wade

What the heck was I thinking kissing her like that?

Presley must think I'm a real creep.

Presley. An unusual name for an unusual person. As soon as she dictated her personal info for me to fill out the paperwork in admitting, I began in my mind's eye to doodle her name with my last name. Presley Wood. Mr. And Mrs. Wade and Presley Wood. Presley Rose Wood.

Damn, that sounds good.

I'm a dork for even thinking about it.

But I can't help it; I'm drawn to her. I feel her in my veins. When she hinted at her troubles, the wildest protective feelings kicked in, and I knew she would never be out of my sight again.

It's more than Presley's pretty eyes that I could lose myself in. It's more than her snappy New York accent, though I do find it fun to listen to. Something inside her speaks to something inside me. We have a bone-deep connection, though we barely know each other. And all the fiancé banter has made me feel it on an even deeper level.

I drive to the nearest fast food place on the highway, but nothing looks good enough on the menu for her. She needs real food. They don't have Ruby's here...maybe I should talk to Nick and Ruby about expanding into Gold Hill. I set that



random thought aside as my desire to take care of her wars with the need to get back to her side immediately.

Pick your battle, Wade. I finally decide on a burger and fries and vow to cook something better for her tonight at my house. Because yeah, she's coming home with me after this.

Presley might resist at first. She might think I'm a creep. If that's the case, I'll have to prove myself. I see the look in her eyes when I fuss over her; no one is taking care of this girl. She's totally unused to it. Something tells me she's been fending for herself for most of her life because she doesn't know how to take me.

I quickly pay for the drive-thru food and gun it back to the hospital.

A doctor is reviewing her X-rays when I arrive with her burger and fries.

"You're very lucky. I see no fractures. But it's badly bruised, and you will need to stay off of it as much as possible until it heals. Ice it and keep it elevated."

"How long until I can go back to work?" Presley looks horrified. "In fact, I have to look for a second job. You have no idea the kind of bills I have."

The doctor puts up her hands to try to calm Presley down, but it only seems to amp her up even more.

"You just don't get it. I didn't go to college, and I have no marketable skills to work from home. I couldn't even get a part-time job at the library putting books away because I failed the Dewey decimal tests. There are no retail jobs in this town. Nobody is hiring any servers. It's construction or nothing in Fate."

The doctor simply blinks and stares hard at Presley. "I'm sorry for all of that. But you need to take time to heal, or you'll continue to have problems in the future. That's my advice."

My hand automatically goes to Presley's back, and I thank the doctor. My fake fiancée's ragged breathing calms, and she

looks up at me with eyes welled up with tears. “What am I going to do?” Presley asks as I unwrap her burger.

“The first thing you’ll do is eat your lunch and wait for them to release you. That’s all you have to worry about now, sweetheart.”

No snarky retort comes this time when I call her sweetheart. Instead, her eyes soften, and she wipes away a tear. I hate that she looks so embarrassed. I never want her to feel that way around me.

“Eat,” I order.

“Yes, sir.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Presley

The truck stops not at my house but at a smallish bungalow on the outskirts of Gold Hill.

“Whose house is this, and what are we doing here?”

Wade smirks at me. “My house. And this is where you’ll stay until you’re healed up.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t agree to that.”

He ignores this as he cuts the engine, exits the truck, and comes around to my side. “You say that a lot,” he says when he opens my door.

“Because you keep changing the plan on me!” I sound like an exasperated caricature of myself, but Wade has driven me to it.

With another one of those outrageous smirks, Wade reaches past my boobs and down toward my hip, where he dislodges my seatbelt. He doesn’t reply until he has me in his arms again. Am I going to keep letting him do this to me?

Hm. Yeah, I guess I am.

“I don’t keep changing the plan. I have the one and only plan. You just don’t ask the right questions.”

Why is he being so weird and cryptic?

And then I think back to how he spoke to my friend Grace. That's right. That makes him still a bit of a tool, doesn't it? Even if he is being outrageously, over-the-top nice to me.

I point back at the truck. "They gave me crutches, you know."

"I know that," he says, marching through the side gate and taking a flagstone path through an astonishingly pretty backyard.

I'd stop to marvel at the willow trees, koi pond, decorative grasses, flowers, and hammocks if I didn't have other pressing matters concerning me at the moment.

"You seem like the type of girl who needs looking after," Wade explains upon opening the back door and carrying me past the threshold into a spacious and modern kitchen. "I have a feeling you're not going to stay put. So I'll be keeping you here to look after you."

I don't know whether to be insulted or pleased.

I know what my inner feminist would say. How dare you take away my agency! On the other hand, haven't I always had a little *too much* agency? Haven't I been concerned only with my survival since day one?

I've been buying my own clothes and groceries online since the age of 12. Some days in my tweens, I went for days without seeing another adult except for teachers at school. One time, I'm pretty sure Mom and Dad went on a cruise for two weeks and left me at home.

I harbored a fantasy that anyone, like a friend, boyfriend, or a friendly neighbor, would swoop in and take me away to a world where I didn't have to be alone. Where I didn't have to enroll myself alone in school or shop for school supplies at Target alone.

I never worried about money. It was always there. But my parents were just...too busy to pay attention to me. My school friends talked about various religious and family traditions and rituals, like lighting candles, having bar mitzvahs, exchanging names for Secret Santas, or reading *T'was the Night Before*

*Christmas* together. But I never had that. Birthday and Christmas packages arrived at the door unwrapped, but I often opened those boxes alone because Mom and Dad were usually sleeping off a bender.

Wade carries me through the kitchen, past an adjoining living room that looks like a combination of a man cave that some woman tried to put some feminine touches on. All the furniture is black leather, but the rug is super high-end, and there are cushy throws and pillows everywhere. Every corner has tall, large-leafed plants. The window treatments are impeccable. Over the fireplace is a gorgeous Audubon print, but next to it is a signed NBA jersey of someone I've never heard of.

A flash of jealousy hits me at the thought of another woman in Wade's house.

But as he marches down the hallway, I remind myself that, for all I know, Wade could be married or dating someone else.

If that's the case, he's inappropriately flirty for someone who might be attached.

Still, even if he does like my banter and likes to boss me around, that doesn't mean I have any claim on him.

He could see me as nothing more than a big brother.

As he should—didn't he say he was 35? He's so much older than me.

Yikes.

But also, yikes at how my body reacts to that little nugget of truth.

Am I secretly looking for a sugar daddy? Gross. Totally gross.

But...is it, though?

Wade carries me into a room decked out in pinks and grays. It's pretty and feminine, unlike the rest of the house.

He sets me down on the bed and immediately grabs a stack of spare pillows from the closet to prop up my foot.

“Wade, imprisoning me in your bedroom is highly weird for a boss.”

He turns back to me before he bolts out the door. “It used to be my sister Susan’s room,” he says.

Right. His sister Susan, who now works with his sister-in-law, my best friend, Grace, who is at home snuggling her new baby.

“Wait,” I say. “Is this the house you grew up in?”

He nods. “Yep. Mom and Dad downsized to a condo, and I always said I wanted to keep my childhood home in the family. Buck always wanted something bigger to raise a family in, so our parents sold this house to me for next to nothing.”

I barely have time to process my surroundings and plan my escape when Wade returns with a glass of water and a prescription bottle.

“This is the pain med the doctor prescribed,” he says, handing me a glass of water and the tiny white pill.

I shake my head, remembering how loopy a pill just like that made my mom that one time. “I don’t need it, but thanks.”

“It will lessen the pain and help you rest,” Wade insists.

As deflection is my entire personality, I ask him, “How do I know you didn’t slip some Rohypnol into the water?”

Wade sets the glass on the nightstand and sits on the bed beside me, looking thoughtful.

In his hand, he cups the tiny pill. Finally, he blows out a breath. “Did anyone ever tell you you’re a terrible patient?”

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a terrible fiancé?”

This makes him laugh, and it pleases me more than it should.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” I say. “You shouldn’t keep me here. You’ll get into trouble with...” With who, exactly? It’s not like Wood Brothers Construction has a human

resources department where I can file a complaint for an overbearing boss. Does it? Heck if I know.

“I mean, you’re supposed to oversee the business while Buck is on family leave, right? You can’t be here fussing over me day and night.”

“Harley and Nick can handle things just fine without me.”

“Sure they can. I’m sure they’re super competent at hiring crew members who don’t wear proper footwear and drop bricks when they get lightheaded from hunger.”

Wade’s jaw tics. Then, he picks up the glass, drinks half of it, and hands it to me.

“There. If there was Rohypnol in it, then I’m just as fucked as you are.”

My throbbing foot begs me to take the pill, so I hold out my hand grudgingly.

Wade’s rough fingers brush against my palm as he carefully places the pill in it. He then watches me drink the water.

“Are you going to make me show you that I swallowed it?” I ask with a smirk.

“No, but I will ask you to tell me what the hell is going on with you. Who are you running from? Who the hell is looking for you and why?”

This is a lot of information to dump on someone brand new.

“I assume you’re going to harass me until I tell you everything.”

“Pretty much.”

I exhale heavily and say, “My parents were professional scammers. My whole life, I thought we were wealthy. We lived in a spacious apartment on Central Park West. We had maids and nannies, and I went to the best schools. It turns out that my parents bankrolled our lives by conning global elites

out of their money with investment schemes, catfishing scams on dating apps, the list goes on. You name it, they've done it.

“One day, they scammed the wrong guy. Some Russian oligarch; Ivan something. Arms dealer, I think. They met him on one of their trips to Croatia and convinced the man to invest money in their pretend startup. Hacking software. Dark web shit. My dad was under federal investigation shortly after getting the Russian money. Mom saw the writing on the wall and ran off to France. Last I heard, she's some financier's side piece, but honestly, I could not care less.

“Once my dad ended up in prison, the Russian oligarch wanted his money back, but it was all spent on lawyers and fines. I've tried paying in installments, but I can't keep a job down because I lack skills. These people are not the most patient in the world. Furthering my problems, my parents never showed me how to do anything. I have no life skills, no education beyond high school. I had a good counselor in high school who helped me apply to college, but I was too stressed out to focus on that.

“So I lived on the cash that my parents had stashed around the apartment and got odd jobs here and there.

“But now, the oligarch wants more than money. He's changed his focus. I guess you could say he's become kind of obsessed with me. Wants me to come work for him on his yacht in Croatia. And by work for him, I don't mean serve him cocktails.”

Perhaps I should have left out that detail because the growl from Wade hints that he'd like to use a nail gun on an oligarch's testicles.

“As soon as I figured out the old rich dude had a fixation on me, I grabbed my things and fled New York. That worked for a while. But they found me by tracking my eBay and Etsy accounts, which I used to sell some of my designer clothes. And now these random guys keep showing up and getting me fired from my jobs, and...and I guess it's a good thing everyone in this crazy town watches everything that goes on because—”



No other words come out because of the knot in my throat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cry.”

Wade reaches across the bed, and he takes my hand between both of his big mitts. “Don’t ever apologize for crying about how everyone failed you. Literally, everyone in your life failed you. That ends today.”

What is it about Wade that he knows exactly what to say to get me emotional? I never thought about my situation like that before.

And who knew he was so very kind?

Before I can stop them, the tears flow. No parents, nannies, or teachers are here to tell me to stop it, suck it up, and pull myself up by my bootstraps. Wade has put everything in perspective. I don’t deserve the way I’ve been treated. I never deserved to be left alone and forgotten.

And no one in my situation deserves to be told to fix her own problems.

I let it all out. I barely register what I’m saying as I sit there and blubber with Wade holding my hand, occasionally handing me tissues, and thumbing tears away.

His touch is so gentle, and his words are so kind that I know my instincts are correct. He has to be a good one.

If Wade turns out to be bad, I’m done with men forever. I can go live with Ernestine; surely, no one will mess with her.

Finally, I get a hold of myself.

“Any other questions?” I ask.

“Just one,” Wade says with a soft note in his voice.

“What?”

“I need to know what clothes you want from your house.”

Wade produces my purse and asks me to retrieve my house key so he can fetch my things.

“I can get them myself,” I say.

Wade leans forward and gets right in my face, so close his breath warms me and makes me shiver simultaneously. “Do you think I’m going to let you go over there after everything you told me?”

He holds my gaze for several long seconds while I consider this.

My bottom lip sneaks between my teeth. Wade’s pupils widen as he glances at my mouth.

“I’ll be fine. I don’t want you mixed up with me and my problems.”

I gasp as Wade reaches forward and firmly cups the back of my neck, pressing his forehead to mine. At first, I wonder if he’ll kiss me—a girl can always hope—but then he murmurs in a deadly, low-pitched voice, “Let’s get one thing straight, baby girl. Your problems are my problems now. You let me handle all that shit. You understand?”

My lips part, and I have to force the sound out. “I understand.”

The simple nod from Wade communicates volumes. He’s dead serious.

“Now, I gotta go check on the tile guys at the Ingalls house and probably do some other shit at the job site, too. But after that, I’ll pick up a few of your things, and then I’m all yours.”

*All mine. Your problems are my problems.*

If only he knew how crazy-making those phrases are when it comes to him. If only he understood what his protectiveness does to me and how baffling my feelings are for a man 15 years my senior. A man I had determined to hold a grudge against forever on behalf of Grace.

I watch him leave, and find myself wanting to reach for him.

That small moment of closeness was a taste of everything I’ve missed my whole life.

And I want more.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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Wade

I work longer at the job site than intended, and I itch to return to Presley.

She'll probably get tired of waiting and decide to snoop through my dresser drawers.

Not that I would care if she snooped—what's mine is hers, as far as I'm concerned. And to be honest, it's kind of a turn-on to imagine her peeking through my things, trying to be all sneaky. Though I doubt women get excited to sniff men's underwear.

Fuck, what's wrong with me?

My one and only concern is her injury.

She's a terrible patient and needs constant supervision.

After working on the rehab project, the first thing on my to-do list is calling Wyatt Mooney, the retired sheriff. His wife Lucy, a federal agent who just came out of retirement, will be very interested in hearing about this mess. One nice thing about this town is that everybody knows someone who can help with whatever you need.

Next, I phone my brother Buck to ask after Grace and the baby.

In the background, I hear the little one crying. Buck sounds tired, so I stop at Ruby's Diner to grab some takeout at

Buck and Grace's house.

After that, I am waylaid by a problem with the re-routing of the upstairs plumbing at the Ingalls house, so I return to the job site to oversee that.

When I arrive at Presley's apartment, I'm covered in sweat, dirt, and dust.

The first thing I notice is how insecure Presley's place seems to be. Although the outside door has a keycode entry, and Presley gave me that code, Other tenants are letting in at least one or two people behind them as they move in and out of the building. There are too many people living there if so few of them care who walks in and out.

Presley's apartment door looks like someone's been messing with the deadlock because I see scratches around the door and the jamb.

Once inside, I search every room for signs of intruders or sketchy activity. This doesn't take long because it's a studio apartment.

I start making a mental list of everything in this place that's not up to code: the stairs are too steep and not even, the windows are painted shut, and there's no fire escape. After some more investigation, it looks like the wiring is fucked, and the plumbing is outdated. On top of all that, the radiator doesn't work.

This place is unlivable. I wouldn't let my dog stay here, and I don't know how the city allows this place to house humans.

I grab an assload of clothes, shoving them into two duffel bags, and then I raid Presley's bathroom, all the while memorizing her sizes and product preferences. One peek in the fridge is a bit frightening. Besides a wrapped biscuit sandwich, there's nothing to eat here.

That clinches it. Presley lives with me now.

On the counter is a stack of mail, and I also go through that. Past due bills and junk, mostly.

I scoop up the necessary mail, along with everything else I think she might need, and head home.

On my way back to Gold Hill, I phone the fire inspector, whom I've gotten to know pretty well with all of the municipal hoops that Wood Brothers have had to jump through with our various projects in Fate.

"Yeah, we're aware of the problems," says the fire inspector. "A lot of these old apartment houses were grandfathered in before our codes were updated, so there's not much I can do."

Wow. I do not like this at all.

In Gold Hill, this would not be allowed. I guess Fate's laws haven't been able to keep up with the population growth in the last few years.

There's not much I can do about that except for one thing.

My next phone call is to Nick, asking him to see if any crew members want to earn extra cash by moving the rest of Presley's things out of that place.

No way I'm letting her go back there, ever.

She doesn't know it yet, but Presley's about to set up permanent residence with me.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Presley

I wake up a few hours later, groggy from the pain medicine. My foot feels a little better but still achy.

An urgent need to pee has me reaching for the crutches, and eventually, I hobble into the bathroom.

I don't notice the addition of all of my favorite products at first. It takes a moment to absorb the fact that all these bottles and accessories are not just happenstance. That bottle of moisturizer is actually mine. And so is that makeup case on the counter. Pulling back the shower curtain, I see all my hair products in the exact state I left them in at my apartment.

I expected Wade to grab a toothbrush, sure. But this is way more than I would pack for a night or two.

How long does he think I'll be staying?

When I'm finished in the bathroom, I slowly and clumsily hop toward the bedroom closet and slide open the door. There must be fifty outfits in here.

I start to feel a little heated.

I'm trying to sort out my feelings on this when my phone rings. It's Ernestine.

"I didn't expect a thank you note, but when are you coming for a visit?" the older woman demands.

Wow, it's nice to hear her voice. Leaning against the dresser, I tell her everything that happened to me today.

She's horrified, of course. "And where did you say you ended up?"

I sigh. "I'm being held captive at Wade Wood's house until my foot heals."

Ernestine is thoughtful for a moment. "Is he that big boy with the arm tattoos and an unpleasant disposition?"

"That's him."

"Huh," she grunts. "Well, listen. Nobody'll judge a girl who falls ill with Stockholm syndrome."

"Ernestine!"

"I'm just saying you are underfed, and that boy clearly knows how to eat! He's got a good job, and he ain't getting any younger. You'd make some good-looking babies, too."

"Goodbye!"

"I'm just saying!" Ernestine repeats.

From her mouth to God's ears.

"I'll let you know when it's time to bust me out of here, okay?"

I'm still laughing at her long after we hang up.

Opening the dresser, I find enough panties, bras, and socks to last me weeks, not days, and I'm reminded once again that Wade is either a poor judge of how many clothes a woman needs for an overnight visit, or he thinks he's my warden.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

The question booms as I snap shut the dresser drawer on a startled jump.

"What the heck is going on, Wade?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

I give him my best death stare. It's not easy to maintain a stony face when a sweaty, dirty, hard-working hulk with a face

like that looks back at me. I'm more interested in climbing him like a tree and tasting that salty neck.

"You didn't scare me. I'm asking why are most of my wardrobe and personal items here? I thought you were only keeping me here for a day or two."

A heated stare fills the silence that follows my interrogation.

How dare Wade take up all that space in the doorframe? How dare he lean against it and look at me like that. Not that I don't enjoy looking at him — anyone with a pulse could appreciate this sweaty, tatted-up hulk with the glowering eyes — but there's no way I can stay here as long as he thinks I can. Not unless he wants me to fall in love with him. Or murder him.

He clearly sees me as someone to protect, like a little sister. Murder it is. What a pity.

"You can't go back to that death trap of a house," he says. "I'll send a crew to get the rest of your stuff."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. "Why can't I go back to my house? Does it have bedbugs or something?"

Wade stands up straight and reaches his arms skyward to grip the top edge of the doorframe. I don't know if he realizes I can see every glistening muscle flexing on the inside of his upper arms when he does that. The tattoos ringing his biceps and triceps undulate under the bunching of muscles and tendons. Why does he have to walk around in a dirty, too-small tee-shirt? Whatever happened to a nice baggy hoodie?

"Not bedbugs," Wade says. "It's not up to code. It's not safe. That house should be condemned, actually."

I roll my eyes. "I thought you Wood brothers were in the business of saving old houses."

He's suddenly astounded as if I've just said something amazing. One hand lets go of the doorframe as his eyes brighten, and I try not to swoon. "You know what? You're right. We should buy that building and fix it up next." Wade stares off into space and lists off the next steps. "I'll have to



talk to Harley, who should be on board. We don't have to bother Buck with this while he's on family leave. He might be pissed for a day or two that we didn't consult him, but he'll come around. As long as the inspection report isn't too terrible..."

"This is all great, but where am I supposed to live?"

He lifts one shoulder and points behind me. "In that bed. Which is where you should be right now."

"I need some water," I tell him.

"I'll get it for you."

I hobble toward the door and try to push past him, but I'm no match for this brick shithouse of a man. "Not necessary."

"Yes, it is," he says, towering over me in the doorway. He smells like the outdoors and sawdust, and I would very much like to lick him clean from head to toe if he weren't such a pain in my ass. "You need to keep that foot elevated, baby girl."

I shove at his chest, but Wade's face turns more resolute. His jaw tics like he's angry or...something else. Horny maybe?

However, I know it's not horny because of what he said earlier.

"I'm not your baby sister," I say, trying to shove at his midsection since pressing on his chest doesn't seem to budge him. His tee-shirt is damp with sweat, and he looks tired.

Wade barks out a laugh. "What? Who said you were my sister?"

"You said I *remind* you of your sister. You've been calling me baby girl and sweetheart instead of using my name. Clearly, I'm a child to you, but I assure you I am not."

If watching him lollygag in the doorframe makes me feel heated, then pressing my hands against his abs turns my insides into a furnace. His torso is immovable. Up close, the man is big all over.

Wade angles his face toward me. “Is that what you think? That I look at you and see a little girl? Or that I think of you like a sister?”

I curse my bottom lip as it trembles of its own accord. “Don’t you?”

He looks so angry I should back away. So, I’m wrong. He doesn’t look at me like a sister or a child. He doesn’t regard me as anything but an obligation, I suppose.

I get things wrong so often that I should keep a list to stop repeating the same mistakes. No one ever taught me how to see the toxic signs in people. I was *raised* by toxic people. Ha. “Raised” is a bit of a stretch.

The more I interact with people, the more I realize I know nothing about them. I’ll never understand another human’s motives.

The only people I can trust are Grace and Ernestine. Men? I don’t get them.

I do know one thing. I’m ready for whatever mood is making his chest expand with every breath. I don’t move a muscle. I just want to witness whatever temper tantrum is about to pop. Just so I can prove to myself that he’s not worth crushing on.

The storm doesn’t come, though. Still, my shoulders remain tight and ready to defend myself.

Wade scrubs his bewildered face with his palm. “Let me think how to contradict that line of thought,” he says, low and lethal.

He leans in so close that he has me backed against the doorframe. What is this? I am a tiny trapped kitten, and he’s...

He angles his face down, down, down until we’re connected, his mouth against mine.

My body silently screams in joyful disbelief.

Wade’s kiss is rough, salty, and all too brief.

When he pulls away, I feel fifty pounds lighter, and my shoulders have relaxed after what feels like millennia of tension.

I've read all the signs wrong: the carrying, the terms of endearment, the hand holding, the long, dark stares that I felt pierce my chest. I'm so used to distrusting people that I question everything.

All I can think to say is, "Why'd you stop kissing me?"

"Don't want to get dirt on you."

"I don't mind," I say with a flirty look.

He smiles and lands another kiss on my mouth, this one slower, more thorough. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, and I accept it hungrily.

I don't know how long we stand here, kissing in the bedroom doorway.

Long enough for my lips to swell and my foot to throb.

"I saw that wince," he says, kissing me one more time, ending with a brush of his teeth against my lip that makes my sex clench. "Come on."

For the third time today, Wade picks me up and sits me on the bed. But this time, he sits next to me.

Ok. I don't need water after all. I just need a spicy kissing session on my boss's guest bed. That's all I need.

Foot pain? What foot pain?

Wade kisses like it's his last day on earth. Passionate and deep, as if he's trying to get a point across, and he doesn't want me to miss a single nuance. His tongue in my mouth is urgent and claiming. His hands squeeze my hips.

I'm overwhelmed by the presence of this man. Gentle but firm, trying so hard not to defile me with dust and dirt.

"Tell me if this works to keep you from putting weight on that foot," he murmurs as his mouth drags down my throat, dotting my skin with wicked, nipping kisses.

“Sure does, boss. I’ll do whatever you say,” I breathe.

He laughs against the ringed collar of my tee-shirt. “Sure you will,” he says. I notice an urge to remove my clothes, to feel his lips there. *Yes, please, tear at my shirt and leave a trail of hickeys on my collarbone*, I tell Wade by ESP. I want him dirty and dusty and sweaty and covered in grime. I don’t care.

My mind is ten steps ahead of where we are. We’re just kissing and barely into the area of petting.

Much to my chagrin, Wade pauses the kissing to check on me, carefully brushing his fingers through my hair. “How’s the foot doing?”

“I don’t know, doctor. Maybe you should take off my clothes and find out.”

Chuckling, he reaches down and tugs off my right sock. Wade examines my foot tenderly, his forehead furrowed.

“Swelling’s gone down,” he says, running one rough finger over the arch of my foot. My toes curl in pleasure at the contact. “That’s good. Any more pain?”

“It’s not bad. But I think I might have also gotten hurt in other places,” I say with a small pout.

Immediately, Wade goes on high alert, and his body tenses. “Really? Where? Show me.”

I fan myself melodramatically. “I don’t know what it is, but my skin feels hot.”

Falling for my evil trick, Wade gently sets my foot down, moves closer, and kisses my forehead to test my temperature. “An infection? I’ll call the doctor.”

“No, it’s not a fever, not an infection. Just feeling really sore and achy under my clothes.”

Finally, Wade catches on, and his eyes darken. “Oh yeah?”

“Uh-uh. Do you think you could help me? I think a massage might help make it feel better.”

“You want a massage from a filthy, dirty man?”

I shouldn't be doing this, should I? The man is 15 years older than me! Yeah, and I'll bet he has the stamina of a war horse. He was mean to my friend! My friend accepted his apologies long ago.

Ah, to hell with my grudge. Nothing wrong with a little fun.

I bat my lashes and say, "That's the only kind of massage that will help with what ails me."

With a low growl, Wade presses his lips to mine as he crowds over me, pushing me flat on my back. His rough fingers find the chill bumps on my bare stomach. "Here? Is this where it hurts?"

I barely have the ability to answer between his fervent kisses. "A little higher," I say, struggling with the hem of my shirt. He takes the lead and lifts my shirt over my head, freeing my arms in one effortless tug. I shiver again as Wade cups a thick hand around one of my breasts.

"Here?"

I let out a sigh. "Right there."

"How about here?" His lips caress the swell of flesh that strains against the cup.

"Better."

I don't protest when he reaches around my back and unlatches my bra. I sit up briefly as he rids me of it. The reverent look in his eyes when he gazes over my bare chest makes me so very wet. The bra is barely tossed aside before Wade takes two overflowing handfuls of my tits. He accompanies the gentle squeezes with brushes of his thumbs over my taut nipples. "This the type of massage you were looking for, sweetheart?" Wade rumbles against my tender skin, kissing and licking every freckle while his hands caress and squeeze, working me up into a ball of unmitigated lust.

"Exactly what the doctor ordered," I say, then gasp as he gently pinches one nipple.

“Look at you,” he says, utterly proud of what he holds in his two hands. “Look how ripe and soft. Almost too big for my hands. Perfect.”

I don't know why this is working for me because I usually hate comments on the size of my boobs. When Wade says it, he makes me feel sexy and powerful.

He drags his hot mouth across the swells of my breasts, then takes one nipple into his mouth.

My body jerks at the attention. He floods me with sensation by swirling his tongue around that tight bud, then pulling it into his mouth.

It's been so long since I had this sort of contact that the slightest graze of his teeth over my nipple almost makes me come. “Wade! Oh...shit!”

My arms that circle his neck grapple and tug at the fabric of his tee-shirt. In the next second, he's tugged it off, and my hands are free to roam everywhere. Over his massive traps, his solid and sweaty shoulders. I slide my fingers through his short-cropped hair and over the scruff on his face that's solely concentrating on my nipples. His whiskers feel incredible there. Wade is so big and rough as he hovers over me. I long to feel that scruff, those hands, on my thighs.

Lowering me down once again on the pillows, Wade's hand tugs open the button of my jeans and finds the waistband of my panties. His palm feels so good against my lower stomach that I moan like a newbie against his mouth.

At my urgent sounds, he caresses the front of my pussy, skin to skin.

When his hand reaches my pubic area and finds no hair, he lets out a guttural moan. “Fuck, Presley.” He says this like a prayer, his salty forehead against mine, his breath coming in labored pants.

His reach goes lower and lower until he cups my sex. He groans, and his jaw tics. “You're completely bare. Holy fuck, your pussy...it's so...soft. So damn wet. Let me make it come.”

My hips move independently of my will, begging Wade to do more and take complete control.

“Yes,” I whisper, nodding. “Yes.”

“My favorite word,” he rumbles, licking his tongue into my mouth as his finger slips into my slit.

The touch of him against my sensitive skin nearly sends me into orbit.

“That pussy is a mess, baby,” he says, sheathing one thick finger into my entrance. “So wet and so messy for me...fuck!”

I squeeze him hard, and he lets out another curse before kissing me so roughly and deeply I forget to breathe.

Wade’s exploring finger pulls away, and I want to cry. Instead, he works that hand over me, spreading my juice over my lips as he goes searching for my clit.

When he finds it, he rubs circles around it, echoing that rhythm with his probing tongue in my mouth.

He’s wound me up so tight with need that it only takes two, three strokes of his swirling finger to make me explode.

I come hard, gripping his shoulders and digging my nails into his skin.

“That’s it, baby girl. There you are. Such a good and dirty little pussy.”

It must be all kinds of wrong that the *baby girl* thing makes me come harder and longer, and yet, here we are.

Wade whispers close to my ear as I come, using every damn nickname he has for me. The overall effect is to draw out my orgasm until I have nothing left.

“My sweetheart’s pussy is so hungry, isn’t it?”

He’s absolutely wrong to say that, yet I love every word.

I’m still twitching as Wade’s kisses become slower and more reverential, as the strokes of his palm over my skin make me come down from the mountaintop of my climax.

“Wade, let me...” I reach down to cup the hard length that’s been making itself known since the moment he pressed me against the doorframe for that kiss. I could feel it digging into my side. I felt it when he was on top of me.

He growls and moves my hand away.

“Stay put, and let me get you that drink of water, baby.”



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Wade

When I return to the guest room with a tray full of snacks, chocolate, and drinks, Presley's dazed expression gets me harder than ever.

"What's all this?" Presley asks.

"You said you were headed to the kitchen," I say, setting the tray down at her feet, then quickly adjusting my dick before helping her put her shirt back on.

"For water," she points out.

"And I got you water, as requested. Be right back." I could easily get detoured by losing myself in her intoxicating kisses again. But if I do that, I'm worried things will get out of control fast. Not only do I not want to injure her foot further, but I want her to know how serious I am. And I don't want to fuck her when I'm covered in dirt and sawdust.

Her pout when I get up to leave again threatens to undo my resolve, but I manage to sprint to my office for my laptop.

"What are you doing?"

"I still don't trust you to keep weight off your foot, so I'm hanging out with you tonight. Dinner and Netflix in bed," I say as I set up the laptop on the end of the bed. "What do you want to watch?"

Presley laughs an aching pretty laugh that puts flashes of my future in my mind.

“Is this Netflix and chill for the forcibly bedridden?” she asks.

“Only for good girls. And you’re definitely not a good girl,” I tease.

Presley snorts and playfully slugs me on the shoulder. “Well, if we’re going to watch movies and eat snacks together, I need pajamas.”

She moves to get up, but I’m quick about slinging her arm around my shoulder. Once I have Presley standing on one foot by the dresser, I avert my eyes as I help her tug off her jeans.

“You don’t have to look away,” she says. “It’s not like you didn’t have your hands all up in my business.”

“Doctor/patient courtesy,” I reply, though as I stare at the wall, I’m one hundred percent thinking about her business. And her tits...and her sweet nipples, how they puckered when I tasted them...Presley’s scent on me that drove me mad when I tasted her on my fingers before I washed them ahead of all the food prep. I’m already fixated on Presley’s sweetness, like a drug dog hitting on a scent.

“Here,” she says, handing me her pajama bottoms. As I unfold them, I wonder how I didn’t notice these silky pink things with the lace trim. They’re so delicate and expensive looking that I feel guilty touching them, afraid I’ll leave fingerprints.

I hold them out for her, and her voice is soft as she steps into them, one foot then the other.

“Thank you for respecting my privacy,” she says.

I expected to get her set up with a movie and snacks, then sneak off to shower. But the woman keeps pulling me back in with conversation.

We don’t get much movie viewing done other than lulls in a 90-minute conversation about what we want out of life.

“I can see myself married with kids one day. I’d love a stable home with a huge kitchen and a backyard pool. I was alone all the time when I was younger, so filling my space with a constant flow of friends would make me so happy. I want a whole wall of recipe books in my kitchen. And a barbecue grill out by the pool. And a homemade pizza oven! And a giant outdoor chess set! But mostly, I don’t care about any of that as long as I have something to count on. Family traditions and rituals. Reading at bedtime and good morning kisses. Waffles on Saturdays, and blow-out Christmas Eve parties with tons of people.”

Listening to Presley list all the things she dreams about makes my heart ache to give her all that and more. I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want someone to care for.

“What about you? What do you see in your future?” Presley asks.

My answer is shorter than hers. “You. Everything I want in a partner, you have it.”

She looks surprised, though she shouldn’t be.

“Wade, I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” Then, smirking, I say, “I’ll let you think that over while I shower.”

She scoffs. “You can’t drop something like that and walk away.”

I shake my head, laughing as she tugs my arm. “I reek, baby girl.”

“Then let me shower with you.”

I love her enthusiasm for me. I’ve never been with anyone so eager for me when I’m dirty and exhausted after work. My only regret is that we never met sooner.

Needless to say, I carry her to my bathroom because watching her deal with crutches is taking too long, and my patience is at an end now that she’s suggested showering together.

I turn on the water and, from her perch on the bathroom counter, Presley watches as I unceremoniously chuck my dirty shirt and jeans into the bathroom hamper with the rest of my filthy work clothes.

She tugs off her pajama top with equal nonchalance, and I help her remove everything from the waist down.

“You definitely do not have to avert your eyes this time,” she says. “But don’t keep your hopes up for a sexy striptease.”

Our laughter echoes in the bathroom as steam fills the space. Why does this feel so cozy and familiar?

I carefully step backward into the spa shower and sweep her into the stall with me before shutting the sliding door. “Have a seat,” I say, setting her down on the small bench in the corner.

Her pout kills me as she says, “I thought I was going to wash you.”

“Whatever you can reach, you can wash. But you’re staying right there.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Presley

I shouldn't enjoy Wade bossing me around as much as he does.

But I don't just enjoy it. I love it.

At first, I just sit there and watch, transfixed, as he works the soap into a lather with a silicone loofah and scrubs himself, and I almost get down on my knees to propose right there. A grown-ass man who knows how to wash himself? What a dream!

The oversplash from him and the rain of the showerhead warms me as I enjoy the show. That bubble butt is doing a lot of work for my benefit. "Here," I say, holding out my hand. "Let me."

Wade looks down at me over his shoulder and grins, then turns to hand me the loofah. I avoid looking at his dick, even though it's right there.

I blush. "Turn around. I'm not ready for that yet."

He chuckles but does as he's told, earning points.

My eyes devour the shape of his waist, the pleasing thickness that no man his age can hide, no matter how much they hit the gym. And me? Obviously I'm here, enticed by the shape and strength honed by hard work rather than leg day.

I work the loofah over his middle and as much of his back as I can from where I sit. I scrub the tantalizing hip dip where his thick thighs jut outward, and work my way toward the lower-back dimples just above his bottom.

He lets out a groan as I wash his rounded cheeks. Hm. Interesting.

I move slower, scrubbing the loofah up and down over the swells, watching the soapy water glide down and into his split.

Am I crazy, or did Wade just push back at me?

Although it's insanely intimate for a first shower together, I don't care. I'm going for it, and begin dragging the loofah down the middle. Slowly but intentionally. Wade's body jerks, and his hands brace against the tile. Ah, yes, he definitely pushed back that time.

What else is a girl to do? I press my mouth against one gorgeous cheek, his skin soaked and red from the water and the scrubbing.

I keep my eyes on Wade and see his head loll back as I blanket his bulbous cheeks with my greedy, tonguing kisses.

Dropping the loofah, I let one finger slide down between his cheeks. His muscles bunch, and he curses through gritted teeth. "Fuck me, Presley! What are you doing to me?"

Smartly, I answer with a teasing lick to the top of his split, "I think the first part of that answered the second part."

I'm about to reach around and take him in hand—make him feel as amazing as he's made me feel, but I don't get that chance.

The next thing I know, Wade has cranked off the water and faces me on his knees, hot drops of water sliding down his rippling jaw.

His face is feral as he shoves my legs apart and pulls my ass to the edge of the bench.

"D-don't you want me to finish you off?"

“Shut up,” he hisses before heading down, nosing open my damp pussy lips.

“Oh...oh shit!”

He is on my mound, doing the same thing he does so well with his kisses to my mouth. His scruff abrades my sensitive skin from my center and out toward my inner thigh, not missing a single inch until I’m thoroughly devoured, teased, and licked. Until my body is humming, on the verge of an explosive orgasm.

I’m ready to pop, but at the same time, I want this to last.

With one hand on the grab bar and one hand on Wade’s head, I lean back against the tile, arch into him, and enjoy the ride.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Wade

She wants my ass? She can have all of it when my cock is seated inside her.

It's ready for her now. But it's not time yet.

It takes every ounce of strength not to sink into her right the fuck now. Let her ride my dick and put whatever she wants into my ass—a finger, a toy, a fucking loofah—but not like this. Not in the shower.

Call me old-fashioned, but we need a bed for that.

However, I need to taste her right the fuck now.

Presley writhes against the tile as I make out with her pussy, licking and tasting and swallowing down her honey, the sucking noises echoing off the tile.

I knew Presley would taste amazing. I wasn't ready for her to make me drunk and crazed for her sweetness.

I lick into her tight hole, drinking her in, bathing her with my tongue. With my thumb, I gently pull back the hood of her clit to nuzzle her there.

“Wade! Oh my god!”

My naughty girl wraps both legs around my head as I work her with my mouth. Her thighs grip while her pretty little toes curl against my spine...



...But wait. Her toes.

And then I remember that right leg needs to stay still.

“Naughty girl,” I say when I come up, shooting her a look.

“It’s fine, I’m fine!” Presley assures me, but I do not listen and instead brace her right leg against the tile.

“What did I tell you about keeping still?”

She hums with pleasure as I resume making out with her pussy. “Hmm. Something, something, blah-blah, something,” she replies, her voice thick with need even as she sasses me.

That’s it. No mercy.

I purse my lips around her tight clit and suck.

Presley screams her release, her fingers curling tightly around the shell of my ear.

And I keep going until she has nothing left to feed me.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Presley

Although I do thoroughly enjoy having Wade's filthy body all over me, I have to say that I love a squeaky-clean Wade just as much, if not more.

Did I say I love him? I could see it happening.

After our shower, Wade moves the slumber party to his room, where a gigantic TV screen is mounted to the wall opposite the bed. This sure beats a laptop. Here, we burn through a marathon of each other's favorite shows, feeding each other snacks in our pajamas until we're both ready to burst.

At some point, as we're pretzeled together under the covers, I tell him another truth. "Most of the guys I've dated don't want to humor me and my preferences. They would let me watch my shows but wouldn't watch them with me. We might fool around, but then they'd be done with me and do their own thing. I like it that you want to spend time with me."

Wade's leg is hooked over mine, trapping me close to him. I'm not thinking about the slight, lingering pain in my foot, only feeling present in my body and Wade's heat. His fingers slide over my face, and he sighs like some kind of beast that's been running all day and finally found its home. His sleepy eyes droop closed. I don't wait for a reply; I'm content to close my eyes and listen to his breathing.

But then, lazily, on the verge of sleep, he murmurs, “They didn’t love you like I do.”



The next morning, satisfied that my foot is healing, Wade drives me to work with him.

“I can go back to my regular job. I promise I’ll be okay,” I tell him once we’re parked at the job site.

“I think not,” he says with a smirk. “I would have left you at home to rest, but I’m not letting you out of my sight. Besides, you can’t wear the boots just yet, remember?”

Shoot. I bite my lip and try to think of how to tell him I need to work to pay off the people my dad owes money to.

“Hey,” he said. “I didn’t mean to hurt you with that comment. I shouldn’t tease you; I’ll try to do better.”

Everything out of Wade’s mouth blows my ever-loving mind. One thing after another is somehow more perfect than the last.

“Thank you, but that’s not why I’m upset,” I tell him. “I really need to earn money.”

He leans back in the seat of his truck and studies my face. “Do you trust me to take care of you?”

“Yes,” I say meekly, a knot of emotions forming in my throat.

“And didn’t I promise that your problems are now my problems?”

I nod because I can’t form another word.

“Good. Glad we have that settled. Now, I want you to stop worrying about that shit and get to work at your new job.”

He doesn’t explain further, but he does, for once, let me use my crutches. His hand remains steady against me as we make our way up the steps of the construction trailer at the Ingalls house.

“What’s my new job?” I ask once we’re inside.

I look around at the pile of folders and paperwork next to the desktop computer, and I think I know.

“You have a choice. You could sit there and read a book or scroll on your phone. If you’re feeling up to anything else, you could take a crack at all this admin stuff that I’m behind on. You did say you were organized. But only if you’re feeling up to it. I’ll pay you either way.”

What other choice do I have? I’m not going to sit here like a lump. But then I think about it, and it seems like something I might have fun with. I do like cleaning up and helping people get organized. It’s one of those things that, when I was a kid, made me feel like I was in control of something in my life.

“Sure,” I tell him. “Where will you be?”

Wade closes the distance between us and presses a sustaining kiss to my lips.

“Right here with you. I’m not leaving your side.”

I sit down at the computer as he logs me in, asking me to handle the backlog of invoices first.

I shake my head. “Bad boy.”

“Yeah, I know. Buck is on top of all this stuff, normally.”

While he props up my bum foot on a folding chair, I hesitantly ask, “So, will I just be doing this until Buck comes back? If so, I’ll have to take some time to line up another job when he returns from family leave.”

Wade shakes his head. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Why not?”

“If Wade can hire Grace when we didn’t have it in the budget, then we can hire you as well.”

I don’t know why I keep protesting. I guess I would rather die than be in anybody’s way or not earn my keep. “But Grace makes money for the company. It’s different.”

Finally, having had enough, Wade scrubs a palm over his face. “Okay. Look. How much does your dad owe these guys?”

I wince and then tell him the number.

He doesn’t even blink. “Fine. Then that’s your stipend until Buck comes back.”

My jaw drops. “That’s more than twice what I would make as a construction worker in a year. Or as your assistant!”

Wade pulls up a chair next to me and opens his laptop. “Yep. That sounds about right.”

“Wade—”

He rests a gentle hand on my leg and says, low and gravelly, “Not another word about it, baby.”

For the next couple of hours, as I separate invoices and receipts into stacks, organize everything into folders, and input numbers into spreadsheets, I’m content to help out my guy.

Wade takes phone calls and answers emails while occasionally reaching over to rub my back, give kisses, touch my hair, or simply make eye contact. He has no idea how life-affirming this is for someone like me. Just to have someone near. Just to have *him* near.

At one point, the cozy, content vibe is disrupted by a loud knock on the door just before Harley barges in.

“You need to call Charlotte. She’s been blowing up my phone over the changes at Hilltop House,” Harley barks. When he sees me, he changes his tone. “Sorry. Didn’t know anyone was in here besides my slacker brother.”

I want to stick up for him, but my mind is buffering. Who is Charlotte, and why does Wade need to call her? Okay, fine, I’m jealous.

“It’s okay,” I say to Harley, my voice wavering.

Wade shoots me a curious look, then turns back to Harley.

“We are done making updates. She knows that. I’ve been a little busy, what with Buck and Grace on leave. I don’t have

time for her demands,” Wade retorts, which makes me feel better. But only a little bit. Still, I have no idea what they are talking about. A demanding ex-girlfriend?

My heart sinks.

“You do have time if you want a return on the investment,” Harley says.

Yikes. My ears perk up because this sounds serious and uncomfortable and messy.

“Harley, I’m asking you to handle Charlotte. I’ve got no more time for her wacky behavior.”

Harley throws up his hands. “What am I supposed to do with her?”

Wade splutters, “Take her to a nice dinner and kindly inform her that what’s done is done, and if she has a problem with that, she can deal directly with you, not me. That whole thing was your idea, remember?”

So many possible scenarios pop into my head, but the one I can’t shake is that Wade has a crazy ex-girlfriend who owes him money, and she’s showing up with yet more claims on his time. Gosh, no wonder he’s so empathetic with my situation.

Harley grumbles, then finally leaves, shutting the door hard behind him.

Wade chuckles to himself, returns to his workstation by my side, and picks up his laptop.

After a while, he sighs, plops his computer down on the desk, and turns to me.

“Presley. What is wrong?”

My chin trembling, I ask, “Who’s Charlotte?”

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Wade

Why the heck is Presley asking about Charlotte?

And why does she look so upset?

“Charlotte Sinclair? You know, the real estate agent? Her face is on a dozen signs around town.”

I do know who she is, but that doesn’t settle my nerves. “Is she your ex?”

Wade’s eyes widen in confusion and shock. “My ex? No!”

I inhale a shaky breath. “Then what was all that about her owing you money, making demands, and needing to talk to you?”

Wade’s shocked look fades into amusement and sympathy. “Oh, babe. No. She’s not my ex, and she doesn’t owe me money.”

“And all that stuff about being done with her? And Harley setting you up? Are you sure she doesn’t have a thing for you?”

Finally, he understands what it is that I thought I heard. “Oh...oh, I get it now.” Sitting in his office chair, he wheels in so close that he cages me in. “Listen. Charlotte is supposed to be selling the Hilltop House for us. That was our previous rehab project. But she keeps coming back with more and more demands from potential buyers. Most of them are no big deal,

but they've gotten so relentless that we've repeatedly told her that we'll get a new agent if this keeps happening. The only problem is she's the only agent in town. Anyway. We're not doing any more changes to the Hilltop House, and I'm letting Harley be the point person with Charlotte because he was the one who wanted to work on that house, to begin with. Does that all make sense now?"

Presley thinks it over, then nods.

"And you're not interested in her?"

"Not even a little bit."

She stares me down, studying me to see if I'm lying.

"I don't have much relationship experience other than high school boys. They were all incredible flirts and told me I was being overdramatic. Right up until they cheated on and dumped me. Every one of them."

My cock jerks at the thought that this woman is jealous. But then the reality hits me. She's been mistreated so much more than she led me to believe when we met. Presley has had no one to guide her or coach her through anything.

"You must think I'm immature and insecure," she laughs.

"I absolutely do not. I love you, Presley."

Her eyes find mine, and she sucks in a breath. "You do?"

I nod. "Yep. Pretty much from jump, you've been my sweetheart the whole time. I'm gonna marry you, baby."

Her eyes flash. "You better not make me cry at work, you big dummy!"

I laugh and slide her onto my lap, inhaling the beautiful scent of her hair, kissing her neck so hard she squeals with delight.

Nothing makes me happier than being the right one. The one to show her how a real man treats his woman. I plan on spending the rest of my life giving her everything she deserves.



“Baby. Listen to me.” I cup the back of her neck and bring her forehead to mine. “You are the only person I see. Everyone else is dead to me.”

This makes her snort-laugh, which may be the most adorable thing I’ve ever witnessed.

“People don’t have to be dead to you. But if anyone flirts with you, just know you’ll have to bail me out of jail.”

A low growl sounds in my chest. “That’s hot.”

“Is it hot? Or psychotic?” she asks.

“I’ll show you psychotic. You acting jealous makes me want to take you home and blow your back out.”

She shivers in my arms. “I’m ready,” she whispers.

As much as I want to, that won’t be a good idea.

“I don’t want to make your injury worse.”

Presley laughs. “Last time I checked, my vagina is not in my foot.”

She’s funny. And if she’s not careful, she’ll get exactly what she asks for. “I mean,” I reply sternly, “I know, based on experience, you’ll move around too much and hurt yourself.”

“But you still want to ‘blow my back out,’ as you say.”

“More than I need oxygen, sweet cheeks.”

A slow smile stretches her face and makes those dimples wink at me. “Then we set ground rules.”

Rules set by Presley? I have a feeling they’ll all be broken by the time this night is over.

Am I going to go along with them anyway?

Absolutely.

Another knock on the door interrupts our kissing.

“Ignore him,” she whispers.

“I like the way you think,” I reply, conquering her mouth with my tongue.

The knocking turns to pounding, and I'm guessing that's not Harley at the door.

I pull away from my Presley's perfect lips and bark, "What the fuck is it?"

The person who enters the trailer is indeed not Harley. Nor is it Nick or any of my other employees.

Presley's body stiffens in my arms when a man in an expensive three-piece suit and stupidly expensive alligator shoes strides in. The trailer suddenly reeks of cologne.

"Nice to see you again, Presley."

The man has a foreign accent and leers at Presley in a way that makes me want to kick him in the face. My arms tighten around her, and I'm instantly ready to fight. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

The man ignores me. "Naughty girl," he says. "Mr. Guzinsky won't like finding out you've been entertaining other men."

I'm on my feet and standing between the desk and this dude, with Presley safely seated behind the desk.

"You don't talk to her or anyone else like that. Apologize, and then we can have a chat."

The man ignores my demands and speaks slowly and with dead eyes. "They call me Boris. I am here to collect a debt, and that's all you need to know about me. But we know everything we need to know about you, Francis Wade Wood, born 1985, co-owner of Wood Brothers Construction."

He's trying to intimidate me. "And?"

With his hands folded at his front, he has the gravitas of a funeral home director, but his words are a thinly veiled threat. "Your company employs 75 full-time workers, does it not? We also know apart from that, your company insures 97 children, spouses, and dependents. It would be awful to see something bad befall such a generous company."

"Eat shit," I spit.

“Wade, don’t,” Presley warns.

“You should listen to the little trollop. It’s not wise to fight back. Let us have her, and you can keep your quaint little business and all of your parasite workers. Or has she already scammed you out of your money? As defensive as you are, it seems she’s already wrapped you around her little finger.”

My mind races. He’s threatening my entire company if I don’t hand over Presley. But it’s not happening.

“If you think I’m handing her over to you, you can go fuck yourself.”

Boris nods, then takes out a phone and taps the screen. I hear the sound of a FaceTime call. “Andrei, I have the girl. Get into position at the Wood home.”

On the other end, Andrei replies, “The big macho husband is away buying diapers again. The wife and baby shouldn’t put up too much of a fight.”

A chill runs down my spine. He’s talking about Grace and the baby.

“Very good. Let me know when you have them,” Boris says, then hangs up the call.

As if this weren’t enough to send me into a blind rage, another person knocks on the door. “Hey, boss,” I hear Nick say. “I thought you’d like to see what Claribel drew on her hardhat; it’s hilarious—oh, sorry! Didn’t know you were in a meeting.”

“Nick. Run. Now.” My mouth is so dry I can barely grit out the words. His eyes go wide, but he’s listening. “Put Claribel in her car seat, get Ruby, and go straight to the sheriff’s office.”

Thank god, Nick is quick to assess the situation and beats it.

Boris finally cracks a smile, and it’s the most wicked, haunting face I’ve ever seen. I’ll never forget it until the day I die.

I swallow hard. “I’m not giving you Presley. What will it take to call this off?”

“Mr. Guzinsky will be very disappointed.”

“Presley’s father scammed you. Not her. What will it take to make your boss whole again?”

Boris rubs his clean-shaven chin and assesses me. “That is not an amount you and your dimwitted brothers are prepared to pay.”

I’ve got only one option, as far as I can tell. Buck and Harley will just have to get over me dumping all that money into the pockets of a Russian oligarch. But we have nothing with which to fight this fight.

“Get your boss on the phone and let me handle it man to man.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Presley

“Let’s go home.”

After the most frightening ten minutes of my life, it’s over just as quickly.

Without question, without even believing for a moment that I was conning him, Wade emptied his savings account, wired the money to Russia, and closed that account.

Boris called off his men, reportedly on standby on Buck and Grace’s street, watching their house. And then Boris left.

Before the thug could even reach his car, Ingalls house was surrounded by federal agents. Boris was taken away in handcuffs. Some kind-eyed lady with an FBI badge interviewed me and assured me that more agents had captured the men outside Grace’s house.

Beyond that, Lucy said the money would be returned to Wade, but it might take a while.

I cried over all the trouble I had caused good people in this town. I cried over the damage my parents had caused. I grieved for my lost childhood. And I grieved for everything Wade lost because of me.

After we spoke to the federal agents, Wade had me talk to Grace on the phone, who assured me she was okay. Of course, Buck was pacing the floor beside himself when he learned

what had happened, but he wasn't upset about the money. Not in the least.

“As long as she's okay,” I heard him say over the FaceTime call with Grace.

Everyone in Fate is too, too good to me. Someday, I hope to believe I deserve it.

I dissociate myself as Wade drives me home to his house. I don't protest as he carries me inside, cleans up my ruined eye makeup, hands me a bottle of water, and wraps me up in a blanket.

He holds me against him on his bed. I snuggle closer and closer.

Bless him; after all that, his cock is like granite, pressing into my backside through the blanket.

And honestly, I feel the need to relieve some tension.

“I need you, Wade,” I whisper, turning toward him to search him out. I need to feel his hands, his kiss, his everything.

“So, what's the rules, then?”

When I arch my eyebrow, he reminds me of the rules I referred to earlier when we'd discussed having sex while my foot is still recovering.

I laugh. “Oh, that. I won't move my leg. I'll keep my foot elevated. And you can get some relief from those blue balls you've been walking around with for two days and hopefully murder my pussy in the process.”

Wade growls and kisses the tips of my fingers that reach out to stroke the scruff of his chin. “Why don't I believe you?”

I lift one eyebrow at him. “Who knows? Maybe you have trust issues?”



As promised, I'm a good little girl.

Mostly.

It's tough to be good with a Wood brother between your legs.

Naked, skin to skin, he moves inside me, and it is gorgeous.

I break my promise in five seconds by wrapping my legs around his middle, gripping him tight to me.

"Baby," he rasps. "The rules."

I whine, "Hmm, fuck the rules."

"No, ma'am," he says, gently pulling my right leg out from around his waist and pressing it into the mattress.

I can't take the delay of his strokes into me, and my body screams for him to keep moving.

"Wade, please!"

"Just a minute, I have to restrain a belligerent patient."

"A what?!" I'm horrified at the comparison, but still, somehow, it's working for me.

Before I know what's happening, and without pulling out, Wade reaches down to the floor to get something and then wraps it around my thigh.

"Wade!"

"That's what you get for breaking the rules."

I reach down and feel the leather...and the buckle...

I am tied to the bed frame and cannot move my leg.

"Asshole," I mutter as my face flushes with heat and my sex weeps.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Wade

“Baby, you look so good with your leg tied down with my belt.”

Presley’s eyes flash, and her breasts heave. “I can’t believe you did that.”

I sure enough did do that. As soon as I realized Presley wasn’t going to be still, as soon as I felt that injured foot on the small of my back and I saw her bite back that wince of pain, it was all over.

I reached down to the floor and grabbed my belt, looped it around the edge of the bed frame and her thigh, then fastened the buckle tight enough to keep her spread for me but loose enough to keep her comfortable.

Bracketing my arms on the pillow and hovering above her, I ask, “You want me to keep going? We use the restraint. If you want to stop, I’ll let you go.”

Her nostrils flare, and she thinks about it while my cock is buried balls deep inside her.

“You were saying how good I looked tied to your bed?”

Heat flares in my belly. “Not going to lie. You look incredible when you’re at my mercy. The plump flesh of your thighs bulging around the belt, aching to wrap around me.”

“I do want that. I want that so bad, Wade.”



I capture her sweet mouth in my lips, delving my tongue inside to claim her. She moans into my mouth. “Soon,” I rumble against her lips.

And then, I move in her.

Her tight flesh grips me, and I know I won’t last through very many thrusts.

“Fuck, Presley. You feel so good. So good...so tight...so slippery...”

She arches her body against me, as much as she can with her thigh tied down. Presley gives a frustrated growl as she strains against the belt, but her smile urges me on.

“You feel so good, Wade. Don’t stop, don’t stop until you make a baby in me, and even after that, don’t stop.”

I don’t know if she realizes what she’s saying, but the words hit me right in my chest. I want that. I want all of that with her, and I want to start now.

Her eyes glaze over as I pound into her faster and harder. She grips me tighter, milking me with her sex.

I want this to be as good for her as possible. Without thinking, I grab a pillow and tuck it under her hips, angling her higher as I smash into her tight, delicious cunt.

“So! Good!” Presley squeaks, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Open up. Eyes on me, sweetheart.” She does as she’s told. For once. And for that, she gets an eyeful of me spitting on my fingers before I reach down between our bodies to rub her clit.

“Oh my god...oh my god!” Her moans tell me she’s close. Her thighs tremble, and I ramp up my speed as I push in, our bodies moving as one.

And then my wicked girl slips one of her delicate fingers into my ass. “Fuck!”

Like a magic button, my release slams into me.

My vision dims, my ears ring, and I fucking unload in her. She screams out her orgasm at the same time as I do, and her spasms are so tight I might go numb.

I bury my face in her neck, repeating her name. “Presley!”

“I’m here,” she says, her nails digging into my back. “I’m here. And I’m all yours.”

“Forever.”

“Forever, Wade.”

“You’re mine to take care of.”

“Thank you,” she chokes out. “For everything.”

My voice rumbles, and my breath is ragged against her neck. “That is a pittance compared to what I would do for you. I love you, baby girl.”

She’s quiet until we’ve both wrung each other out completely.

We come out on the other side of our climaxes, clinging to one another.

“I love you, Presley. I meant every word. I’m keeping you.”

“And I love you, Francis,” she says with a wink, recalling my first name that Boris blurted out.

Laughing, I slap her on the behind, and she squeals.

My girl is naughty, and loving her for the rest of my life, caring for her, and watching over our babies will be so damn fulfilling.

More than that, it sounds magnificent.

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## EPILOGUE

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One year later

Presley

I stand underneath Wade's handmade wedding pergola, wearing the last couture dress in my collection.

Most of my designer clothes have been sold to help replenish Wade's savings. He didn't want the money from me, but I insisted. We're about to get married, and what's mine is his, as far as I'm concerned.

As long as the money Wade wired to the oligarch is tied up with the international investigation into the threats made against me, I have to make it up to Wade.

I'm just happy to have someone to share everything with. Material things, and also my time. Getting rid of some Prada and Jimmy Choos was the least I could do after he saved me from the clutches of horrible people.

I only kept this dress: a strapless, floor-length blush gown with shimmery rose gold details. It was the only piece in my collection that could pass for a bridal gown—and it's the only one roomy enough for my current situation.

A person might feel sorry for me after everything Wade and I have been through, but as I look around this space on the eve of our wedding, I feel nothing but love. There's love in

every detail, from Wade's beautiful woodwork on the white pergola, to the autumn blooms and vines cascading from the scattered decorative pillars, to the lanterns of all shapes and sizes lighting the space.

When Grace found out that Wade and I were considering a simple courthouse wedding due to our money situation, she begged me to let her handle the venue and the decorations.

"You have to let me do it up right," Grace had said when we told the family about our engagement. "You were my lifeline when we lived in that crappy building, it's a full circle moment!"

That crappy building turned into Wood Bros. Construction's next project after they finished and sold the Ingalls house. The brothers had put their heads together on restoring the old Victorian to its former glory without displacing its current apartment residents. They started with a proposal for a community garden in the backyard, which got the attention of the town leaders. Because of the brothers' work already done in the downtown area, community organizers Izzy and Juniper helped the brothers apply for grants that financed the purchase of the building. No more lousy plumbing and no more fire code violations.

And tonight, the backyard of that building is bursting with light and color.

Footsteps rustle nearby, and my heart warms when I hear Wade's voice.

"What are you doing out here alone, baby? The wedding's tomorrow night. Or did I forget? Shit, did I tell people the wrong day?"

I laugh and step out of the pergola to see my groom ambling toward me in his work clothes. Damn, how does he make even the dirtiest shirt look sexy?

"You didn't get the day wrong," I tell him. "The photographer wanted some shots of me alone during golden hour. I thought that was smart because that means less standing and posing for photos tomorrow. So, I took a cue

from her and seized the moment. I'm absorbing everything now because tomorrow will be so busy, and I don't want my feet to get any more swollen..."

Wade has stopped short, propping himself with one hand on a nearby tree.

"What is it?" I ask, concerned.

"This is the first time I've seen you in your wedding dress," he rasps.

Uh oh. He doesn't like it? "And?"

Wade's throat bobs. "You look incredible," he says, letting go of the tree and closing the distance between us. He joins me under the pergola and takes my hands in his.

"Thank you. So do you," I say. He laughs, but I mean it wholeheartedly.

"Isn't it bad luck to see the bride in her dress before the wedding?"

I consider this for a moment, and then I go with, "I think the universe has refilled our jars when it comes to good luck. We're good."

I don't have to say it because when our eyes connect, we both know what I mean. The Russian thugs are gone for good. Neither of us has heard a peep since they cleaned out Wade's savings and international authorities began poking around. As for me, I'm still working through my guilt. Day by day, Wade shows me that he would do it all over again just to save me, whether or not I loved him.

And he didn't seem at all worried when I told him we were going to be parents. Of twins, no less.

"The universe gave us two extra doses of luck, too," he says, resting a warm hand on my tummy.

Wade is simply a good and decent person, ready for anything. He went to work right away, helping me prepare a nursery in his sweet little bungalow in Gold Hill.

When I decided I'd be living in Gold Hill for the foreseeable future, Ernestine said she wouldn't visit me. Those old rivalries and grudges between the towns really are hard for some of the older folks to let go of. That didn't last long, though. As soon as she found out Wade and I were official last year, she brought over a whole mountain of her homemade treats, and made sure Wade knew how to bake biscuits for me.

"I'm overflowing with luck right now. Look who I got to marry me? I'm the luckiest man on the planet."

I gently nudge him in the sternum. "You're so cheesy."

"I am. But you made me this way."

"I don't have that much power," I tease. "I think you were always a closet cheeseball."

Wade laughs and cups my cheek, then kisses me gently on the lips. And again, this time on my rounded tummy. "Maybe I was waiting for the right person to draw it out. I hope you like cheese because you're about to commit the rest of your life to this sentimental fool."

My lungs fill with air, and I exhale a contented sigh. "I look forward to many years of being foolish together, Wade."

"I love you, Mrs. Presley Rose Wood. Will you marry me?"

"I'll marry you, Mr. Francis Wade Wood, and I'd divorce you ten times just to remarry you and relive this moment."

Wade barks out a laugh and pulls me in for a tight hug. "We don't have to go through all that. We can just have this."

"This? This I like," I breathe against his chest that smells like his spicy natural scent and wood chips.

"It's a tradition, then. Every year on the night before our anniversary, we meet right here and have a moment."

He knows how much I love traditions and rituals. He knows I never had much of that before I met him.

"Deal," I say, a knot of emotion forming in my throat. I squeeze my eyes shut tight and simply bask in the moment.

Every day, I fall harder, and every day, Wade catches me.

He might claim to be the luckiest man alive, but he was there for me in ways he'll never comprehend.

And that makes me, without a doubt, the lucky one.

THE END

Thank you for reading Screwed!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Abby Knox writes feel-good, high-heat romance that readers have described as quirky, sexy, adorable, and hilarious.

Abby's favorite tropes include: Forced proximity, opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, age gap, boss/employee, fated mates/insta-love, and more. Abby is heavily influenced by Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gilmore Girls, and LOST. But don't worry, she won't ever make you suffer like Luke & Lorelai.

If any or all of that connects with you, then you came to the right place.

Say hello at [authorabbyknox@gmail.com](mailto:authorabbyknox@gmail.com)

Find links to all my social media pages, and be sure to sign up for my newsletter at [authorabbyknox.com](http://authorabbyknox.com) to get free stuff!





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