



WE'D BOTH BEEN
BURNED BEFORE.

Second
CHANCES

A DIRTY LOVE NOVELLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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SECOND CHANCES

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Second Chances

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SECOND CHANCES

An old crush and an old pain. Can they move on to find love again?

Five years ago, I had a secret crush on my neighbor. The problem was that we were both in relationships. That was, until I caught my boyfriend and his girlfriend in bed together.

Liam left his girlfriend, and I moved out, moved away, and moved on from my boyfriend without ever telling Liam how I felt. The pain was too much for both of us.

I never expected to see my old crush again after so many years. And I certainly never expected him to see me naked.

Getting over my embarrassment is just the first hurdle I must clear because my feelings for Liam are back and stronger than ever. But can I look at him and not remember my past? More importantly, can he look at me and not see his?

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PROLOGUE

CHLOE

FIVE YEARS AGO

My heart raced as I pushed open the door to the tattoo shop. Not out of fear, but out of pure excitement.

I was about to get my first tattoo.

The ding of the door announced my arrival to the rest of the store, and a handsome man stepped out from the back.

My neighbor and friend Liam Stevens grinned and rubbed his hands together. “You ready to do this, Chloe?”

“I think so?”

“ ‘I think so’ question mark?”

Okay, I’d lied. I was nervous. But I was more nervous about Liam touching me than the pain from the tattoo needle.

See, Liam was my neighbor, and the thing was, I had a tiny crush on him. But he had a girlfriend, whom he lived with, and I lived with my boyfriend. Nothing had ever happened between Liam and me, not even flirting.

Even though I was happy with Darren, I couldn’t help but notice that my neighbor was good-looking, nice, built, and had tattoos.

Which was how I’d ended up here tonight. When I told Liam at my twenty-fifth birthday party that I’d never gotten a tattoo, he told me he would give me one as a birthday gift. A part of me still couldn’t believe I had said yes, but then again, no one knew I had the hots for Liam but me, myself, and I.

“Did you decide on what you’re going to get?” he asked me.

“Do you want to look around before we head back?”

Tracy, Liam’s girlfriend, had several tattoos and had offered to help me decide what I wanted and where I wanted it. She had steered me toward something small and in a spot that was safe, but I had left the conversation, knowing what I wanted to do.

If I was finally going to get a tattoo, I wasn’t going to start small and build up to something because I was scared. I was

going to go all out and get exactly what I'd wanted the first time.

I shook my head. "No need to look. I already know what I want." I pulled out the picture from my purse and showed it to Liam.

His eyebrows rose. "Oh. Wow."

The image I had was a woman with a lace tattoo that started on her shoulder and trailed down to the middle of her chest, overlapping a breast.

"I know you can't do exactly that," I told him. I knew that artists didn't like to copy another artist's work. "But I was hoping for something similar. And I know that this is bigger than what you wanted to give me for free, so please let me pay you the difference."

He looked up from the piece of paper I had handed him and eyed my shoulder. "I need to see your clavicle area."

I'd come prepared for this. I removed the lightweight sweater I had on and slid the strap of the camisole I was wearing down to my arm. I also made sure to brush my blonde hair out of the way.

Liam picked up the picture and placed it in front of me, like he was visualizing how the tattoo would look. After a few seconds, he nodded his head. "I think this will look good on you. Sexy yet classy. Kind of like you."

I laughed. "Thanks. If you're saying I'm classy, then you must have left my birthday party before I got too drunk. There's nothing classy about climbing into bed and falling asleep before all your guests leave."

Liam winced but also couldn't seem to hold in his laugh.

"Yeah, that's my level of class."

"Hey, at least you didn't throw up."

I was too embarrassed to admit that I had come pretty close.

"True. It could have been worse."

He smiled. “Well, I still stand by the classy part. And if it helps, I said, ‘Kind of like you.’”

I chuckled. “Right. I suppose you did.”

He looked back at my drawing. “I can do something very similar to this, but we’re going to have to do this over two different sessions. I would maybe let you get away with it all at once if you had experience, but since this is your first tattoo, we’re going to do it in steps.”

I tried to hide my disappointment. Even though I never had a tattoo before, I knew people who had gotten them. I had speculated I might have to do it in more than one step. I knew it would last forever, but I didn’t want to walk around with a half-completed tattoo.

I must not have hidden my disappointment well because Liam said, “What I’ll do is, do half the tattoo completely today and do the rest the next time you come in. That way, if you change your mind about getting something so big, you don’t have to do it.”

“Okay. That sounds good.”

The bell over the door rang from behind me, and I automatically looked over my shoulder to see who had entered. It was a couple with more than a few tattoos each. I wondered if they could tell that I was a newbie at this whole thing, and I pulled my strap back up and put my sweater back on before they could stare at my plain skin.

“Chet, your appointment is here,” Liam yelled. “He’ll be right up,” he told the couple. He turned his attention back to me. “Let me get something drawn up, and then we’ll start, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.” My heart was beating fast again.

I couldn’t wait.



“We’re finished.”

I opened my eyes and turned my head back to Liam. I had closed my eyes and faced away from him at one point to try to block out the pain. And the feel of his warm body sitting so close to me. I'd had no idea getting a tattoo could be so erotic. But that was probably just because of my neighbor. I'd had to remind myself several times that we were each in a relationship and happy with our significant others.

The good thing was that I felt relatively certain Liam had no idea about my internal struggles. Thankfully, the tattoo pain was a great cover for desire.

He handed me a mirror. "Take a look."

I held up the plastic-framed glass and gasped. "Oh my God, it's beautiful."

The tattoo started on my shoulder and draped down over my collarbone. That was where he had stopped, and now, I wasn't sure if I wanted the rest of it tattooed on my skin. It was stunning the way it was.

Also, I wasn't sure if I could handle the tattoo going all the way down to my breast. If Liam touched me there, I might just combust. Or faint from trying to rein in my lust.

He grinned. "I'm so glad you like it." He touched my chest. "Next time, we'll finish the rest. It'll start here and stop right about—"

I sat up from where I had been reclined in my chair before his hand could end up on my boob, just like I had feared.

His brow furrowed in confusion.

"Sorry. I was getting a kink in my back."

"Oh. Sorry. You should have said something."

"It just came on. I didn't mean to startle you."

He chuckled. "I'm fine. But I do need to put some ointment on it and cover it up. Do you want to lie back again or sit up?"

"I'll sit. Go ahead."

I should have lain back down because when he moved closer to cover up the new ink, his face was inches from mine. As he

looked down, I watched as his tongue came out and licked his lips. It was a completely benign action with most people. But I had to look away again before I started thinking about him using that tongue on me.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Come on, Chloe. That was the opposite of what I was supposed to be thinking about.

His hand left me, and I heard the wheels of his stool as he moved away from me.

“Are you okay?”

I opened my eyes. “Yeah.”

“If the pain is too much, you can take some pain relievers.”

I put a smile on my face. “I think I’ll be okay, but if it gets to be too sore, I’ll do just that.”

“Great. Let me get you the aftercare instructions, and then I’ll walk you out.”



I tried calling Darren on my way home to tell him to be naked and ready. I had once read that flirting with others was good for relationships. *Look but don't touch.* I didn't know if I completely agreed with that—it depended on how serious the flirting was—but I could see what the article meant. I had gotten turned on from being around Liam, but I was taking all that desire home to my boyfriend.

Unfortunately, he didn't answer.

When I got back to our house, the front door was unlocked, and the lights were on, but no one was home. Darren's car was also in the driveway.

I looked out the window to Liam and Tracy's house. I could see lights on over there too.

Darren had to be over there if he'd left the house looking like he was still home. He must have popped over there to hang out

with Tracy since I was at Liam's tattoo shop.

Darren and I had only been living in our house for less than three months when Liam and Tracy moved in. With both couples being new to the neighborhood, the four of us had become friends, and it wasn't unusual for one of us to be at the other's place.

It worked out anyway since I wanted to show Tracy my new ink. Originally, she had planned on going with me earlier, but she'd had to work.

I knocked on the front door and pushed it open before I heard an answer. I wasn't worried about finding Tracy in the middle of changing or anything if Darren was already over here.

But neither of them was in the living room or the kitchen. I was just about to head to the backyard when I heard a sound coming from the hall.

I pivoted and headed in that direction instead. Liam and Tracy had a two-bedroom house, and the door to the bathroom and the main bedroom were both open, but the guest bedroom door was closed.

That's odd.

A vision of a true crime documentary flashed in my brain, and I froze.

After a few seconds, I shook my head at my overactive imagination. There wasn't a serial killer in there.

But just to be on the careful side, I gently turned the knob on the door and slowly pushed it open. If there was a murderer, I wanted to be able to see them before they saw me, so I could run back home, lock the door, and call 911.

Fortunately, no one was getting killed.

Unfortunately, two people were having sex.

Tracy and Darren were both naked with Tracy on her hands and knees. I had a clear view of Darren's penis in Tracy's vagina.

I must have gasped or something because both their heads jerked in my direction.

I met my boyfriend's eyes and shook my head. Then, I spun around and sprinted for the front door.

Upon my exit, I ran right into Liam and almost fell off the front stoop.

He grabbed my arms to steady me. "Hey, hey, hey," he said in a soothing tone. "Are you okay? Did something happen with your tattoo?"

I suddenly realized I had tears on my cheeks. I hadn't even known I was crying.

I shook off Liam. "I'm fine. My boyfriend is fucking your girlfriend though." I stepped around him and jumped to the ground. "Try not to kill him, please. I don't want to see you end up in prison over his worthless ass."

With that, I marched home and started packing my stuff.

ONE



CHLOE

PRESENT DAY

I took a sip of my coffee and stared out the window as the first signs of daylight began to brighten the sky. I had to get ready for work soon, but I was giving myself five minutes for the caffeine to kick in as I enjoyed the quiet.

“Good morning, Chloe,” Savannah’s voice boomed from behind me, and coffee spilled on my fingers as I jumped.

I looked up at the ceiling. *Five minutes. That’s all I asked for. Five minutes.*

Savannah was a pharmacy technician where I worked at CVS as a pharmacist. She was in her early twenties. When she and her boyfriend had broken up, my heart had gone out to her, and I’d offered her a place to stay.

She was sweet, and I knew exactly what it felt like to break up with a boyfriend. I didn’t want her to worry about where she was going to live while she got back on her feet.

She was only supposed to be at my place for a couple of weeks, a month tops, according to her. She’d been living in my house for almost two months, and she was starting to drive me nuts.

If you looked up *extrovert* on the internet, you’d get a picture of Savannah. She wanted to be with someone *all the time*. And she never *stopped talking*.

I liked people as much as the next person, but I was an ambivert—a mix between an introvert and an extrovert—and I needed my alone time too. I was tired of going to my room to read or watch TV just so I could be alone.

“Morning, Savannah.” I looked at the clock as I rinsed my hand. “Why are you so cheerful in the morning?”

She grinned and shrugged. “What’s not to be cheerful about?”

“I don’t know. Work, lack of a home, climate change?” I said with little emotion as I didn’t agree with her unwavering happiness.

She laughed. “You’re so funny.”

I refilled my mug and slid it off the counter. “Yeah, that’s me. I’m a fucking riot,” I said dryly. I walked toward my bedroom. “I’m going to shower.”

It wasn’t until after I closed my door and stripped that she yelled, “You might want to wait a few minutes. I took a long shower this morning.”

“Of course you did,” I muttered. I stood in front of my mirror, naked. “I just want my home back,” I whined softly to myself.

My reflection didn’t reply.

Since there was a chance I wasn’t going to get enough warm water to take a full shower, I picked up a hair tie from my counter and put my brunette hair up in a messy bun.

I had stopped bleaching it blonde after I left Darren. He was the one who’d always liked my hair so light. And I liked saving myself the maintenance of keeping up the dye job every six weeks. I actually thought I looked better with my natural color anyway.

With thoughts of my ex, I ran my hand over my tattoo. I thought I was more pissed at him for ruining my first and only tattoo than I was about him cheating on me. Not then, but nearly five years later, I was. Especially since I never got it finished.

After what Liam and I had discovered, our two homes were a whirlwind of realtors, packing, moving, and everyone avoiding everyone else. I hadn’t seen Liam since about a week after it happened. He had moved out right away, and I had gone to live with my parents until I found a new place to live.

I had wanted to get so far away that I moved to the town Hanover, California, so I could totally start over. It was unlikely I’d ever see Liam again, and even though I could go to someone else about extending my tattoo, it just didn’t sit right with me.

I sighed. “That’s life,” I said to myself.

I didn't know if that thought was in response to never getting my tattoo finished or my earlier problem of wanting my home back. Either way, I was right.

I reached for my coffee to take a big sip before I got in the bathtub for my cold shower, but I missed and knocked my cup to the floor.

Broken ceramic and coffee went everywhere.

“Son of a bitch.”

I yanked a towel from the closet and fanned it out on the floor next to my feet to soak up the coffee before it ruined my woodwork. I carefully got on my hands and knees, so I wouldn't cut myself.

After absorbing the liquid, I used the wet towel to push the broken pieces of the cup into a pile. I was going to need to get dressed before I went for my broom and dustpan.

I made sure not to step on any slivers of ceramic as I set my feet on the ground and stood.

Black spots filled my vision, and I reached for the wall. This wasn't the first time I'd been light-headed from standing up too fast, and it wouldn't be the last. It was, however, the first time the black spots increased instead of disappearing.

“Oh crap,” I muttered before I went down.

TWO



My partner, Martin, and I were on our way back to the station after a false alarm when we got a call over the radio.

We both paid attention to see what and where the problem was.

“We’re less than five minutes away,” I said.

Martin picked up the radio to let dispatch know we were on our way.

When we arrived, a panicked young woman was standing outside, wringing her hands.

We pulled our equipment from the back of the ambulance and hurried over to her.

“Did you call 911?” Martin asked.

“Yes. I’m Savannah. My roommate, Chloe, passed out or fainted or something. I’m not sure what happened.”

I flinched at the name. It brought back a lot of memories. Some good and some not so good.

I pushed them down because whoever this Chloe was, she needed me to focus on her and not someone from my past.

“Can you show us where Chloe is?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, right this way.”

As we followed Savannah inside, Martin asked, “Did you see your roommate pass out?”

“No, I heard a loud noise, so I knocked on the door. When she didn’t answer, I walked into her bedroom and saw her lying on her bathroom floor.” She pointed to an open door. “She’s in here. I didn’t touch her or anything in case something was broken.”

I put my hand on her arm. “Let us go in, okay? It’s easier if you stand out of the way.”

Some people didn’t understand this request, but thankfully, Savannah didn’t try to argue with me.

She nodded.

“You did good,” I told her. Stepping forward, I rapped my knuckles on the open door. I didn’t want to scare her in case she was awake. I didn’t want a strange man entering her room to scare her. “Chloe,” I said as I walked in. “My name is Liam, and I’m a paramedic.”

There wasn’t an answer, and when I rounded the corner, I caught a glimpse of an unmoving woman with dark hair on the bathroom floor.

“We’re going to need the stretcher,” I said to Martin over my shoulder.

“On it.”

I approached the patient. “Chloe.”

She didn’t move.

When I got into the bathroom, I noticed what looked like a broken cup on the floor, but it was pushed into a pile, so I didn’t think it’d happened when the patient fell.

The next thing that caught my eyes was that she was completely naked, so I suspected she had been about to get in the shower. Her hair was dry as well as the shower walls.

I felt for a pulse, which was nice and strong, and her breaths were rhythmic and deep, like she was sleeping.

She was partly on her side, but I didn’t want to move her in case she’d hit something on her way down. I went around to her other side, and that was when I froze for a second.

I *knew* that tattoo on her shoulder and clavicle.

That was when I took a second look at her face. I recognized her, even with the dark hair.

It was my Chloe. Chloe Becker.

I shook my head. She wasn't *my* Chloe. Just *the* Chloe from my past.

She moaned, and her eyelids fluttered.

"Chloe, can you tell me what happened?"

She opened her eyes and frowned.

"Try not to move."

She blinked a couple of times before she lifted a hand to my face. "Liam?"

I smiled. She remembered me, and we hadn't seen each other for almost five years. That was a good sign.

"Yes, it's Liam. What happened?"

"I'm tired."

"I know, honey, but can you answer a few more questions for me first?"

"Yes," she said, but then her hand fell, and her eyelids closed.

I heard Martin coming back with the stretcher, so I jumped up and spun in a circle to find a towel to put over Chloe's body. I didn't want him to see her nude.

"She came to for a few seconds but went unconscious again," I told my partner as I started an IV.

"I'll let Hanover General know we're bringing her in."

Martin handed me the C-collar, and I wrapped it around her neck.

He got off the radio. "You ready to move her?"

"Yes. Let's get her to the hospital."

"Ready on three. One, two, three."



Chloe was still unconscious when we got to Hanover General, and I reluctantly walked out of her room once the doctor and ER staff took over.

I was worried about her.

Martin lightly smacked my arm. “Let’s get the paperwork done, so we can get out of here.”

“Okay.” I followed my partner over to the desk and opened my computer.

We called it paperwork, but it was all done electronically nowadays.

The process took me twice as long since I couldn’t stop looking at Chloe’s ER room. I was hoping the doctor would come out, so I could get an update before we left, but soon, I was finished and realized that wasn’t going to happen.

Martin and I headed for the ER doors and back to the rig when I almost ran into someone walking in.

“Hey, you okay?” Martin asked once we got outside.

“Yes.” I shook my head. “I mean, no.” I pointed over my shoulder with my thumb. “That patient we just brought in? I know her. Or I knew her.”

His eyebrows flew up. “No shit?”

“Yeah. She used to be my neighbor when I lived in LA.”

Now, Martin’s eyes got as big as the tires on our rig. “As in her boyfriend was the one fucking your ex?”

“Yeah.”

“And now, you’re both in Hanover?”

“Seems like it.”

“Small world, man.”

“Hmm. Yeah, small world.” I turned and looked toward the hospital one last time.

Martin got close to me. “You know there’s no law saying you can’t come back later and check on her,” he said quietly.

I pushed him away. “Wouldn’t that be weird?”

He shrugged. “Aren’t you friends?”

“We were. But that was five years ago.”

“So? I think it’d be weirder for you not to see how she’s doing.” He turned and headed for the rig. “Come on. It’s time for us to save some more lives.”

THREE



“Do you want me to come up there?”
“No, Mom. You have work.”

“But you’re in the hospital. I do have sick leave, you know.”

“I’m in the ER, but they’re going to send me home soon. I was dehydrated and probably overworked. They’ve given me two bags of IV fluids, and I’m feeling much better.”

I didn’t tell my mom about how I had hallucinated Liam though. I hadn’t mentioned it to the doctor or nurse either. I didn’t want them to make me stay longer. I’d already had several CTs done of my head and neck. I figured it was just part of being dehydrated. Or more like, I hoped it was.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come? It’s almost been five years since you and Darren broke up.” She gasped. “Is that what is stressing you out—the approaching anniversary of finding out he was cheating on you?”

I rubbed my temple. “No. I have broken up with boyfriends before. You don’t remember the anniversary of those dates.”

“Darren is the only guy you lived with.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s because the other boyfriends before him were from when I was in high school and then college. He’s not that special, Mom.”

“If you say so. I still hate the idea of you being alone.”

“Oh, I’m not alone. That’s part of my stress.”

“Savannah. That’s right.”

“And work. One of the pharmacists went out on maternity leave. They had, like, seven months to plan for her being gone, but did they? No.”

“Honey, you have to stop working so much. You’re not going to work today, are you?”

“No,” I lied.

I had already called work and left a message, telling them I’d be in once I was discharged from Hanover General. There were only three pharmacists at work, and with one of them already out, I couldn’t leave the last coworker covering all the shifts.

“Oh good.” Her voice was full of relief.

The nurse knocked on the door as she walked into my room.

“Mom, I have to go. The nurse is here.”

“But—”

“I’ll call you later. Bye.”

I hit End before she could say anything else.

“Sorry about that,” I told the nurse. “Mothers.”

She smiled politely, and that was when I noticed her hands were empty.

“I’m not going home yet?” I had been expecting discharge papers.

“Yes, you are and soon. The doctor is just getting everything written up. Actually, there is someone here to see you.”

I dropped my head back against the bed. “Is she young, perky, and won’t stop talking?”

I had talked to Savannah on the phone after I came to. I had still been pretty out of it at that point, but I was fairly confident I’d told her not to come. Work didn’t need to be short a pharmacy tech too.

The nurse chuckled. “Quite the opposite. He’s about our age and quiet.” She looked me up and down. “Which I suppose is pretty young. Some days, it doesn’t feel like it though.”

I smiled at her joke. “I feel that.” I looked up at my IV. “But I guess you figured that out already.”

“I kind of did.”

“Well, you might as well send my visitor in.” I had no clue who would be visiting me at Hanover General. I hadn’t exactly posted on social media that I was here. “Did you get a name?”

“I didn’t have to. It’s Liam. One of our paramedics. He’s the one who brought you in.”

The nurse left my room as a wave of relief washed over me.

I must have seen this Liam’s name badge when he was helping me, and I must have changed his face in my head to the Liam I had known from LA. It made so much sense, and I felt better that I hadn’t told the doctor that I was seeing things.

A few seconds later, there was another knock, and then I was sure I should have mentioned to the doctor what I had thought I saw back in my bathroom.

“Liam?” *Am I hallucinating again?*

He grinned. “Hey, stranger. Fancy seeing you here.”

I smiled in awe. “So, it really is you.”

He laughed and held out his arms. “In the flesh.”

“Wow.”

And now that I knew it was the Liam I had known from my past, standing in my hospital room, I realized that I was wearing a bulky hospital gown, and I hadn’t showered that morning.

I gasped as my eyes widened.

He turned around and back to me. “What? What’s wrong?”

“You saw me naked.”

It shouldn’t matter, but it did. Even with everything that had happened almost five years ago, I couldn’t forget my crush. Especially when it seemed that Liam was just as handsome, if not more so, than he was the last time I had seen him.

He had light-brown hair and hazel eyes. He was wearing his paramedic uniform—dark pants and a short-sleeved white button-up shirt—but it was enough to show off his fit body and the sleeve of tattoos on one arm. He was so sexy. Tracy had been a fool for cheating on him.

He smiled sheepishly. “I did.” He held up his hands. “But I was completely in work mode. I was making sure you were alive, not checking you out.”

I sat up straighter. “Speaking of that, you’re a paramedic now? What happened to your tattoo work?”

Liam’s eyes grew sad, and he looked away. “A few years ago, my brother passed away in a car accident.”

“Oh no. Jordan, right?”

He met my eyes and nodded. “Yeah. I’m surprised you remembered.”

“To be honest, I’m surprised too. I have a terrible memory.”

The corner of his mouth lifted at my joke. “Anyway, after that happened, I felt this...calling to do something...more.”

“Even though your brother didn’t make it? That’s amazing of you.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. You haven’t even heard the wild part yet.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“Jordan was with a friend when he had his accident, and that friend, Nate, is now married to my sister-in-law, Piper.”

I laughed in disbelief. “No way.”

“Way. They even have a kid.” His brow furrowed. “Maybe two. I’m not sure. I don’t really talk to Piper, and I’m really bad about getting on social media.”

“So, you’re happy for them?”

“Very. Nate seems like a great guy, and Piper deserves to be happy.”

The nurse came back in at that point. “Here are your discharge papers.” She handed them to me and took out a pen. She pointed to a section. “You need to go home and rest for the remainder of the day.”

I must have made a noise because she narrowed her eyes at me with a disapproving look.

“No going to work.” She glanced over at Liam. “Are you two friends?”

“Yes.”

The nurse tilted her head toward me. “Make sure this one doesn’t sneak out and work today.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” I met Liam’s eyes. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

Liam just winked and smiled.

The nurse finished going over my directions. “You’re free to get dressed and go home. As long as that’s where you’re going.”

I sighed. “Of course I’m going to go home.” I had to shower before going to work.

She eyed me. “Okay.” She stared at me a few more seconds, and then she left my room.

I swung my legs over the side and slowly stepped down, just in case I did get dizzy again.

“You’re not really going to work, are you?” Liam asked.

I studied his face. It was full of concern, so I lied again, “No.” I shooed him away. “Now, step out because I have to get dressed.”

“I have to get back to work. I’m on my lunch break. But remember, I already saw all your bits and pieces.”

My jaw dropped. “Liam, you told me you didn’t see anything.”

“Technically, I said I didn’t check you out, not that I didn’t see anything.”

“You’re horrible,” I said with a laugh.

He shrugged. “When there is a beautiful woman in front of me, it’s hard not to notice.” He stepped forward and kissed me on the side of the head. “It was nice seeing you again,” he said before leaving and shutting the door behind him.

I stood there, lost in my thoughts for a minute. I thought Liam had just flirted with me.

If I had forgotten my crush over the last five years, it was now back in full force.

FOUR



CHLOE

I was surprised to see Savannah sitting in the waiting room as I left the ER.

“What are you doing here?”

She frowned. “I’m here to take you home.”

“I was going to call an Uber.”

She grabbed my hand and slid it through her arm. “Now, you don’t have to.”

“I can walk on my own,” I told her as she led me outside. “And shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I called in and told them we weren’t going to be there.”

“You might not be going there, but I am once I get home and shower the hospital off of me.”

We reached Savannah’s car, and she opened the passenger door for me. “Did you talk to someone?”

“I left a message.”

“Then, I can tell you with certainty that you’re not going in. I actually spoke to someone and told them you were in the ER. They called in someone from another store to cover for you.”

“Figures. Why didn’t they do that to help cover maternity leave the last few weeks?”

She shrugged and walked around to the driver’s side.

I got in and shut the door. I was kind of glad I wasn’t going to have to go to work, but I wasn’t sure what I was going to do

with the rest of my day. I really appreciated Savannah calling work for me, but I wanted to go home and be alone.

I realized I would have been anything but alone at work, but small talk with patients was quick and easy. It wasn't the same as living with someone in your private space.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" Savannah asked me. "I can pick something up on our way home."

"Sure. You decide."

"But you were the one in the hospital this morning."

I smiled at her. She really was sweet. It wasn't any wonder why I hadn't found the courage to ask her when she was going to move out.

"But you called 911 for me this morning, made sure work knew I wasn't coming in, and waited around to give me a ride home. You deserve to pick."

She bit her lip, so I put my hand on her arm.

"If I was hungry for something, I would tell you."

She smiled. "Okay. How about Lulu's Diner?"

"Sounds good to me."

Savannah turned on her music, and I pulled my phone out of my purse. I saw that my mother had tried to call me again. I sent her a text to let her know I was on my way home and I'd call her tomorrow.

I had a voice mail from work, confirming they had my shift covered, and I had a few notifications on Instagram. But I wasn't prepared for the message that a friend from LA had sent me.

Chloe, I wasn't sure if I should show you this, but I figured you would hear about it sooner rather than later, and I wanted you to hear it from me.

Call me if you need to talk. Love you!

I clicked on the post my friend had sent me and suddenly lost my appetite.

It was a post from Tracy's Instagram account. She had her hand out toward the camera while she kissed Darren. All with the caption that read, *I said yes*. Ring emoji, bride emoji, groom emoji, and a heart emoji followed.

I felt sick again.

"What's wrong?" Savannah's voice was full of alarm.

I hadn't told everyone at work about what had happened with my ex five years ago, but I had told Savannah pieces when I offered her a place to stay.

"My ex is getting married. To the woman he cheated on me with."

"Ouch." She winced. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"You don't still have feelings for him, do you?"

I snorted. "Not even close." I lifted a shoulder. "It's just...I'm the one who should be getting engaged. I know I'm not perfect, but in this situation, I was the one wronged. I should be happy and in a relationship. Not him." I threw my head back against the seat. "Instead, I haven't had a good long-term relationship since I left Darren."

I flashed back to Liam in the hospital, and I wondered what he thought of the news.

But I realized that he hadn't given me his phone number, and I hadn't given him mine.

And for some reason, that made me more miserable.

Maybe because I'd had a sliver of hope that Liam might have liked me. He came to visit me on his lunch break, and he flirted with me some. But he hadn't even bothered to try and stay in touch—not even a pretend *Hey, I'll call you* sort of thing.

My ex was getting married, and my love life was in the toilet.

No, that wasn't right. It was worse than that.

My love life was nonexistent.

FIVE



I sat in front of Chloe's house in my SUV, wondering if I should knock on the door. It hadn't occurred to me until I left the hospital that we hadn't exchanged information. The only thing I knew about her was where she lived.

But as someone who had never returned to a patient's home, I felt like I was making my way into stalker territory. Especially since I had gone back to the hospital to see her.

I was so lost in thought that I forgot to pay attention to my surroundings, and I wasn't prepared for the knock on my window.

Startled, I looked up to see Chloe's roommate.

I hit the button to put the glass down and smiled awkwardly.

"You're one of the paramedics from this morning, right? I'm Savannah." She smiled. "In case you forgot."

"Yes. I'm Liam."

"Did you forget something, Liam?"

That would have been a good excuse. *Why didn't I think of that?*

Because you're not in high school, and you don't need excuses to go to a woman's house.

"No, I didn't. I actually know Chloe. We were neighbors back in LA."

Savannah's eyes grew, widening to the point that I thought her eyes might pop out of her head, and her jaw dropped.

This was a very unusual reaction. I had to wonder what Chloe had said about me.

“So, you’re *the* Liam. The Liam who dated Tracy?”

Ah. That was what she’d told her roommate. I should have known.

“I am.”

“How are you taking the news?”

I furrowed my brow. “News?”

“Oh crap. I think you’d better go in and talk to Chloe. It’s not my business.”

An air of foreboding settled over my head, but the plus side was that I now had an excuse to talk to her.

I pulled my key from the ignition and got out of my vehicle.

“I was just leaving to run an errand, but the front door is unlocked. Chloe’s out back on the deck.”

“Thanks,” I said and headed toward the door.

“I’m sorry,” Savannah called out to me.

I turned around. “Thanks,” I said and faced forward again. “I guess,” I said under my breath since I still didn’t know what was going on.

Once inside the house, I went straight for the sliding glass door that I assumed led to the backyard. I opened the door and found Chloe sitting on a lounge chair. She didn’t even look in my direction, and she had a bottle of wine tucked against her side.

“Hey,” I said as I stepped out, warning her I was there.

“Hey, Liam,” she said with a surprised grin. “What are you doing here?” She pointed to the lawn chair next to her. “Sit.” She lifted her bottle. “Be miserable with me.” Laughter came from her mouth, but it was more of a sad laugh rather than humorous.

“I realized we hadn’t exchanged numbers earlier,” I said as I took a seat.

“And then you heard the news, huh?” she said with sympathy.

I leaned back and shrugged. “What news?”

She looked away. “I don’t want to be the one to tell you.” She thought about it a few seconds. “I know.” She picked up her phone and started looking for something, it seemed.

Meanwhile, I was eyeing her bottle, wondering how much she’d had to drink from it. She’d just been in the hospital for dehydration. Alcohol was something she shouldn’t be drinking right now. But then again, whatever this news was, it didn’t seem to be good.

“Uh, Chloe...”

She shoved her phone at me, and I didn’t finish what I was going to say, so I could look.

It was an Instagram post from my ex-girlfriend, Tracy. And it looked like she was getting married to Darren.

“Oh,” I said, handing the phone back.

Chloe straightened in her seat and leaned forward. “Oh? All you have to say is, *oh?*”

I shrugged. “Yeah. I mean, she’s my ex. That was five years ago. I’ve moved on.”

Grabbing her bottle, Chloe slunk down on the lounge. “Just when I thought you were the one person who would understand...”

I closed my eyes. I was a jerk.

I turned in my seat and looked at her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d still have feelings for Darren after five years. That was insensitive of me.”

She scowled. “I don’t have feelings for him.” She shuddered. “Tracy is welcome to him.”

Now, I was confused. “I don’t understand.”

“Why is he in a happy relationship and I’m not? He cheated on me. He should be miserable. He should be the one looking at pictures of me getting engaged and feeling sorry for himself.”

“You’re feeling sorry for yourself?”

“Do I have to say yes?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “No.”

“Do you know that for my twenty-fifth birthday, I actually thought he was going to propose?” She rubbed her forehead. “I feel stupid, saying it out loud now, but we’d been together a few years, and we were living together. Plus, I found a jewelry box in his coat and made myself hold off on opening it because I didn’t want to ruin the surprise any more than I already had.”

I winced. “Please don’t tell me it was something for Tracy.”

She chuckled. “No, it was for me. But it was earrings. Thankfully, he gave them to me before a party, so I didn’t have to put on a fake smile in front of all my friends.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“Don’t be sorry. I didn’t tell anyone but a few of my closest friends. They convinced me that we were still young and he’d ask me sooner rather than later. Instead, he was cheating on me.” She held up one hand. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m super glad that he didn’t ask me to marry him, but I can’t help but think, *Why her and not me?*” She turned her head away, as if she were ashamed. “What’s wrong with me that no one picks me?”

Oof. That was a loaded question and one I was not fit to answer because I didn’t know what to say.

Chloe picked up her bottle and took a couple big gulps.

“Chloe, I don’t want you to think I’m ignoring your feelings, but do you think that drinking is wise after what happened today?”

She looked at me and burst out laughing as she shoved the bottle at me.

I took it from her and spun it around to read the label.

Sparkling grape juice.

“I’m sad, not an idiot.”

I frowned. "I never said you were an idiot."

"You're right. You didn't." She sighed. "I just feel like one."

I leaned forward and lifted her chin. "Please don't. You're beautiful and sweet. And twice the woman Tracy is. Those two belong together, and you are better off without that dick in your life. You'll meet someone and get your happily ever after too."

She leaned back and smiled at me. "I hope you're right. Because even though I don't want *that* dick in my life, I would like *a* dick in it. My vagina is lonelier than I am."

I chuckled, slightly uncomfortable. I hadn't expected her to say something like that. In all the times we'd hung out, we'd never talked about sex.

I sniffed the bottle. "Are you sure there's no alcohol in here?"

She laughed and motioned for me to give it back. "I wish."

I tipped the bottle up and took a drink before handing it back. "Hmm. That's good."

"I know. Full of sugar, I'm assuming, but it's delicious." She eyed me. "So, is the reason you're not upset the same reason you didn't beat up Darren the night we found out they were cheating?" She shook her head in amazement. "I thought for sure you were going to tear his limbs off."

"Yeah, I think I knew we weren't as happy as we once had been. But we were living together, I was busy at the shop, and it was just easier to keep things the way they were than to mess with moving out and stuff."

"I hear that. Darren and I owned our place. Selling it and splitting everything was a pain in the ass. I'm not buying another house with someone unless I'm married."

"Do you own this place? Or are you and Savannah renting?"

"I own it. Savannah is a temporary roommate. She needed a place to go after she broke up with her boyfriend. I thought she'd have moved out by now."

"She's overstaying her welcome?"

“Kind of. I feel awful because, as you probably noticed, she’s the nicest person ever, but I miss living alone. You know, the five-year anniversary is coming up of when we found out about Darren and Tracy. I usually go all out to celebrate by ordering in my favorite food, watching my favorite movies, drinking my favorite wine, and enjoying my single status. But I can’t do that with Savannah here. And this year—either because I turned a decade older or because I found out that those two are getting married—being single doesn’t seem as much fun.” She held up a finger. “But I would still like to be alone to celebrate or wallow in my own pity.” She laughed in disbelief. “Man, I sound like a loser.”

“No, you don’t. I think you sound like someone who is entitled to feel the way they feel. Just because you’re happy you’re no longer with Darren doesn’t make it hurt any less. He still wronged you.”

She smiled up at me. “Thank you. Now, can you take my roommate off my hands that night, so I can get some peace and quiet?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know. Let me work on that.”

“Thank you,” she said with a grin.

SIX



Later that week, I walked into the kitchen at work to see McNally shoving a piece of paper at Martin.

Martin shook his head and walked toward me.

“What’s going on?” I asked him.

Martin rolled his eyes. “McNally’s trying to sell something again,” he answered and left the room.

McNally was known for trying to get others to join his get-rich-quick schemes or to buy something from one of the multiple multi-level marketing businesses his wife had signed up for. What McNally wasn’t known for was remembering that we constantly turned him down.

My coworker spun around and set his sights on me as he made a beeline in my direction.

I started shaking my head before he even reached me. “Nope, not going to happen.”

“It’s not what you think,” McNally said and pushed the same piece of paper Martin had turned down in my direction. “I’m not selling anything, man. It’s a cabin up in the Sierra Foothills. The wife and I were supposed to go next weekend, but she has to get her bunion surgery done the Thursday before. It’s too late to cancel, and we could really use the money for Millie’s recovery.”

“It’s bunion surgery,” I pointed out.

“Exactly. She can’t stand on her feet for who knows how long, so she can’t go to work.”

Great. Now, I felt guilty.

I snatched the paper from McNally's hand and scanned the listing. Now that I had it in my grasp, I saw that it was several sheets of paper with multiple pictures, a description of amenities, and a map.

Besides the beautiful photos, the first thing that caught my attention was the word *seclusion*.

"Millie picked it because it's close to shopping and a couple towns, yet it's far enough away that it has privacy. There are also hiking trails, swimming, fishing, and a hot tub."

I also noticed that even though it was labeled a cabin, it had all the amenities that I had in my own home. Dishwasher, washing machine and dryer, television, and Wi-Fi. It even had a some of things I didn't, like a wood stove.

It only had one bedroom with a queen-size bed, but there was also a couch.

The price on the page was a little steep, but the location and amenities seemed worth it.

I looked up at McNally. "I'll take it."

"But if you just look at the pictures again—" He cut himself off. "Wait. Really?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, really. I have a friend who is going through a little bit of a rough time right now. She also has a temporary roommate she can't get rid of. I think I'll show her this place to see if she's interested. She needs a vacation."

"Wow. Thanks, man. I will send you the information to your email, and I will email the property owners and CC you."

"Sounds good." I lifted the packet in my hand. "Do you mind if I keep this?"

"It's all yours."

"Thanks."

I pulled out my phone and found Chloe's number. We had exchanged numbers when I went to visit her.

Me: What are you doing next weekend?

After I hit Send, I realized that if she had plans next weekend, I'd just wasted my money. Here's to hoping she was free.

While I waited for her to respond, I pulled up the website on the listing so that I could send her the info once she got back to me.

Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to wait for her message back to me because a call came in, and Martin and I left to take it.



CHLOE

Work had been so busy that I hadn't had a chance to look at my phone all day and I'd shoveled in my lunch in front of the computer. Some days, I hated working retail and wished I had gone the hospital route.

But the second my shift was over, I grabbed my purse and got out of there before something major happened and I was required to stay.

I said good-bye to the ladies at the checkout of the store, put on my sunglasses, and slipped out the front door.

Once I got to my car, I unlocked my phone to check for any missed calls and messages.

My mom had called twice and left at least one voice mail. I wasn't surprised because she had been calling me all week after my emergency room visit. But I'd already decided I would talk to her later. I did send her a quick text though to tell her that I was fine and I was driving home from work.

I also saw that I had a message from Liam. Since the night he'd come over, we had been texting back and forth a little. Things like *how are you today* and *what are you up to*. But today, he asked me what I was doing next weekend, and my stomach did a little somersault.

Me: Nothing too exciting. Probably some grocery shopping and laundry.

I hit Send and wondered if I'd sounded like a loser. I wasn't in high school or even college anymore, so I shouldn't worry about trying to make my life sound more exciting than it was. But some instincts ran deep, and I mentally kicked myself for not coming up with something better than buying food and washing dirty clothes.

I was just about to put my car in reverse when Liam responded.

He sent me a website link.

After looking it over, I messaged him back.

Me: It looks beautiful there, but I'm not sure why you sent it to me.

Liam: You said you were stressed out from having Savannah at your place all the time. And I know you usually spend the anniversary of your freedom from Darren at home, but I thought you could just as easily drink wine, eat some of your favorite foods, and watch your favorite movies at this cabin. I thought it would also give you an excuse to get away and relax.

The anniversary was the Monday after that weekend, and I thought it was super sweet that he'd thought of me, but I was disappointed. I had secretly hoped that he was going to ask me out.

Now, I had to tell him thanks, but no, thanks. It did sound heavenly, but the cabin wasn't close, and I didn't want to pay the fee I had seen on the website to be alone.

I tapped my chin.

However, the money might be worth it to send Savannah there for the weekend. I didn't know how easily I could sell her on a place that highlighted seclusion and privacy though.

I sighed. It was better just to tell Liam no.

I started typing out my polite *no, thank you* when another message from him came through.

Liam: Oh, I forgot. I didn't want you to assume we'd share a bed together since there is only one. I am more than happy to sleep on the couch. Or on the bed. ;-)
Also, I am more than happy to go hiking or fishing and leave you alone for a while when we're there.

I almost dropped my phone.

A weekend away from Savannah and with Liam.

I couldn't tell him yes fast enough.

SEVEN



CHLOE

I woke up with a stiff neck as Liam's SUV bounced around. I opened my eyes to see a steep dirt road.

"We're here," he said with a quick look in my direction.

I leaned forward. "Perfect timing," I muttered as my eyes caught the beautiful surroundings.

Since it was spring, there was green everywhere, except for the brown wooden cabin at the top of the hill. It literally looked like it could be in a movie.

"It's adorable."

"It's even better in person," Liam agreed.

He parked his SUV close to the building, and I got out and stretched my legs. The air was chillier up in the mountains than it was back home, and I was glad that I had packed pants and sweatshirts.

Liam opened the back of his vehicle and pulled out the cooler we had packed with food for our three-and-a-half-day adventure.

It was Thursday evening, and I had taken Friday and Monday off of work. A few weeks ago, I hadn't thought I'd be able to get time off on such short notice. I guessed it had taken me going to the hospital for my store to finally realize that they could find people to help out and cover our open shifts.

I pulled out Liam's and my suitcases and shut the back of the SUV. Meanwhile, Liam had set the cooler down and was pulling a picture off the front of the cabin.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He put the frame back and turned, waving a silver object back and forth. “Grabbing the key.”

“That doesn’t seem like a safe place to put it,” I said as I rolled our luggage to the entrance.

Liam unlocked the door, swung it wide, and picked up the cooler he’d set at his feet. “I don’t think they leave the key here all the time. Just before guests arrive.”

“It still doesn’t seem very safe.”

He laughed. “Have you never been to a rural area before?” He set the cooler on the table with a loud thunk.

“And I suppose you have?”

He grinned at me. “I grew up in Nebraska. Of course I have. I lived in a city with about three hundred thousand people, but my cousins lived on a farm. And my family liked to go camping when I was little.”

“So, you’re familiar with staying in a cabin?”

“No, like *camping*, camping. With a tent.” He shook his head with a laugh. “You sure are a city girl.”

I put my hand on my hip. “I did grow up in LA. And we can’t all be wilderness experts.”

“Oh, I’m not an expert. I’m just not as green as you are.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and took a good look at where we were staying.

It was a log cabin on the outside with the wood exposed on the inside too. It was open concept, so everything was in one big room. The living room, the dining area, and the kitchen. And according to the website, the small hallway off to the right was where the bathroom and bedroom were.

It was beautiful. It had the aesthetic of rustic living, but inside, it had everything a city girl could want.

The kitchen had a microwave, a stove, and a refrigerator, which Liam had started stocking. And the small living room

area had a television and a big, comfortable couch where I could picture myself sitting on while I sipped some of the wine I had brought with us.

Speaking of wine...

I went back out to Liam's vehicle to get the rest of the groceries and brought them inside. I opened the bottle and poured myself a glass of wine to sip on as I put the food away.

"We're drinking already?" Liam asked when he came inside from the back deck.

I set the glass down and chuckled a little uncomfortably. "Is it too early?"

It just occurred to me that Liam had probably changed a lot since we were last neighbors. He never seemed to mind drinking back then. There were plenty of times the four of us had gotten together, and all we'd do was drink and talk.

He smiled. "Not at all. I'm just wondering why you didn't tell me it was beer o'clock." He walked over to the fridge and pulled out a beer.

"I was going to tell you once you came back in. What were you doing back there anyway?"

"I was making sure the hot tub was working, and I wanted to check to see if there was chopped wood for the stove."

"And?"

"Hot tub works, and there is a small firewood shed up here with plenty more under the deck. We can use the wood stove every night and not run out."

"I can't wait. I've never been around a real wood-burning stove."

Liam took a sip of his beer. "I have. My grandparents had one as I was growing up. I loved it when my grandpa would start a fire when I was little. But when I was in middle school, they replaced it with a gas-burning one. It was easier to turn on, but it wasn't the same."

“I bet.” I swirled my wine in my glass and looked around. I noticed that our suitcases were still leaning against the wall. I hadn’t even looked in the bedroom or bathroom yet. “I’m going to check out the rest of the place.”

I headed to the short hallway. To the left was the bathroom, and to the right was the bedroom. I went to the bathroom first, hoping that it was nice and clean. I dreaded a dirty bathroom.

I flicked the switch and breathed a sigh of relief. The bathroom was spotless, and it was big. There was a garden tub with a separate shower and plenty of counter space.

Happy with my findings, I flicked the switch and turned around, only to run into Liam.

“Oh my God. I didn’t realize you’d followed me.”

My wine sloshed between us and spilled onto both of our shirts.

Liam stepped back. “Sorry, I thought you heard me.”

“No, I’m so sorry. I got wine all over you.”

He smiled reassuringly. “It’s my fault.”

“Okay, it’s slightly your fault.”

He laughed. “Tell you what. Since we’re both wet, why don’t we put on our swimsuits and get in the hot tub? We can let our wine-covered clothes soak in the sink while we’re outside.”

My eyes widened in shock from Liam’s suggestion. “It’s cold outside.”

“It’s not that cold, and we’ll be warm in the hot tub.”

I wasn’t so sure about that.

“And when we’re done, I’ll come in and build us a fire. We can soak in the hot tub, and then we’ll relax on the couch and watch a movie.”

I was excited to try the fireplace, and if I kept my body under the water, it would be warm. “Okay, let’s do it.” I pointed my finger at him. “But if I’m cold, I’m coming in right away, and you’re still going to build me that fire.”

He laughed again. “Deal.”

EIGHT



As I waited for Chloe to change, I went into the bathroom to find some towels for when we got out of the hot tub.

In the closet next to the sink were washcloths, hand towels, regular towels, and a pile of big, fluffy beach towels.

I grabbed two beach towels and headed back to the living room. I had already changed into my swim trunks, and I considered starting the fire in the wood stove before we went outside, but I didn't want to burn down the cabin. I'd been to a number of fires as a paramedic, and it wasn't worth the risk. I could picture the faces of the firefighters I worked with judging me in disappointment if I left the fire burning unattended.

I did make sure that there were several logs of wood ready to be thrown in once we came back inside though.

I wasn't sure what I was more excited for—going in the hot tub with Chloe or snuggling up on the couch with her.

I marched to the fridge and grabbed another beer. After twisting off the cap, I took a long, hard swallow.

I shouldn't be thinking of Chloe as anything other than a friend. At least, not right now. This was not the weekend to get involved with her on any level. She was hurting, and I wasn't going to take advantage of that.

Feeling good about the pep talk to myself, I set my half-empty beer on the counter, ready to sit, relax, and simply enjoy her company.

But all that flew out the window as soon as the bedroom door opened and she stepped out.

Chloe's swimsuit wasn't particularly skimpy, but it was red, and it showed off her fantastic body. It reminded me of the time we had gone to a pool party back when we were neighbors. My ex-girlfriend kept giving me crap about being under the water for most of the gathering. What she didn't know was that I had a hard-on almost the whole time from seeing Chloe in a bikini.

I felt like a dirty dog at the time, but Tracy was the one to reap the rewards later. When we came home that night, I fucked her brains out. Of course, that hadn't prevented *her* from eventually straying and screwing our other neighbor.

Now, with no girlfriend, my dick didn't have any guilt about letting itself be known that it wanted to have sex with Chloe, and I had to lower the towels to cover my crotch.

"You ready to make a run for it?" I asked her. Thankfully, my voice didn't give away my arousal.

She smiled nervously. "I think so. But maybe you should give me one of those to wrap around myself until we get there."

Her eyes were on the beach towels in my hand, and my stupid cock jerked against my lower abdomen.

Knock it off, asshole. She's not looking at you.

Great. Now, I was talking to my penis in my head.

I pulled one towel away to hand to her while making sure I kept the other in place. "Here you go."

As she unfolded it and wrapped it around her shoulders, I turned my back to her and went for the sliding glass door. I opened it and rushed to the hot tub, throwing the towel to hang over the railing along with my T-shirt I had pulled off. Then, I slid under the hot water.

I sighed with contentment. Not only was I warm, but my erection was also safely out of sight.

Which was probably why I didn't turn away as Chloe unwrapped the towel from her shoulders and got into the hot

tub with me. I was disappointed when most of her was no longer visible.

Except for the one tattoo I'd given her, her body was free of ink, and I felt an itch I hadn't felt in a long time. I wanted to pick up a needle and put my artwork all over her body.

She didn't seem to notice my desire because she moved to the outer edge and took in the scenery.

"Wow. It's so beautiful here."

I couldn't help but smile at her delight. And she was right; it was beautiful.

"Right here is the best of rural and city living. The closest town is about fifteen miles away, an easy drive for groceries and other necessities. Yet we're out here, all alone with no one to bug us."

"I think I'm more fascinated by the fact that we are sitting in a hot tub on a gorgeous deck attached to an amazing house, but when I look down, I see grass and flowers and trees. And there is literally a creek in the backyard of this place. It's so cool. It's like camping in the woods, but we don't have to sleep outside and go to the bathroom in a pit we had to dig ourselves."

I threw my head back and laughed. "For the record, I have never done that. Growing up, we always went to campgrounds with public restrooms and showers."

"So, you're not as tough as you say you are."

I shrugged. "I guess not."

"Did you see the pictures online of people swimming in the creek?" she asked.

I recalled a picture of a woman standing in the stream with her arms thrown in the air. "Yes."

"Do you think it's safe?"

I looked over the edge. The yard was a steep incline to the creek below. "The water is moving pretty slowly, and it is a creek, not a river. I don't think we'd be swept out to the ocean

or anything. But you'd probably have to be careful not to slip and hit your head on one of the jutting rocks." I looked over at her. "But I don't know if it will be warm enough to go in there. The temp is supposed to pick up tomorrow, but I'm betting that water is freezing."

"You're probably right."

I smiled as a memory came to me. "My family and I went to a family reunion out in the Black Hills in South Dakota. Whatever campground we were staying at was up high in elevation. It was super cold up there, but it didn't stop any of us kids from going in the hot tub every day."

"Kind of like now."

"Kind of like now," I agreed. "But we would get hot, so we'd run and jump in the swimming pool to cool off for a few minutes." I smiled at her. "You and I could always go down and jump in the creek if we get too hot up here."

She raised her eyebrows. "No way. I'd rather just go inside."

I laughed. "I don't blame you. Even the mild things I did as a kid sometimes seem too much for me as an adult."

She laughed too. "Tell me about it. As a kid, we used to ride our bikes down the street with our eyes closed. We'd start out counting one second and work our way up to ten. It's really not that long of a time, but there is no way I'd do that now."

"Wow. You rebel, you."

"Tell me about it. Someday, I might tell you the things I did in college," she joked.

"I can't wait." My eyes traveled down to her chest. "You never got your tattoo finished."

Her smile fell, and she shrugged. "Yeah, well, you and I both know what happened after I got it. For a long time, I didn't like looking at it in the mirror. I think that's the worst thing about Darren cheating—he ruined my tattoo. And then you and I both moved away. It didn't seem right to have someone else finish it."

I couldn't help but be pleased at her devotion to me and my work, but she didn't owe me anything. "Darren and Tracy ruining it would have been all the more reason for you to go and get it finished or even change it a little."

"I suppose you're right. But I don't look at it and get sad anymore. I like it now, and I'm glad I got it."

"You could still finish it like you originally planned."

"Yeah, but you're not a tattoo artist anymore," she said without a hint of humor.

Still showing me loyalty.

When we got back to Hanover, I was going to find someone to complete her tattoo for her.

NINE



The sun was beginning to set, and the temperature was dropping. I knew that even the warm water from the hot tub wasn't going to keep the chill off for much longer.

"I think I'm going inside." I looked at Liam. "You?"

He looked around. "Yeah, it's probably time. Maybe we can come back out tomorrow." His eyebrows rose. "Are you glad you braved the cold?"

"Yeah. It was very relaxing." I eyed my towel hanging over the railing. "But now, I think all that relaxation was for nothing because I'm dreading getting out of the hot tub."

"I suggest making a run for it and not even bothering to towel off until you get inside. You can always clean up the water from the wood floor later."

"Good idea."

"And once we're dry and changed, I'll start that fire. You'll be warmed up in no time."

I pictured myself on the couch, bundled up in clothes, with a fire burning in front of me.

"Okay, you convinced me." I moved to the edge and went for it.

I jumped up, grabbed my towel, and threw it around my shoulders as I ran for the door.

Only, when I reached it, the door wouldn't open.

"What?" I tried to shake the door. "No!"

“What’s wrong?”

I heard the splash of water and his feet hitting the deck as he got out.

“It’s locked.” I spun around and almost forgot I was standing out in the cold, half-naked and wet.

Liam hadn’t bothered to grab his towel, and his gorgeous chest and sexy tattoos were right in front of my face as he tried to open the door.

His right arm was covered from wrist to shoulder, but his ink didn’t stop there. It continued on over his pecs and across the other shoulder, where it stopped on his upper bicep. He had another smaller tattoo on his left forearm, but the one that really got me was the one on his lower abdomen. I didn’t know if it was a triangle, a diamond, or a star because only the top stuck out, but I had to bite my lip, so I wouldn’t pull his swim trunks down to find out.

I pictured us going inside, stripping off our wet suits, and me kissing him there until I moved lower and took him in my mouth.

“Don’t worry. I’ll run around to the front and let you in. I don’t think we locked the door when we came in.”

“Huh?” I looked up into his eyes.

He smiled sympathetically. “You made a sound. I’m sorry you’re out here, suffering. The lock must have released when we closed the door behind us.”

“Oh. Yeah. It’s cold out here.” I certainly couldn’t tell him I was suffering for other reasons than just the cold.

He put his hands on my upper arms. “Hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

I nodded, and he finally grabbed his own towel and ran down the stairs. The house was on a hill, and he had to run up it to get to the front, but he did it with little effort. Less than a minute later, the back door was open, and I was let in.

Liam quickly closed it behind me, and I ran for the bedroom, where I had brought my suitcase when I changed earlier.

Thankfully, I had read the weather forecast before I left Hanover and packed sweatshirts, yoga pants, and fluffy socks. I quickly stripped off my swimsuit and put on my warm clothes, grateful I had kept my head above water and my hair wasn't wet.

I opened my door and called out, "Are you decent? Is it safe to come out?"

Liam chuckled from the main room. "There's no fire quite yet, so I don't know how safe it is. But I'm decent."

I smiled and made a pit stop in the bathroom to throw my wet suit over the edge of the tub. Then, I went out to see how Liam was doing on the fire.

He was leaning in front of the stove, dressed in gray sweatpants and a white tee, and there was wood in the stove. I wasn't sure of everything he was doing, but I watched as he was able to bring the fire to life.

"How do you know how to do that?" I asked, fascinated.

He looked over his shoulder at me and grinned. "YouTube, baby."

I laughed. "Instead of saying, *They have an app for that*, YouTube could make a slogan, saying, *We have a video for that*."

"They should totally do that." He stood and brushed his pants off.

Of course, my eyes followed his hands, and I almost sighed when I saw his crotch. God bless gray sweatpants and man bulge.

I had to wonder if Liam would notice if I was missing because I wanted to go back into the bedroom to take a quick break to get myself off. At the rate I was going, it would probably take me two minutes to reach an orgasm. But then again, I couldn't promise I wouldn't make any noises or cry out his name as I brought myself to completion.

It would probably be best if I found another outlet for my sexual frustration.

I headed to the kitchen. “What shall we have for dinner?”



I pushed my plate away and sat back in my chair. “That was good.”

Liam had braved the cold again and gone outside to grill steaks. I’d stayed in and made us baked potatoes and side salads.

“Yes, it was.” He picked up his dishes and took them to the sink. After rinsing them off, he put them in the dishwasher.

Could this man be any more perfect?

“What?” Liam said after he closed the dishwasher door.

Oh jeez. I hadn’t realized I’d been grinning at him like a fool.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking it was nice to see someone clean up after themselves.”

He frowned. “Savannah doesn’t clean up after herself? No wonder you want her to move out.”

I had tried to be general in my compliment, but I couldn’t let him think Savannah was a bad roommate. Loud? Yes. Messy? No.

“No, she’s actually very good about that.” I stood and picked up my plate and glass. “It’s just others I’ve lived with who didn’t always do their share.”

“Darren?”

I chuckled. “How did you know?”

Liam shrugged with a smile. “He’s the only other person I know who you lived with.”

“Lucky guess then.”

I also put my stuff in the dishwasher, and Liam and I worked together to clean up the kitchen. Neither of us said anything as we worked, and it was nice to not have to make conversation just for the sake of it.

When we were done, he asked, “Is it movie time? What are we watching?”

“What? Why do I get to pick?”

“You said on the anniversary of breaking up with Darren, you like to order your favorite food and watch your favorite movies. The listing said they have Netflix, so I figured we could pour some wine and you could pick the movie.”

“Great idea.” I rubbed my hands together and grinned. “Now, what shall I torture you with?”

TEN



CHLOE

I ended up not torturing Liam. Instead, I had picked a movie we could both enjoy. I'd chosen something neither of us had seen before, but it was a comedy, and I hoped it would keep my mind off of wanting to get him naked.

We were about halfway through with the movie when I figured I probably shouldn't drink any more wine. So, I decided buttery popcorn was the next best thing to alcohol.

I threw my legs down and got up from my side of the couch. So far, we had been sitting too far away to even fake an arm going behind someone's back, like in high school.

It was probably better this way. It kept my mind on the movie.

"Hey, where are you going?"

I looked over my shoulder. "I'm making popcorn. Do you want me to pop you a bag?"

"Nah. But I will pause the movie for you."

"Thanks."

I found the popcorn I'd brought, put a bag in the microwave, and carried it back to the couch when it was done.

"I'm ready. Hit play."

Liam resumed the movie, and I sat back and relaxed. I was laughing pretty hard at a particularly funny part, so I didn't notice him leaning over and reaching into my bag at first.

But I quickly pulled it out of his grasp.

“What are you doing?” I tried to scowl at him, but I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading over my face.

“I was going to have some of your popcorn.”

I shook my head. “No, you are not. I asked if you wanted some, and you said no.”

He shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“So, go and make some then.”

“I don’t want that much.” He gave me a sweet smile and what had to be the worst case of puppy-dog eyes I’d ever seen. “Can’t I just have some of yours? Pretty please.”

He leaned toward me again, and I put my foot on his chest as I held the bag even farther away from him.

“No way, José. This is mine, and I don’t share,” I said with a grin.

Liam wrapped his hand around my calf and pulled me toward him.

I screamed in surprise and delight as I was dragged across the couch and practically into his arms.

He made a move to swipe my popcorn bag out of my hands, but I hugged it to my chest and covered it with my arms. I turned my back to him the best I could, but he tickled my side. I couldn’t help from laughing and rolling onto my back.

“You don’t fight fair,” I yelled at him.

He plucked the popcorn from my hands. “All’s fair in love and war...and food.” He took a couple of kernels out of the bag and popped them in his mouth. He looked over at me with a smirk on his face. “Mmm...that’s delicious.”

“You’re a turd.” I scrambled to sit up quickly, but when I stretched to get my stuff back, he blocked me without even trying.

I was now faced with three decisions. I could get up and walk around to his other side, but he’d just switch hands. I could let him have my food, but the competitive streak in me didn’t want to give up that easily. Or my third option was, I could

climb into his lap to straddle him, and then I would be within range of both of his arms.

But did I have enough guts to do it? I didn't want to scare the guy off.

He looked at me from the corner of his eye. "I don't know what you're thinking over there, but you'd best stop," he teased. "This popcorn is mine now. You lost fair and square."

That's it. Challenge accepted.

I swiftly pounced on his lap before he realized what I was doing and could block me.

I thought I'd stunned the guy because when I reached for his hand, he didn't seem to bother to even tighten his grip on the bag.

I looked down into his face and smiled. "Thank you very much for giving it back to me."

I started to move back to sit on the couch when I was flipped onto my back. I held the bag of popcorn over my head even though half of it had landed on us because I wasn't going to give up that easily.

Unfortunately for me, Liam's arms were longer, and he swatted the bag right out of my hand. I heard it hit the ground, and my mouth fell open.

"I can't believe you just did that."

He smiled. "You left me no choice. This way, no one wins."

I wanted to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him, but since I couldn't, I decided the fight wasn't over. "Not true. I'm going to put another bag in the microwave."

When he didn't move off of me, I arched my hips to let him know he needed to move back.

Except my pussy rubbed right over his hard dick.

His *hard* dick.

Wait. When did he become aroused?

Liam looked as shocked as I felt, and we both froze.

Now was the time to do what I hadn't been brave enough to do a few seconds ago. I should just take him in my arms and plant one on him.

But I waited too long. Because Liam sat up and backed away from me. All the way to the other side of the couch.

He cleared his throat, and I knew whatever he was going to say next was going to disappoint me.

"I think it's time for me to head to bed. I got up early this morning for work, so we could get here at a decent time. And with—"

I cut him off before he could say anything about not wanting to get involved with me, "No, no, it's fine." I faked a yawn. "I'm tired too."

I literally watched as his shoulders relaxed.

I'd had no idea the thought of kissing me was so stressful.

Not wanting to sit there any longer in case he could see the discontent written all over my face, I got up and began to clean up the mess we'd made during our play fight.

"Let me help you," he said, getting up.

"It's okay. I got it," I said, picking up the bag from the floor and carrying it over to the garbage. "I saw a hand vac charging in the bedroom. I'll go grab it."

I jetted to the bedroom, took a couple of deep breaths, grabbed the vacuum, and went back out into the main room.

"Speaking of bed, where are we sleeping tonight?" I asked with a normal and casual voice. I was pretty proud of myself.

"You can have the bedroom, and I'll sleep out here."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tease him that he wanted to stay in the living room so he could finish the movie without me, but I feared he would think it was some sort of ploy for me to stay out there. Or worse, to lie in bed with him.

I grimaced. I didn't want him to think I was desperate.

I vacuumed up the popcorn on the couch and floor and turned to him.

“Thanks for letting me have the bedroom. But no finishing the movie without me,” I told him. I even managed to put a smile on my face.

He grinned. “Deal. I’ll watch something else.”

I shook my head in mock disappointment. “I knew you wanted to sleep out here, so you could have the TV.”

He opened his mouth, but I walked away and over to the garbage.

“It’s a good thing I have my phone,” I added, so he didn’t think I wanted to stay out there with him. Because I really didn’t. Not to watch TV anyway.

I dumped out the contents of the hand vac and washed my hands. “Okay, I’m heading to bed then. See you in the morning?”

Liam almost looked sad, but after a second, he nodded. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

ELEVEN



The next morning, I got up early and made breakfast for Chloe and myself.

Things had been awkward between us at bedtime after spending a great evening together. I should have never taken the joke of stealing her popcorn as far as I did. We were both playing around, but when she arched her hips and discovered I was hard for her, all the fun was sucked out of the air.

I was ready to apologize, but she cut me off from saying anything more. I'd gotten the impression she wanted to drop the whole thing, so I had. Sometimes, people needed a little time to digest things before they were ready to talk about stuff. I was planning to say I was sorry after we both felt less awkward.

And this morning, I was hoping we could start fresh with a new day. I figured the best way to start a vacation was with caffeine and food.

"What smells so good?"

I spun around from the stove to see Chloe standing a few feet away. I hadn't heard her at all.

I smiled. "Coffee, bacon, and eggs."

I held my breath, waiting for her approval.

"Sounds great. I am definitely starting with coffee."

"Have at it. The rest of breakfast will be done soon."

Chloe poured herself a cup and sat down at the dining room table. “So, what’s on the agenda today?”

“I looked at the weather this morning. It’s going to be warmer than last night, but it will cool off in the evening again. We can go and check out the nearest town. It’s on the smaller side, but I think it has some shops if you want to look. And there is a state park we can visit to go hiking, and there is also another town farther away with a historic district. Or we can stay here and finish our movie and go in the hot tub again.”

She tapped her fingers against her mug a couple of times. “I’m not sure about hiking, but I wouldn’t mind walking around town and checking out the local shops. It might be fun.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll get ready as soon as we eat.”



We got to town about an hour and a half later.

Chloe, who’d had her face in her phone for the last five minutes, looked up. “I was just looking online, and this town has quite a few places for its size. They even have a winery. We definitely need to go there before we head back to the cabin.”

“Should we do that first?”

“Since it’s morning, I’m going to go with no.”

I chuckled.

“I would like to go to one of the bookstores and check out the gift store. Is that okay with you?” Chloe asked.

“I’m down for anything. Let me just find a place to park.”

Thankfully, the main street in the town had most of the businesses, so we could get out and walk. We would have to drive to the winery though.

The first stop was a bookstore. Once we were inside, Chloe took off, as if she’d been there before. Meanwhile, I browsed the aisles.

I wasn't a big reader even though I had tried many times in the past. My brother had liked to read, and my parents had made comments when I was growing up, asking why I couldn't be a reader too.

I had tried sci-fi, fantasy, suspense, and horror. I had even tried a romance book after the urging from a girlfriend, but I could never get into it. It wasn't that the books weren't good; I would just rather be doing stuff than reading about doing stuff. I had been a very active kid, and I thought my parents had gotten overwhelmed by it sometimes.

I wandered over to the medical section since I didn't know what else to look at, and that was where Chloe found me, thumbing through an anatomy book, when she was ready to leave.

Next, we went to a gift shop. I found this stuff much more interesting.

"Oh my God," Chloe said. "Liam?"

"Coming," I said from one aisle over and set down the item I had been looking at.

"No, stay there," she said quickly.

"Okay."

She peeked her head around the corner and smiled. "Close your eyes and hold out your arms."

I was already wondering why she hadn't wanted me to go over to her aisle, and now, I was quite curious.

"You're not going to hurt me, are you?" I joked.

"Nope. Just the opposite."

I had no idea what the opposite of hurting me would be in a store, but I wasn't going to find out until I did what she'd said.

I closed my eyes and held out my hands.

"Move your arms out farther," she said, closer to me now.

I did as she'd asked. "How's that?"

"Good." I could hear the smile in her voice. "You ready?"

“As I’ll ever be.”

She plopped something in my arms. It was large but not overly heavy for how big it was. I touched it with my hands. It was soft, and I was able to squeeze it.

“Open your eyes.”

When I did, I saw I was holding a huge kernel of popcorn, and I burst out laughing.

“It’s a pillow.” Chloe laid her head on it.

Now, I understood what she’d meant by the opposite of hurting me. She lifted her head, and I squished it to me. It would be comfortable to lay one’s head on.

“I can’t believe you found this.”

“Me neither. I thought, this way, we wouldn’t have to fight over popcorn anymore. You could have your very own ginormous kernel all to yourself.”

“Ha-ha. You’re funny.” I was giving her crap for her teasing me, but I was secretly very happy. The fact that she was making a joke out of last night let me know she had no hard feelings for what had happened between us.

“Do you want me to put it back?” she asked me. “I still want to look around some more.”

“Nah, I haven’t been over in that aisle yet.”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

Ten minutes later, she found me at the register with the popcorn pillow sitting on the counter.

Her mouth fell open. “You’re really buying that?”

I smiled at her. “Heck yeah. It’s my souvenir from our weekend together.”

The grin on her face was worth the ridiculous price I paid for fabric and stuffing.

TWELVE



CHLOE

About the time we got back to the cabin, the sky began to darken. Our day out had been relatively warm and the sky blue, so the change in weather seemed to come from out of nowhere.

“Wow. It’s too early for it to be dark yet,” I said as I leaned forward in my seat to look out the windshield in order to see the sky better. “It looks like a storm is coming.”

“That would explain the drop in temperature,” Liam said.

I gasped in excitement. “Do you think it might snow? I saw on the listing that this place can sometimes get snow.”

“I’m not sure. It’s not winter yet. It’ll probably just be a rainstorm.”

Bummed, I sat back in my seat. “Man, I was hoping we could light another fire and watch the snow fall outside while we drank hot cocoa.”

Liam laughed. “Did you even bring hot cocoa?”

“Yes, I did, doubting Thomas.”

“And you didn’t bust it out last night after we went in the hot tub, got locked out of the cabin, and froze our butts off?”

I shrugged. “Sorry. I didn’t even think of it last night. I was more focused on getting my sweats and fuzzy socks on. Besides, the wine kept us plenty warm.”

I looked away as my cheeks heated. *A little too warm.* Until everything had gone cold when Liam announced he wanted to

go to bed...alone.

“True that. Alcohol does have a way of getting blood flowing in the body.”

We made it to the top of the hill and parked next to the cabin.

I reached into my purse before I got out to make sure I had the key ready. It wasn't raining yet, but it was windy, and I didn't want to mess around, digging in my purse for the key.

As the two of us ran to the front door, a big gust of wind came over the hill and blew right through my outfit. I thought it was almost colder now than when we had gotten out of the hot tub, soaking wet, last night.

Once inside, I said, “I think it's another fire night.”

Liam rubbed his bare arms. “I agree.”

I shook my head and smiled. “I told you to wear something long-sleeved before we left this morning.”

“It was nice out,” he protested. He looked me up and down. “You didn't dress much warmer.”

He was right. My long-sleeved shirt was thin, and I was wearing sandals.

“That just means it's fuzzy-slippers time again.”

“I agree.”

I headed to my room and kicked off my shoes. I was pulling a sweater on when I heard the wind pick up, howling outside. The sky turned darker; it looked like the middle of the night, except it was still early evening.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I headed back to the main room.

I stopped to check the thermostat though to make sure the heat was running. I walked over to the front window and looked outside. “It's so windy. I can't believe it's not raining.”

“It could just be a windstorm.”

“Huh.” I shrugged. “Maybe it is. I'm still holding out for snow though.”

Liam laughed. “Not when it’s this windy. It’d be a blizzard.”

“True.” I turned around, admitting defeat in my hopes for the fluffy white stuff.

“So, since we’re probably not going outside again tonight, what do you want to do?” Liam asked. “And do you want red or white wine?”

“Crap. I left the wine I’d bought today out in the SUV.”

“Do you want me to go and get it?”

I looked out the window. “No,” I said with a sigh. “It’s not worth it. Maybe if it lets up, I’ll run out there. But we still have one more night here. We can drink it tomorrow too.”

Liam opened the cupboard. “In that case, you have two bottles of red left. So, it looks like that’s what you’re drinking.”

“Works for me.”

As he poured me a glass, he asked, “Do you want to watch a movie or play a game?”

His voice sounded tight, and I studied him as he handed me my wine.

I had a feeling he didn’t want to watch anything on the television again since we had almost kissed last night. Or since I had almost kissed him.

I didn’t want him to feel awkward, so I opted for a game instead. “I saw a deck of cards in one of the drawers. Know any good games?”

He grinned at me. “I sure do.”



We were in the middle of our third game of Six Card Golf when the cabin went black.

I yelped, unable to see anything around me.

I had lost power in the city before, but there were usually cars driving around and lights off in the distance, as only our local

grid had lost power. Out here in the middle of nowhere, there were no other lights, and the clouds must be covering the moon because there was nothing from that either.

“Chloe?”

“Yeah.”

“You okay?”

“Yes. Just a little creeped out, is all.”

Without the hum of appliances and electronics, the wind sounded very loud.

“Don’t worry; I’ll protect you.” I could hear the humor in his voice, but I was too nervous to laugh.

“Maybe it’s a good time to start that fire.”

“Right.” Light suddenly appeared as Liam unlocked his phone. “I wish I had done that when we first got back.”

“Me too, but I kind of forgot once we got inside, changed clothes, and started playing our game.”

“Well, there’s no time like the present.” He motioned for me to come closer. “Can you hold my phone, so I can see?”

I scrambled out of my chair. “Yes. Sorry.”

I could barely see his smile as I took his phone from him.

“It’s fine.” He set a piece of wood in the stove. “This will give us a little bit of light, and then maybe we can look for some flashlights and candles.”

“Good idea. You only have twenty-three percent battery left.” I bit my lip. It was the end of the day, and I usually charged my phone when I went to bed. I was betting I didn’t have much battery left either. I hoped that the lights going out was the worst thing that happened to us tonight.

Within minutes, Liam got the fire started, and the room lit up with the yellow glow. It was enough to see the living room, dining room table, and part of the kitchen, but it wouldn’t hurt to have something more than just the wood stove for light.

I handed him his phone. “I’m going to start looking for flashlights and candles.”

“I think I saw one flashlight in the kitchen.” Liam stood and brushed off his jeans. “I’ll go outside and get more wood while you look for more.”

My eyes bugged out of my head. “You’re going to go outside. Now?”

“Yes. We don’t know when the power is going to come back on. The stove isn’t just for light. It’s our only source of heat, and I don’t want us running out of wood. I need to get some from under the deck and bring it up to the back door. Also, I need to bring some inside in case it does decide to rain out there. The woodshed can’t keep out all the rain, especially with the wind the way it is.”

He was right, but I didn’t like the thought of him being out there in the dark. It was like a horror movie outside. I pictured an ax murderer coming along and killing Liam while I was inside, like a sitting duck.

Liam stepped forward and took one of my hands. “Hey, we’ll be okay. The cabin is small. The fire will keep us warm, and the walls will keep the wind out. The only thing we’ll suffer from is boredom because I don’t think we should be wasting battery life on playing cards. And I grew up in the Midwest with the greatest winter storms. This is small compared to that.”

I nodded in agreement. He was right. And we were in a safe location. I doubted there was anyone outside, waiting to hurt us.

I squeezed his hand. “Okay. Do you need my help with anything?”

“No. You just look around for other sources of light. If you find some candles, maybe we can finish our game of cards after all.”

I smiled. “Deal.”

Liam went to his suitcase and pulled out a light jacket. I doubted it would do much, but it was better than a T-shirt.

Then, he grabbed the only flashlight we had found so far and went to the sliding glass door.

He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and opened it before heading out into the night. Thirty seconds later, the door opened again, and he practically threw the wood on the ground before going back for more.

Meanwhile, I grabbed my phone, and I went into the kitchen. I started opening every cupboard there was in hopes that I would find something. I had been right about my phone. My battery was low—even lower than Liam’s—and it would be impossible to charge with no electricity.

I found a smaller flashlight in one of the drawers, but it wouldn’t offer too much light. Still, it was better than nothing.

I abandoned the kitchen and went to the bathroom. I didn’t have high hopes, but maybe the owners had put some candles in there for romance.

There were less cupboards in the bathroom, and it didn’t take me long to find absolutely nothing.

Next, I went to the bedroom. I could already feel the cold seeping through the walls, and I decided I’d better look for extra blankets in the closet along with sources of light.

The closet was pretty bare, but there were two extra blankets. And behind those blankets were two jar candles.

I was more excited than I should have been because two candles weren’t going to do much for us. But at least it was something.

I threw the blankets on the bed and took the candles out to the main room to light them.

THIRTEEN



I had brought up more than enough wood to last us for the night. I was about to head inside when I felt the first few drops of rain. Or what I assumed were drops.

The wind was blowing so hard that the rain felt like someone was throwing pellets at my cheeks.

And now that I knew it was starting to rain, I went down for one more load. The wood shed up on the deck was full, but it wouldn't hurt to bring another load inside, especially so we would have plenty of dry wood for the stove.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to go under the deck, I noticed that the light from the flashlight didn't reach as far. Another sign that the rain was going to make things more difficult. It was already hard enough to see without any lights or the moon.

I moved the flashlight to my armpit, just like I had done all the other times I came down for wood, so I could see and still use both my hands. But this time, as I bent over to get under the deck, my foot hit a patch of wet grass, and I slipped.

The flashlight and my body went flying. I landed on my back with a loud thud. I took inventory of my body, and while my spine had taken a hit, I was fairly confident I was okay. I hadn't hit my head or lost consciousness, and nothing felt broken.

A few raindrops hit my face while I decided it was safe to roll over and get up again, and I knew I didn't have much time before there was a full-on storm.

I looked around for the flashlight and noticed it had rolled down the hill a few feet. The hill was steep on the best days, but in bad weather, it wouldn't be the greatest to walk down. But if I slid on my butt, it would be manageably safe, and I had more fear for walking around in the dark than I did for going down the hill a bit.

It took me about two minutes to get the flashlight, and I wondered what I had been so worried about. Clenching it in my hand brought me some relief, especially now that I could shine the light up the hill to orient myself better.

I swept the landscape with the light and saw I wasn't too far from the deck. I just needed to get back on my feet and up there. Thankfully, it was still sprinkling, so I wasn't really wet, but I was getting cold. My fingers were going numb, and I wished I had looked around for gloves before coming outside.

I pushed myself to my knees carefully, still making sure that I hadn't hurt anything in my fall. I seemed to be good, so I planted my feet, ready to stand.

But when I put the pressure on my legs to get up, my shoes slipped, and I slid down the embankment.

Only this was not a controlled slide, so I couldn't stop myself. The only thing I could hold on to was the flashlight, as I wasn't close to trees or any other large object to grab. The best I could do was relax my body, so if I crashed into something, I would hopefully minimize my injuries.

Fortunately for all my bones, I landed in the creek. Unfortunately for my internal temperature, I was now wet from head to toe.

I knew I needed to get out of the water as soon as possible and get inside before hypothermia set in. A common misconception was that it took freezing temperatures to get hypothermia, which wasn't true. Now that I was wet and the wind was blowing, I was very susceptible to the condition.

The creek, which had been moving slowly last night, was now picking up speed, thanks to the wind. But the jutting rocks I had warned Chloe to be careful of if we went swimming

actually came in handy, as I was able to grab one before I moved too far downstream.

I threw the flashlight onto the bank and pulled myself out of the water. It probably sounded odd, but it was even colder outside the water than it was in, and I had to force myself to get up when I wanted to lie down and not move.

Using the flashlight, I noticed that I had moved downstream from the cabin, but the good thing was, the land was a little flatter, and there were more trees around. I suspected I was no longer on the property, and that was why trees hadn't been cleared from the land.

Using the trunks, I pushed myself up further and further until I was at the same level as the deck. I considered going around to the front of the cabin, but I calculated both routes and concluded that the deck route was shorter and faster.

Although I could have been wrong since I was starting to get tired. Exhaustion was an early sign of hypothermia, as was confusion. I didn't feel confused yet, but that could just be because my brain wasn't working like it should.

I struggled forward, against the wind, and when I reached the bottom stair of the deck, I fell to my knees. I laid my head down on the upper stair for a second because I wanted to go to sleep. Just a little nap, and then I could wake up with more energy.

Part of me knew that was a bad idea, and I sat up. My teeth were barely chattering at this point.

Using the last of my strength, I did the only thing I could think of. I heaved the flashlight up to the top of the stairs and hoped that Chloe would hear it and investigate.

I was pretty sure there was no way I was getting up to the sliding glass door on my own.

FOURTEEN



Boom.

I jumped as the loud sound of something landing on the deck scared me.

I had been pacing the living room, wondering where Liam was up until then. It had been a while since I'd finished lighting the candles and putting the wood next to the stove, and I wondered what was taking him so long.

Our phones had also died while I was waiting, so I now had no idea what time it was or how many minutes had passed.

At one point, I looked outside and saw his flashlight moving in the dark, so I knew he was still out there. But that had been some time ago.

And my fear of a stranger being outside had returned, especially now with the added pings of the rain hitting the windows.

I cautiously went to the sliding glass door and looked outside, scared a creepy face was going to pop up in my view.

But there was no one.

Instead, I saw a beam of light on the floor of the deck.

Is that Liam's flashlight? I scanned the area. Where is Liam?

My heart started pounding, as I knew something was wrong.

Bracing myself for the cold, I opened the door.

"Liam?" I called out.

I turned my head slowly from side to side, trying to listen for him to answer.

When I didn't hear anything, I stepped out farther and yelled his name louder.

Suddenly, I heard a noise. I wasn't sure if it was my name or what, but it was coming from below.

I ran to the flashlight, picked it up, and shone it down below.

"*Liam*," I screamed when I saw him.

He was at the bottom of the stairs. His face was pale, and his hair looked wet.

I scrambled down to the bottom of the stairs, almost forgetting how cold it was, worried that he had injured himself somehow.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

"Cold," he said. "Fell. In the. Creek."

"Oh God." *Poor Liam*.

I looked up the stairs and back at Liam. He had several inches on me and who knew how many pounds.

"I can't carry you up there. If I help, can you walk?"

He seemed to think about it, and then he nodded.

After what felt like forever, he finally made it to his feet. He wrapped an arm around me and clasped the other to the railing.

"Ooh," I couldn't help saying.

He was wet and freezing against me, which was a surprise because it was already cold outside.

"Okay. One foot at a time. I'll go as slow as you need me to." Inside, I prayed he would be able to go fast. I worried there would be two of us outside, dying from hypothermia.

Liam nodded and took his first step.

"Good job. Keep going."

Using the same foot, much like a kid who'd just started walking on the stairs, he went up another. It was a little

awkward, but if it worked, I was all for it.

The closer we got to the top, the more his body seemed to rely on muscle memory instead of pure brain power, and he moved a little faster.

I was beginning to feel optimistic that he'd be okay once we got inside.

When we reached the cabin, I realized I had left the door open and winced. All that warm air from inside had escaped, and the cold wind had infiltrated the inside. I could only hope that the fire hadn't been snuffed out.

At least I didn't have to try and open the door, and I didn't have to worry we'd been locked out again.

"Tiny step inside," I told Liam just in case he'd forgotten.

Finally, we were safely inside, and I quickly spun around to slam the door closed and lock it.

I also pulled the shades closed that we previously hadn't bothered with, hoping that would help keep some cold outside.

Getting up those stairs hadn't been good for Liam though, and he slid to the floor.

I leaned down and shook him. He wasn't shivering, which wasn't a good sign.

"Liam, come on. We need to get you changed."

He made a sound that could have been a moan or a grunt, but he didn't move.

"Shit."

I jumped to my feet and put my hands to my temples.

"Think, Chloe. Think." I looked down. "It sure would be nice to have a paramedic right now."

Liam didn't laugh at my joke, but I didn't really blame him.

I clapped my hands together. "Okay, I can do this."

I wasn't a paramedic, but I did work in the medical field. I'd had to do six years of college to become a pharmacist. I knew that I had to get Liam warm to fight off hypothermia, and the

best way to do that was to get him out of his wet clothes and warm him up.

I sprinted for the couch and shoved it as close to the wood stove as I could without it catching on fire. Then, I threw off the cushions and pulled out the hideaway bed that Liam had slept on last night.

It only had a sheet and one blanket on it, so I ran to my bedroom and grabbed the others I had found in the closet earlier. I also went back for the comforter from the bed just to make sure things would be extra warm.

I brought the last blanket in the cabin—the one that had been on my bed—over to Liam and laid it out beside him. Then, I quickly got to work, getting his wet clothes off, which seemed to take forever.

It was hard enough to get wet clothes off myself, like after swimming, but to do it on another person who wasn't helping was almost impossible. I was sweating by the time I pulled off his boxers—his last item of clothing.

“Sorry, Liam,” I said as I rolled him on the hard floor onto the blanket. It probably didn't feel too good. But once he was on the blanket, I used that to pull him over to the bed. “Holy crap, you are heavier than you look.”

I did consider the fact that I might not be able to get him into the bed, which would suck because the floor was cold. But I would make do if I had to.

Before I attempted to wake him, I grabbed one of our beach towels and dried off his body and hair the best I could. I used as much of the fabric as I could when I got to his groin because it felt wrong to touch and see him naked when he was out of it.

I bit my lip as I studied Liam and the bed. I was going to need to wake him up a little to get him up onto it.

I crouched down beside him and sat him up. “Liam. Liam, I need your help.”

He groaned.

“Yes, Liam, wake up. I just need you to get up on the bed for me, please. I can’t do it without you.”

I placed his hands on the bed, so he could feel it. And then, although I felt bad, I smacked his cheeks a couple of times.

“Come on, Liam. You can do it.”

I put my hands under his ice-cold butt to shove him up and show him he needed to get up, and thankfully, he helped me get him to the top.

I collapsed beside him, as I was completely out of steam at this point.

Turning my head, I saw that Liam’s eyes were closed once again, and we were lying sideways.

“Goddammit, Liam. Help a girl out, please,” I teased because it was the only thing that made me feel better.

I literally had to stand on the bed to get him turned, so I could put him under the covers.

Once he was exactly where I wanted him, I went over to the fire and put another log in. I wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to do, but I didn’t want it to burn out while we were sleeping.

I then picked up Liam’s soaked clothes and threw them in the bathtub. Next, I stripped out of my own damp clothes and quickly hung them on the side of the tub. I had to remove my underwear, too, because it had gotten wet when I accidentally sat in a puddle while moving Liam to the blanket.

I considered going to my room for another pair, but I had already wasted enough time. I needed to get to Liam and help him warm up.

He was shivering when I reached him, which was a good sign because he hadn’t really been doing that by the time we got inside earlier. But I knew he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

I pulled back the covers, braced myself for contact, and slipped underneath.

“*Eek.*”

Liam was freezing, and I instinctively jerked away from him, but I knew I had to prevail because he was starting to shiver now. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to plaster my body to his and wrapped an arm over his chest. I knew the best way to warm him up was body heat, but it was tough at first. I imagined it would be similar to lying next to an icicle.

I pulled the blankets up as far as I could without cutting off our breathing and closed my eyes. I pictured the hot sun beating down on me as I tried to concentrate on something else, hoping to block out the cold. It must have worked because, eventually, I fell asleep.

FIFTEEN



CHLOE

I was in the middle of a really good dream. A really *great* dream.

Liam and I are fighting over popcorn again, but this time, when he falls between my legs, he doesn't freeze up.

He rolls us, so we are face-to-face on our sides. He looks me in the eyes as he slides his hand up my side, and I hold my breath in anticipation.

I don't know how it happened, but our clothes are suddenly gone.

That was the beauty of a dream. I didn't have to worry about a pesky thing like getting undressed.

Liam draws my leg over his hip and rubs his dick over my clit. With each pass of his cock, I grow wetter, and I want him inside me. I've been thinking about what it would be like to have sex with him for years, and I don't want to wait any longer.

"Liam, please," I beg as he buries his face in my neck.

I don't have to translate what I'm asking him for. He just knows.

He cups my ass and positions his head at my opening before he thrusts inside me.

And that was when Liam literally made my dreams come true.

My eyes flew open as everything came rushing back to me. The storm, Liam falling in the creek, me getting us both naked to warm him up with body heat.

I should have made a pit stop in the bedroom for underwear because, now, Liam was inside me. I didn't know what time it was, but it was dark, and the storm continued to rage outside.

"Liam," I said, trying to get his attention.

I didn't know if he was conscious or still out of it, and I didn't want him to be worried if he came to.

Something must have registered because he rolled me onto my back with him over me, and I caught a glimpse of his face. His eyes were half-open, as if he were in a place between sleep and awake.

I didn't really have enough time to give much more thought to the situation because he slid out of me before driving deep back into my core.

"Oh, God." He was large and filled me full, his cock hitting every nerve ending inside my pussy.

I maybe should have tried harder to wake him, but instead I wrapped my arms around his neck, as I could do no more than hold on and enjoy the ride.

There was no finesse to our two bodies coming together. Liam was acting on pure, raw instinct as he thrust into me, over and over again as his body raced toward its completion. It felt wrong to let him fuck me, but it also felt so right. I didn't know if I would ever be forgiven for the desire that swelled in my body, but I couldn't stop it if I tried.

Liam's dick stretched me with each stroke as he caressed my most sensitive areas within me. One would think that there would be no orgasm for me with Liam not conscious enough to think about my satisfaction. But I was getting closer and closer to exploding, and rather than having to work for an orgasm like I did with most men, I was having to work hard to hold this one off.

It was a losing battle. There was a sexy, tattooed man I had wanted forever touching me from head to toe as sounds of pleasure escaped his lips. Pleasure he was getting from my body, and I couldn't help but be turned on from knowing this. It also didn't hurt that he knew what he was doing in bed, even half-conscious.

His muscles strained, and his hand on my butt lifted me closer to him. He was close, and I shut my eyes and waited for his orgasm to pass.

But with one last push, he held himself there as he rotated his pelvis over mine, his pubic bone rubbing my clit. With a loud moan, he came inside me, and the dam I had been holding broke as well.

I shuddered and cried out under him as my pussy contracted around his cock, trying to take in everything it had to give.

Liam collapsed on top of me, and soon his loud, deep breathing tickled my ear. He was already back asleep.

I pushed on his shoulders, but instead of rolling off of me, he took us both to our sides again. He enveloped me in his arms, and my head rested on his shoulder.

He was still inside me, but I assumed as his erection eventually waned, he would slip out. I didn't try to get out of his hold. I wanted let myself enjoy being held by him for just a little bit longer.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who feel back asleep.



LIAM

I was dreaming that I was wet and struggling to get up the hill and back to the cabin. Back to Chloe. But gradually, the landscape around me changed from wind and cold to stillness and heat, and as I slowly woke up, I realized I was no longer outside.

I was in a bed, dry, and surrounded by warmth. Heavy covers were over me, and a soft figure was pressed against me with our bodies wrapped around the other. It was the best I'd felt in a long time, and I didn't want to get up. Then, as morning wood set in, I realized the hottest part of me was my erection. It was also the only part of me that wasn't dry. There was only one thing that was hot and wet and felt that good, and I froze as all traces of sleep left me.

I was inside Chloe. More specifically my cock was buried inside her pussy.

Her hand ran up my arm and over my back. "I'm awake too."

I opened my eyes to check if it was still night, but the fire gave off just enough light for me to see her face. "Did I hurt you?"

Having no idea how the two of us ended up naked with our private parts practically fused together, my first worry was for her.

She shook her head. "No." Her voice was firm as if she wanted me to know she meant what she said.

I swallowed. "Do you want me to pull out?"

She shook her head again. "No." This time, her voice was a little breathy.

It dawned on me that she was very wet. There was a chance it wasn't all from her desire, and I closed my eyes. "Did we already have sex?" When I first woke up, I'd assumed that our bodies coming together had happened right before I gained consciousness, but I was now pretty sure that wasn't the case. "Did I...take advantage of you?"

A finger ran down my nose and over my lips. I looked at her face again.

"You were sort of in a trance, *but* you didn't take advantage of me. I feel guilty that I didn't try to stop you. It's possible I took advantage of you."

"Did you enjoy yourself?" I paused and darked to ask the next question. "Did you come?" I held my breath, knowing the chances were low that she did.

“Yes.” She looked away as if embarrassed. “But I tried not to.”

I moved right past my ego that felt the need to puff out its chest at the mere mention of getting Chloe off without me even trying to annoyance with myself making her feel like she had to deny herself pleasure. “For fuck’s sake, why?” I didn’t wait for an answer. It was pretty much a rhetorical question since she’d already explained the situation to me. “Did I come?” I laughed. “Of course I did. I can feel how wet you are from me.”

She nodded in confirmation.

Pushing her hair off her face, I met her eyes. “Don’t ever stop yourself from enjoying sex. Especially with me.”

I rolled us until she was on her back and I was between her legs.

“I want to make you come again.” She sucked in a breath as I kissed her jaw. “And this time, no holding back. No regrets.”

A soft moan slipped past her lips.

I shifted my weight, so I could cup her breast and take a nipple in my mouth without sliding out of her. She was so tight and wet; I didn’t want to leave.

Chloe’s nails dug into my arms, and her pussy clenched around my cock. Slowly, I began gently rocking back and forth inside her, wanting to build up her desire until she exploded all around me.

Her hands roamed my body, and when I felt her nails claw at my back, I knew it was time to pick up my pace.

Kissing my way up her body and over her neck, I stopped when I reached her mouth. This would be our first kiss, and for some reason, I wanted it to be special.

I brushed my mouth against hers. I licked the seam of her lips, and when she opened, I slipped my tongue inside.

She moaned as she tightened her grip on my back, and I gradually slid my cock out and back in.

“You feel amazing,” I told her after I broke our kiss.

Placing a hand under her ass, I lifted her, and I thrust inside her over and over again. I wanted to get in as deeply as I could. I wanted her to feel me everywhere and know I was the last one inside h

I kissed Chloe's neck and told her, "Tell me what you need."

"You," she sighed. "I need you."

Then, me she would have.

With my arm completely underneath her, I gripped her hip in my hand as I pounded into her. I felt as though I should be getting tired, but Chloe's cries fueled me on, as if they were giving me strength.

And when her inner muscles were squeezing so hard that I thought she might push me out, I knew she was close.

"Come on, Chloe. Let me feel you. Come for me, please."

Her nails dug into my shoulders, and she threw her head back. A loud cry came from deep in her chest as she exploded in my arms.

"Fuck yes," I hissed, and with two more strokes, I buried myself deep and came inside her.

SIXTEEN



The next time I woke, the cabin was no longer dark, and I was alone and naked on the pullout bed.

I slowly sat up to look around and assess my situation.

The cabin was still and quiet, and I assumed the power was still out. And even though it was day, there wasn't any sun. I rotated my body, so I could look out the window. I saw that the sky was cloudy, and there was...

"It snowed," I exclaimed.

I jumped out of bed and ran to the window, ignoring the cold floor on my feet and the cool air on my bare skin. The snow was just a light dusting, but it was still snow. I also noticed the wind had died down, but it still didn't look welcoming outside.

"Ahem." A throat was cleared behind me, and I turned around, feeling awkward.

Liam stood a few feet away, dressed in sweats and a T-shirt.

I quickly ran for the bedroom to find some clothes. "Excuse me," I said, not being able to meet his eyes.

I couldn't believe we'd had sex. Twice. It all seemed surreal at this point with everything that had happened. And I was unsure of what to say to Liam once I came out of the bedroom.

First thing, I had to find clothes before I figured out what I was going to say to him. I was so fixed on getting dressed that I almost missed the alarm clock blinking away at me.

"We have power?"

“I was going to tell you before you ran away,” Liam said from the other room.

I hadn’t realized I had talked that loud.

“Sorry,” I yelled back, and then I winced.

Sorry. What the hell am I sorry for?

I have sex with the man, and I turn into a dork.

I had plugged in my phone next to the bed last night so that when the electricity came back on, it would charge. I checked, and my phone was at sixty percent, so it couldn’t have been too long since the power had returned. But it didn’t matter. It was back.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I told him.

A little time alone to clear my head might do me some good.



After I was dressed, I decided the best thing to do with my time was clean up after everything that had happened the night before.

Liam had already wrung out his clothes in the bathtub and hung them up to dry, so I went to work on fixing the beds. I put the blanket and comforter back on the bedroom mattress, and I started changing the sheets on the pullout bed.

“What are you doing?” Liam asked me from the kitchen. Now that we had electricity, he was cooking.

I thought it was obvious. “Changing the sheets. There are a few extra sets in the bedroom closet.”

He smiled. “I can see that. But what I want to know is, why?”

I went with the obvious answer first. “You fell in the creek last night and then slept in it. Who knows what you brought to bed with you?”

He pointed his spatula at me. “Good point.”

“Also...” I shrugged. “You know...”

Liam's brow furrowed. "What? Did I cut myself or something? Did I bleed on the sheets?" He held up his arms and inspected them. Then, his shirt was lifted, and he looked at his chest and abdomen. He put his thumbs in the waistband of his sweats when I stopped him.

"No, you didn't cut yourself."

"Then, I don't understand."

I rolled my eyes. "We had sex, Liam. Without a condom. Which we should probably talk about."

He winked at me. "That's right; we did have sex. Several times, I believe."

I put a hand on my hip and stared at him, a deadpan look on my face. "So, you did know what I was referring to?"

He grinned. "Sure did. But you were acting shy all of a sudden. I'm still Liam, and you're still Chloe. You don't have to be weird around me."

"Right," I agreed, forcing a smile.

He was trying to make me feel better, but suddenly, I was disappointed. I didn't know what I'd expected. That Liam and I would be a couple, just like that? It was foolish thinking. Us ending up in bed together was highly unusual, and no way had Liam ever insinuated that he wanted a relationship with me.

But I did not want him to know that I was hurt, so I quickly moved on from what had happened. I used changing the sheets as an excuse not to look at him, and I used food as a way to talk about something else.

"What are you making over there? Did any of the food spoil?"

"Nope. Since we didn't touch the fridge or freezer, most of the cold stayed in. Food's still good. I'm making eggs again. I hope that's okay."

"As long as you're going to make coffee too," I said in my attempt to tease.

"Already done. Didn't you smell it?"

"I didn't. Someone should take away my coffee card."

Liam chuckled, and I finished making his bed, folding it back up and putting the couch cushions on top of it. There was a hamper in the bathroom, so I put the dirty sheets in there along with the blanket I'd used to drag him across the room to the couch.

I smiled. A real smile this time. I was going to have to give him a lot of crap for what I had done for him last night.

SEVENTEEN



I set the eggs down in front of Chloe and studied her. Things had been a little weird between us this morning, and I wasn't referring to me catching her looking out the window, naked.

I feared she was having regrets about us having sex last night. Maybe I should have stayed in bed this morning and cuddled with her. I had wanted to get up and clean up after everything she had done for me, but it was possible I'd made the wrong decision.

I got my own plate of food and sat next to her. "Just so you know, I was not ignoring you earlier. I get tested regularly." I smiled. "And not because I sleep with a bunch of people. I am in constant contact with patients who are bleeding, and since I'm getting tested for HIV and hepatitis, I get checked for everything else too. Also, I haven't been with anyone in about a month."

Chloe started coughing and put her hand to her mouth. "A whole month?"

I frowned. "Not long enough? I mean, I didn't exactly plan last night."

She waved her hand in front of her. "No, I know. It's just... well, I haven't been with someone in about a year."

I smiled. "It's okay. I won't judge you," I teased.

The corner of her mouth turned up at my joke. "I also don't have any diseases, and I am on the pill. I already took my pill this morning."

I took a drink of my coffee. “I honestly wasn’t worried, but I appreciate you being candid.”

“You weren’t?”

“No. I trust you.”

“That’s pretty amazing of you after what Tracy did to you.”

I lifted a shoulder. “Yeah. Don’t get me wrong. I was cynical at first, but Tracy doesn’t speak for all women, and our relationship doesn’t define every relationship. My parents aren’t the greatest, but when it comes to one another, they’ve always had each other’s backs, and they’re still married to this day.”

“Do you see them often?”

“About once a year. They’re in Nebraska, which is fine by me. They were always strict and judgmental. I think I became a tattoo artist to piss them off. At first anyway.” I shook my head at the memory of them judging me after I had come home with ink. They were close-minded then, and nothing had changed since. “My brother was more mainstream for them. He went to college and became an engineer. But even Jordan wasn’t my parents’ biggest fan. And now that he’s gone, I feel like I don’t have much reason to see them. At least I had my brother to visit when I went back home in the past.”

She put her hand on mine. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

I rubbed my thumb over her knuckles. “Thank you. We were never very close, but I still miss him sometimes.”

“Do you miss doing tattoos?”

“Sometimes. But I really love what I do. I have thought about seeking out a shop to do some part-time work, but I don’t know if it would be worth it. All my clientele was back in LA, and I don’t know if I could build up a new one, working a few evenings and weekends here and there.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to try. If that’s what you really want.”

I smiled. “Who knows?” I saw the very top of her tattoo peek out of her shirt. “Maybe I will look into some places and see if anyone would give me some chair time.” I pulled my hand

away from hers, so I could finish my food. “Anyway, we don’t leave until tomorrow, but I don’t think we’ll be doing anything today. The ground is icy, and with the way the wind was last night, there might be trees down.”

“I know you like to be active, but I am perfectly happy with sitting inside all day, staying warm, and relaxing by the fire.” She looked over at the pile of wood. “I think we have logs to last us a week.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, maybe I didn’t have to bring so much inside, but we didn’t know when we’d have heat again.”

“This is true.” She shuddered. “I am glad that we don’t have to worry about that. It was so cold last night.”

“Uh...yeah...speaking of that, thank you for everything. You know you saved my life last night, right?”

She blushed. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” I looked over at the couch. “How did you get me on the bed anyway?”

“I dragged you on a blanket and smacked your face until you woke up enough to help me get you on the bed.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re joking.”

She smiled over her coffee cup she’d just picked up. “Nope.”

“I do not remember that at all.” I shook my head. “You’re amazing.”

She blushed again. “That I agree with.”

EIGHTEEN



One would think that being stuck in the house all day would make the time move more slowly. But that didn't seem to be the case.

My mom had called me the night before when she heard about the storm, so I called her back after breakfast. We talked for a while, and I told her about my trip. I didn't tell her the severity of what had happened with Liam because I knew she would worry about me even though the storm was over.

After lunch, Liam worked out while I read a book on my phone in the bedroom. Watching him exercise had been too distracting. However, I must have been tired because before I knew it, I was waking up with my phone in my hand.

I was still groggy and didn't feel like getting up yet, so I got on social media and spent way too much time scrolling through posts. And soon, it was time for dinner.

When I walked out of the bedroom, I didn't see Liam anywhere. I called his name for some reason even though I could see all four walls of the place. I checked the bathroom even though the door had been open when I left the bedroom, and I looked out back. He had talked about how he had brought up too much wood, and I checked to see if he was taking some back down.

He wasn't on the deck, but I did notice the sun was out, and the snow had melted. It looked nice out there, but I could tell by how cold the glass was that it wasn't warm outside.

I was just about to check the front when Liam came through the door, carrying the box filled with wine we had picked up yesterday.

“I was wondering where you were,” I told him.

He kicked the door closed with his foot and carried the case into the kitchen. “I thought we could have wine with dinner, and then we could finish our movie.”

“Good idea. Thanks for bringing it in. When I was looking for you, I thought maybe you had gone into the hot tub again,” I told him with a laugh because the thought was ridiculous. I didn’t think he’d be that daring and foolish.

“Oh yeah, I did that while you were taking a nap.”

My mouth dropped open.

Liam chuckled. “What?”

“It’s freezing outside.”

“Technically, it’s over forty degrees out there, and since freezing is thirty-two or below, it’s not freezing.”

I shook my head. “You almost died of hypothermia last night.”

He shrugged. “Then, what better way to warm up than to get into water that is one hundred degrees?”

“You’re nuts.”

He laughed. “I prefer the term *adventurous*. Maybe I’ll go out there again after we eat, and I’ll take you with me.”

“I’d rather watch the movie.” I had been out in the cold enough last night to last me a long while.



Liam and I cooked together again, ate, and cleaned up the kitchen. I excused myself to the bathroom, and when I came out, Liam had already turned on the TV and pulled up the movie.

But when I walked over to the couch, I saw he was sitting back against the arm with his legs spread out, which didn't leave me much room to sit next to him. I wasn't sure if that was his way of telling me to go and sit somewhere else or if he didn't realize how much room he was taking up.

He'd seemed to be into me when we were having sex last night, but maybe he was worried that if we did it again, I would get the wrong idea.

I knew I was overthinking the situation, and I needed to give my brain a break, so I asked myself what I would do if we *hadn't* had sex last night. The answer was easy.

I nudged one of his feet with my knee. "Hey, couch hog, mind making room for me?"

He sat up, grabbed my hand, and pulled me down next to him. "You don't have to sit on the end when lying down is much more fun."

A grin spread across my face as I turned toward the television with Liam at my back, so we could both watch the movie. "If you say so," was what I said though, so I didn't come across as a huge dork.

Liam hit play, and we watched the movie for a little while until he started rubbing my hip with his thumb.

His touch was subtle at first, but soon, he was running his hand down my leg and up my side. He skimmed his fingers over my clothes-covered breast and down to my waist.

I almost felt like I was in high school again, like when my boyfriend and I used to make out in my parents' basement.

But I didn't want to just make out with Liam. I didn't want to go to first or second base. I wanted a home run.

I rolled, so I was facing him, and I kissed his neck. Just smelling him was a turn-on.

His hand wandered down to my ass, where he squeezed me and drew me toward him. I lifted my leg over his hip, so I could feel his dick between my legs.

We both groaned when our lower bodies made contact.

Liam pushed his chin down, so he could take my mouth. As we kissed, I slipped my hand up his T-shirt, so I could feel his skin. He was warm, and it reminded me of what he had felt like naked against me.

He pulled his mouth away and met my eyes. “I want to be inside you again.”

My reply was to slide off the couch, stand, and reach out my hand. He took it as he also stood, and he followed me into the bedroom.

I didn't bother with the lights because there was enough coming from the living room and down the hallway. Instead, my hands went right for his clothes and began to strip them off.

Liam smiled. “Someone is eager,” he said after I pulled his shirt over his head.

I pushed his jeans off his hips and grabbed his cock. “Is that a bad thing?” I asked coyly.

His length jerked in my hand. “Not even a little bit.” He fisted my top in his hand and yanked before he kissed me. Against my mouth with a smile, he said, “Except for the fact that you're not getting naked too.”

“I think I can change that.” I stepped back and pushed him hard enough to get him to fall back on the bed.

I leaned down and pulled his pants off his legs, and then I went to work on my own clothes. As I undressed, I kept my eyes on his body. He was incredibly sexy with his muscles and his tattoos. And now that he was naked, I could see that his tattoo over his groin was of none of the things I'd guessed.

It was a tribal tattoo that expanded across his lower abdomen.

And even though it wouldn't taste any different than the rest of his skin, I immediately knew I wanted to lick the entire design.

I kicked off my pants and climbed onto the bed between his legs. I kissed the point at the top of the tat and traced the rest of it with my tongue. I went to the left, then to the right, and came back in the middle. I pretended like I was going to go

back up to where I'd started, but I quickly veered down to his cock and sucked it in between my lips and down my throat.

"Holy...fuuuuck," Liam ground out.

I loved that I had taken him by surprise even though I thought it'd seemed obvious as to what direction I was heading with my mouth.

He was large, and I could only keep the entirety of him there for a bit before I needed to back off and let myself breathe.

And he seemed to notice. "Come here."

"No," I whispered and sucked him in again. If this was the only time we were together, I wanted to make him come, so I could taste him.

I got up onto my knees, so I could have better access and control, and I tuned out everything, except for giving Liam great head. I did make sure to listen to the sounds and movements he made, so I could figure out what he liked.

Despite him being large and more than a handful, he couldn't lie still when I paid extra-special attention to his crown. So, while I stroked him with my fist, I used my mouth to kiss, lick, and suck him there.

And when his body gave me all the signals that he was going to come, I pushed his head to the roof of my mouth, drew on it hard with my tongue, and wrapped it around the underside of his dick.

He shuddered so hard as he came that he almost pulled his cock from my mouth. It took a little additional effort to keep him there, but it was worth it.

When he finally lay still, I pushed my hair from my face and sat up with a satisfied smile.

NINETEEN



Basking in the glow of my BJ skills, I wasn't prepared for Liam to shoot upright, grab me under my arms, and pull me up his body until his face was between my legs.

"My turn," he said before he clasped his hands over my thighs and gave me a long, hard lick.

He held me there, so I couldn't get away if I tried. But I wasn't trying.

No one had gone down on me in a real long time, and just knowing it was Liam underneath me was a sure sign that my orgasm was headed toward me like a Shinkansen bullet train.

At first, I gripped the headboard because the pleasure from his mouth made me want to squeeze something. But within five minutes, I was holding on so that I wouldn't fall over because I could barely stay upright anymore.

"Oh God, that feels...so good." *Too good.* "Oh shit. Here, I—" I didn't finish my sentence as my climax hit so hard that it stole my breath.

As I came, Liam pushed his tongue against my clit, making sure my orgasm went on and on.

When I could no longer handle any pressure and became too sensitive, I started to roll off of his head. Liam yanked me down and over his body instead.

He kissed me long and deep, and I could taste myself on him. It was so sexy, knowing his mouth had touched me in such an intimate place.

As we kissed, his hands roamed my shoulders, my back, my ass, and my legs. He didn't rush anything. We simply enjoyed being close to one another.

I didn't know how long we lay there like that, but at some point, I did feel his dick nudging its way between my legs.

I lifted my head. "Oh, someone is ready to party again."

Liam smiled. "Yeah, he's kind of got a mind of his own. He likes to party, even when I want to sleep."

I laughed. "Yeah, I noticed."

He half-smiled and half-winced back at me.

I kissed him again. "It's really okay. If I had been afraid or unwilling in any way, I'm sure I would have been able to get you to roll off of me. Don't feel bad."

He planted a peck on my nose. "If you say so."

"I do say so," I said with a firm look.

"In that case..."

"In that case what?"

"I'm going to be inside you again in about a minute, so if you want me to put on a condom, now's your chance."

I fake gasped. "You brought condoms to our weekend getaway? I am shocked."

"Well...I, um—I mean—I always carry condoms. You never know what's going to happen."

I lowered my lips, so they were just above his. "Smart man."

"I'd like to think so."

Liam took my mouth again as he spread my legs and pushed inside me. This time, I gasped for real and arched my back.

A hand ran up my side and thumbed my nipple. "Speaking of being on top, I think it's your turn to ride me." Another palm cupped my other breast. "I want to see your face as you come."



By morning, Liam had fucked me so many times that we slept in until lunchtime.

I had figured we'd spend our last day doing something like checking out the other town close by or going for a hike. Instead, we spent the whole day inside and did everything naked.

We finally finished our movie since we hadn't the night before. But I'd had to wrap myself in two blankets, so Liam would pay attention and not distract me with sex.

We cooked naked and went in the hot tub naked.

And then on our last night there, we went to bed together again. Naked.

Except, despite the exceptional sex, I couldn't fall asleep.

I was on my side, facing Liam, his arm around me, and I realized I hadn't been that content in a long time. But a part of me worried that everything would end when we left and went back to Hanover.

I realized that some of my fear was due to two things. One, I really liked Liam. I mean, like, *really* liked him. And two, whether it was the anniversary of Darren cheating or because seeing Liam brought up those memories, I was worried I was going to lose another good guy.

I knew now that Darren hadn't been a good guy, but at the time, I'd thought he was. And it still hurt because I always wondered if I was missing something. There must have been a reason Darren had slept with Tracy. What did Tracy have that I didn't? And to make it worse, Liam had also slept with Tracy. If I was missing that special quality, Liam would know.

Liam's arm moved, and he rolled me to my back. "What's wrong?"

"Uh..." I didn't think I had given anything away.

"What's wrong?" he asked again.

“How do you know something’s wrong?”

“You weren’t sleeping, so I guessed something was bothering you. Your answer confirmed I was right.”

“Hmm...I guess I walked right into that.”

He leaned forward and rubbed his nose against mine. “You can tell me, you know. I’m a really good listener, and I promise not to judge.”

I didn’t know if it was because we were going home tomorrow or if it was because it was dark and I couldn’t really see his face, but I decided to go for it.

“Am I lacking something?”

Liam got up and put his head on his hand so he could look down at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Over the years, I’ve wondered if the reason Darren cheated was because I was missing something. Did Tracy have something I didn’t? There had to be a reason he cheated on me with her. A reason he’s marrying her and not me.” I rubbed Liam’s arm as I talked, “And since you’re the only other person who’s had sex with me and Tracy, I figured you would know.” My hand paused. “Not that that’s why I slept with you, you know. I just realized all this tonight.”

“I know you wouldn’t use me as an experiment. And, no, Tracy didn’t have anything you don’t.” He collapsed down and rolled to his back. “In fact, she’s the one lacking things that you have.”

I smiled. “Ooh, do tell.”

He laughed. “You’re kind and thoughtful. You have a banging body.”

“In all honesty, so does Tracy,” I pointed out.

“She might look good, but she doesn’t have your warm heart. And I think that’s why Darren was attracted to her. Deep inside, he knew you were too good for him, and Tracy was more on his level. Let’s be honest—those two were meant for each other.”

I turned to my side, rested my head on Liam's shoulder, and rubbed his chest. "Not only are you sexy, but you are also wise."

He chuckled and put his hand over mine. He dragged it down to his hard length. "In that case, how about a celebratory fuck?"

I grinned. "What are we celebrating?"

"Getting rid of those two assholes."

I threw my head back and laughed. "I think that's an excellent idea."

TWENTY



Monday morning, Chloe and I packed our things and loaded my SUV to head back to Hanover. We'd only been at the cabin since Thursday evening, but it felt like we'd been there for weeks. And I meant that in the best way possible.

I put my palm on her thigh as she leaned back against the headrest and gazed out the window. She turned to me and smiled, resting her hand over mine. She looked back to the window, and I grinned. We didn't need to talk to each other as we rode home. Being in each other's presence was enough.

It wasn't a surprise that Chloe fell asleep on the drive. The sun was out, so it was warm in the SUV. Plus, we hadn't gotten much rest the night before.

I pulled into her driveway late in the morning, and she woke on her own.

"Are we here?" she asked with a yawn as she stretched her arms over her head.

I turned off the engine. "We are."

We exited my vehicle, and I helped her bring her things inside. We had a lot of food leftover from our trip, and we were splitting it. There was also the wine and other stuff we had bought when we went to town.

Chloe unlocked the door and came to an abrupt stop once she was inside.

"What's wrong?"

“Savannah,” she said through clenched teeth.

I was still in the doorway, so I couldn't see much from my point of view. “What did she do? Leave a stack of dirty dishes by the sink? Use your living room as her closet?” I snapped my fingers. “I know. She had a party and left a mess.”

Chloe looked at me. “Worse.”

I frowned. “What could be worse than someone trashing your home for a party you didn't even get to attend?”

She finally walked all the way inside. “She rearranged my things and moved her stuff into my house.”

I came in behind her and scanned the room. I'd only been in her house twice, so I didn't have a good memory of what it had looked like before.

“That chair isn't mine. That picture that she took the time to hang on the wall isn't mine.” She stomped over to her bookshelf and pointed. “All these bird figurines aren't mine. I said she could stay temporarily. It's been two months, and not only did she move her things in while I was out of town, but she also hasn't chipped in to help at all. No rent, no utilities. She barely even pays for food.”

Chloe was getting angrier, the more she spoke, and I didn't blame her. But I also didn't want her to do something she'd regret.

“Is Savannah here?”

“No. She's lucky, or I'd kill her.”

I winced. That was what I was afraid of.

“How about we finish bringing your stuff inside, and then we'll figure out where you go from there?”

Chloe looked over to where I was standing, still holding the cooler. “Oh my God. I'm sorry.” She motioned me toward the kitchen. “You can set it down on the counter.” She snatched up her luggage handle. “I'm going to put this in my room really quick.”

I nodded to let her know I understood and headed toward the kitchen. I opened the cooler and removed her half of the food. Once I had everything out, I started putting it away as Chloe came out of her room.

“You don’t have to do that, Liam.”

I ignored her as I opened the fridge. “So, what are you going to do for real?”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I hope you’re not really going to kill your roommate. So, what are you going to do?”

She snorted. “I don’t know. I feel bad, kicking her out, but my house is small, and I didn’t buy it with the intention of living with a roommate.”

“You can move in with me.”

Chloe laughed and smacked my arm. “You’re funny. Thanks for the laugh.”

Too bad I was half-serious even though I fully understood it was way too soon to move in together.

She put her hand on her hip. “No, I’m just going to have to sit Savannah down and talk to her. Calmly and rationally tell her that I have boundaries and that she just crossed a major one.”

I tried to think of all the people I knew to see if someone else might need a roommate. “I think I might have an idea.”

Chloe’s brow shot up. “Really? And you’re just telling me this now? I would have slept with you days ago if you had led with that.”

It was my turn to laugh. I kissed her on the cheek and grabbed the cooler off the counter. “Let me get back to you,” I said as I headed to the door, my mind on helping Chloe.

“Wait.”

I stopped in the living room and turned.

She rushed over to me, grabbed my face, and kissed me. “Thank you. And if you don’t come up with anything, it’s

okay. I'll still let you get in my pants." She looked away with a blush. "If you still want to, that is."

I grinned. "Of course I do. Just because the trip is over doesn't mean we are."

She turned her eyes back to me, and she smiled.

"I'd better go."

She patted my chest. "Right, right. Let me know what you find out."

I kissed her again. "Will do."

I hurried outside, put the cooler in the back, and grabbed my cell as I got behind the wheel.

"McNally."

"Hey, it's Liam."

"Hey, Liam. How was your trip?"

"Good. But I'm calling in my favor."

"Your favor?"

"Yeah. I took the cabin off your hands. Now, you owe me," I told him. Normally, I wouldn't expect anything in return, but this was for Chloe.

"What is it?"

"You have a younger sister, right?"

"Yeah," he said hesitantly. "She's a little young for you."

"What?" I frowned. "No. I don't want to date her."

"Oh. What do you want with her then?"

"I heard you talking a while ago. Does she still need a roommate?"

"Uh, I think she's looking for another woman to live with."

I sighed. "Not me, McNally. I know someone who needs a place."

"Oh." I could hear the smile in his voice. "Yeah, that would be great news for her."

“Good. Why don’t you find out when your sister is free? We can have the two ladies meet.”

“Will do.”

I ended the call and dialed Chloe. I couldn’t wait to give her the news that might lead to her getting her house back to herself.

TWENTY-ONE



CHLOE

I frowned at my phone. I had just left work for the day, and I had expected to see a message from Liam, but he hadn't texted me since that morning. I tried to call him at lunchtime, but he didn't answer or message me back. Then, I was busy all afternoon, and I hadn't had a chance to check if he'd responded until I was off work.

Not hearing from Liam was unusual. Since our trip, we talked every day and saw each other several times a week.

He'd successfully found a place for Savannah to live, and with her gone, he stayed over at my house quite a bit. We spent more nights together than apart, and tonight, we had plans.

Or I thought we did.

Liam had gotten off work before me, so I didn't understand why I hadn't heard from him. We were supposed to go to Davenport's for a drink later.

When I got home, I thought I'd see his SUV in my driveway, but it was empty. There was a car parked in front of my house, but I had never seen it before. I figured it was there for one of my neighbors, so I didn't even pay attention to the driver's door opening. I didn't even register the person coming up behind me as I walked to the front door.

"Chloe."

I stopped walking and frowned. The voice behind me sounded familiar, but there was no way it could be who I thought it was. I hadn't seen him in five years.

I slowly pivoted on one foot and sucked in a breath. “Darren.”

He smiled uneasily and raised his hand in a wave. “Hi.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He motioned toward my house. “Do you mind if we go in and sit?”

I didn’t want him in my home, but he had thrown me for a loop, so sitting down sounded like a good idea. “Fine, but don’t make yourself comfortable. You won’t be staying long.”

I turned my back to him before he could give me a response. There was no negotiating my terms.

I unlocked the door and let my ex enter my house. I immediately sat down. I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

Darren sat across from me but didn’t say anything.

“I’m waiting,” I said more sharply than was necessary, but I was already on edge because I hadn’t talked to Liam yet. Seeing Darren again was not what I needed right now.

He rubbed his hands together and lifted his eyes to mine. “I came to tell you, I’m sorry.”

“Excuse me?”

“Five years ago, I broke your trust and hurt you. And the worst part was, I never apologized. I want you to know that I am truly sorry. I should have never cheated on you. I should have come to you when I was having doubts about us.” He looked down. “I definitely should have talked to you when I realized I was falling in love with Tracy. At the time, I had a million excuses for why I had gone behind your back, but that was all they were—excuses. I should have told you I didn’t want to be together anymore. I was a coward.”

“Wow.”

He looked at me again.

A hundred emotions were flying around in my head. “Why now?”

He turned red and cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Um... Tracy and I...”

“Are getting married.”

His eyebrows flew up. “You know?”

“Yeah, Darren, it’s a small world, especially with social media.”

He nodded. “Right. Of course.” He cleared his throat again. “Tracy and I have been taking premarital classes and doing therapy, and you—and Liam—came up. Our therapist suggested that the two of us consider apologizing to the two of you, so we don’t bring any of the negativity into our marriage.”

“So, it’s like the twelve steps for a recovering alcoholic but instead for a recovering cheater.”

Darren winced, but he laughed. “I still miss your humor.”

I shook a finger at him. “Oh no, you don’t get to miss that.” I leaned forward. “Because you’re right. I wouldn’t have been happy if you had broken up with me, but it’s better than being cheated on. It’s better than wondering what I did wrong. What was wrong with me.”

“It was never about that—”

I held up my hand. “I know it wasn’t. It took me a while, but I know now that it wasn’t anything I did.” I sat back and pushed myself up. “But I do thank you for coming and apologizing.”

It did feel good to know that my ex was sorry. At one point, I had loved him, and it helped to know that he did care enough to feel bad.

Darren reluctantly got up and followed me to the door. I opened it, and he paused before walking out.

“Does this mean you forgive me?”

“You don’t need me to forgive you, Darren. It’s you who needs to forgive yourself. And to make sure you never do it again.”

His expression was sad, and he looked like a little boy who’d lost his puppy.

I rolled my eyes. “Sure, I forgive you. Happy now?”

He smiled slightly. “Actually, I am.”

“Great. Now, get out,” I said the last sentence with a smile, and he chuckled.

He headed to his car, and I went to shut my door when I recalled something he’d said.

“Darren?”

He turned around.

“You said that your therapist suggested you *and* Tracy should apologize?”

“Oh yeah. We found out that you and Liam both lived here, so we drove up together.”

I looked toward his car and didn’t see anyone. “And where is Tracy?”

“I dropped her off at Liam’s work. I think she’s waiting for me at a coffee place down the street from there.”

“Does that mean she found him?”

“Yeah. She said it didn’t go well.”

“Okay.” I shut the door, not bothering to say good-bye, and grabbed my phone to call Liam.

He didn’t answer again, and a sense of dread settled over me.

Tracy had gone to talk to him, and now, he wasn’t answering my texts or calls. This wasn’t good.

TWENTY-TWO



CHLOE

It wasn't until around ten o'clock in the evening that there was a knock at my door. I peeked out of the side window, relieved to see that it was Liam.

I swung open the door. "Why didn't you use your key?" I asked as I stepped aside.

He slowly entered, as if he was waiting for something. "I didn't know if I should since I'd pretty much ghosted you." He held up his phone. "I'm sorry I missed all your calls and messages."

"Come and sit down."

"You're not mad at me?"

I sat on the couch, hoping he'd sit next to me. "More worried than mad."

He collapsed beside me. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He huffed out a breath and ran his fingers through his hair. "Tracy came to see me today." He seemed to watch me to see what my reaction would be.

"I know."

"You do?" His face was full of surprise.

"Yeah. Darren came to see me."

Liam's jaw clenched. "That son of a bitch."

“Actually, his mom is quite nice and took my side when we broke up.”

“Chloe, it’s not the time to joke.”

I held up my hand in surrender. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” I slid my palm over his fist and squeezed. “What happened today?”

“I hadn’t spoken to her in five years. And she just showed up...out of the blue. And apologized for cheating on me.”

I wasn’t sure if I should listen to what he had to say or if I should tell him about Darren’s visit. I didn’t know which would make him feel better. Because he was struggling, I thought it would be good for him to know he wasn’t alone.

“Darren told me the same thing. Something about premarital therapy and wanting to make amends.”

Liam met my eyes. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him I forgave him.”

“You did?”

“I take it, you didn’t tell Tracy the same thing?” I asked softly.

“Hell no. She’s a bitch.”

“Oh, wow.” I pulled my hand back to my lap.

He turned toward me, putting a leg up on my couch. “What do you mean?”

“I was already worried when I didn’t hear from you, and I told myself everything was okay, but now, I know I was right,” I said through the lump in my throat.

“Right about what?”

I jumped from the couch, unable to sit any longer. “When you and I met up again, I thought I was the broken one. I thought I was the one still dealing with being cheated on. And you”—I waved my hand up and down in his direction—“you seemed so calm and collected and together.” I shook my head. “But I think you were lying.”

His lips pursed. “I wasn’t lying.”

“Oh, Liam, not to me. I know you wouldn’t lie to me. I meant, you were lying to yourself. You thought everything was okay when it clearly isn’t.” I turned away from him and tried not to cry. The last couple months had been so good between us. We had come together so effortlessly, but I should have known it wouldn’t last. “Cupid hates me.”

I heard Liam stand from behind me. “What?”

I sniffled. “I must have pissed Cupid off somehow because either I can’t find love or when I do, the guy doesn’t feel the same.”

“Is this your way of saying you love me?”

“What does it matter?” I said over my shoulder. “You obviously have stuff you need to deal with. One of them clearly being that you are not over Tracy.”

Liam started laughing, and I couldn’t help but get pissed.

I spun around. “Now’s not the time to make jokes, Liam,” I said, repeating his words back to him.

“I’m not making a joke.”

“Not out loud. But you are laughing at me.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Care to share what’s so funny?”

He moved my hair off my shoulder. “I’m not still in love with Tracy or not over what happened between us. I don’t care about her.”

“Then, why didn’t you forgive her? You called her a bitch.”

“Because of what she said about us.”

My arms dropped to my sides in surprise. “How did I get brought into the situation?”

“I might have mentioned that you and I were together now, and”—he took a deep breath—“well, she got jealous.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I don’t get it. Darren left me for her.”

“Did he though? Or did he stay with her because you had found out he cheated and didn’t want anything to do with him after that?”

I thought back to my conversation with Darren. “No, I’m pretty sure he wants to be with Tracy.”

Liam shrugged. “Maybe it’s true, but I think Tracy has some doubts.”

“Okay, but this doesn’t explain why you disappeared on me for hours.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and turned away. This wasn’t good if he couldn’t meet my eyes.

“The thing is, back when we were neighbors, she figured out that I was attracted to you. I tried to brush it off and ignore how I felt, but I couldn’t help it.” He sat back down. “And she told me today that I was no better than Darren. No better than she was because even if I didn’t cheat, I wanted you. I think that made her jealous back then, and I think that’s why she slept with Darren. As some sort of revenge.”

I sat next to Liam. “So, you disappeared because Tracy made you feel like the two of them cheating was your fault? Or she made you feel guilty because you were attracted to me back then?”

He shrugged. “Both, I suppose.”

I fell back against the couch. “Wow. That’s a lot to process.”

“I—”

I put my hand up. “Give me a minute to think.”

Liam closed his mouth.

I went over everything we’d just talked about and looked up at Liam.

“So, in no way is what happened between Tracy and Darren your fault. They are two adults who made their own decisions. No one had a gun to their heads to make them have sex. They chose to. Also, while I was hurt at the time, I am so glad that I’m not with Darren anymore. Lastly, you are a hundred times better than those two. Even if you were attracted to me, not once did you act on it. I don’t even remember you flirting with me. You were the perfect neighbor and friend, and you’re right; Tracy is a bitch. Planting that shit in your head.” I

scooted forward and took Liam's hands. "I love you, and please don't let her ruin what we have together."

A slow smile spread across his lips. "I love you too."

I had to stop myself from jumping up and down in a ridiculous victory dance because Liam Stevens loved me.

Instead, I kissed him. "Want to hear a secret?"

He smiled against my lips. "Always."

"I had a massive crush on you, too, back then."

Liam pulled back, his face full of awe. "No shit?"

I laughed. "Yes, shit."

"I had no idea."

"I made sure you didn't." I pulled him toward me. "So, see, if you're a bad guy for liking me, then I'm a bad girl for liking you."

"Hmm. You know what happens to bad girls, don't you?"

"What?"

"They get taken to the bedroom."

I wiggled my eyebrows. "I can't wait."



EPILOGUE

CHLOE

NINE MONTHS LATER

“Don’t get out yet. I’ll come over to you,” Liam said from the driver’s side.

“Okay.”

I heard his door open and close, and then I felt mine open.

“Since we’re here, are you sure I can’t just take off the blindfold?”

Liam laughed and grabbed my hand. “No. You have to keep your eyes covered until I’m ready. I don’t want you to give in to the temptation to peek.”

“Okay, fine.”

He snorted. “Don’t act like you don’t love it.”

I laughed because he was right. It was my thirty-first birthday, and Liam had a surprise for me. He’d made me put on a blindfold at my house and leave it in place all the way to our destination. The suspense was killing me.

“Walk this way,” he told me. “The ground is even.”

I wrapped my free hand around his arm. I trusted him, but I didn’t trust myself. I tripped even when I wasn’t blindfolded.

“Okay, there is one step up here.”

I lifted my leg, probably way higher than I needed to, and slowly set it down until I felt the ground beneath my foot.

He opened a door with a ding sounding over it, and the few voices that were talking immediately went silent.

Since I couldn’t see or hear anything, I used my sense of smell. It was vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

“Where are we headed?” Liam asked someone.

“Second door on the right,” a man answered.

“Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. Happy birthday, Chloe,” the man said.

“Oh. Uh, thank you.”

The unknown man chuckled, and Liam guided my arm to keep me walking.

We turned a corner, which I guessed was the second door on the right, and it closed behind us.

“Right over here,” Liam said. “I want you to sit down, and then you get to take the blindfold off.”

“Ooh...I can’t wait.” My heart was pounding with excitement now.

We took a few steps, and then we paused.

He turned me around. “Sit down slowly.”

I moved my hand out and encountered a padded piece of furniture.

Once I sat down, he added, “Now, turn to your right and lean back.”

I did as he’d told me, and my foot hit the bottom of a chair. I had just been to the dentist a few weeks ago, and I immediately pictured the same kind of seat I’d sat on there.

I sniffed the air again. “We’re not at the dentist, are we?”

Liam laughed. “No, baby, we’re not.”

“Thank God, because that would not be romantic.”

I heard the sound of wheels and what had to be Liam sitting.

“Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath. “As I’ll ever be.”

I felt his hands at the back of my head as he pulled off the blindfold.

I slowly blinked my eyes open. The light hurt a little because I’d been in the dark for so long.

“Ta-da,” Liam said with a grin.

I looked around. “Where are we?”

“A tattoo shop.”

“That’s why I recognized the smell.”

“And that’s why I told you to wear a tank top.” He reached over the counter and grabbed a pair of black gloves. “We’re finally going to finish your tattoo.”

Without warning, a tear ran down my cheek, and Liam’s eyes went wide.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “We don’t have to do it. But I want you to know, I have been practicing. I wouldn’t have brought you here if I had an unsteady hand.”

I wiped under my eye. “I know. I’m not sad. I’m happy.”

He shook his head and laughed. “Whew. You had me worried there for a minute.”

“Sorry.”

“So, are we going to do this?”

I pushed the strap of my camisole down. “Hell yes.”

He leaned forward and kissed me. “Happy birthday, Chloe.”

I kissed him back. “Thank you for giving me the best birthday ever.”



MEANT TO BE SAMPLE

CHAPTER ONE

Piper closed the lid of her laptop and rubbed her temples. The pounding in her head matched the pounding of the hammer outside. She reached for the bottle of ibuprofen that had taken up permanent residence on her desk and shook out four tablets.

After Jordan's death, she had thrown herself into her work, but lately, it hadn't been bringing the same fulfillment. She still loved her job. She was a women's advocate at a women's and children's abuse shelter, and she would always find satisfaction in helping women or children get away from their abusive spouses or parents.

But she had slowly begun to realize that it couldn't be her only source of happiness like it had been for the last thirteen months. She'd been exploring jobs for one of her clients today, despite it being Saturday, and even though she enjoyed doing research, a headache hadn't taken too long to make its appearance.

Piper heard shouting coming from her backyard and pushed her feet into the carpet so that her desk chair rolled back and she could look out the back window. She couldn't make out the words, but it was obvious that Nate was arguing with Luke about something. He shook his bald head along with the hammer in his hand, as if trying to make a point, and Piper found herself smiling. The two of them were both alphas and often butted heads about what should and what should not be done.

She scanned the backyard. The veranda was coming along somewhat slowly but nicely, and it would be done before fall.

She was excited to see the conclusion, but it also brought a deep longing to the surface.

Jordan should have been the one outside, working with Nate. It had been Jordan's idea in the first place. When they had purchased the house, everything had been perfect, except for the backyard. Jordan had promised her he was going to make it the best yard on the block for their future children, and all the neighborhood kids would want to come over to their house to play.

They'd moved into their home in January, and it had been too cold to start a big project. But, four months later, Jordan was dead, the supplies he had purchased to start on the project a reminder that he was gone.

They'd sat in the garage for almost a year when Piper decided they needed to go. When she'd asked Nate if he wanted any of it, he had proposed to finish what Jordan had barely started. She'd tried to tell him not to bother. After all, there wouldn't be any children to play back there now, but Nate had insisted.

She didn't know what had transpired between Nate and Jordan while they sat in the wrecked car, waiting for the first responders to show before Jordan passed, but she suspected that her late husband had made Nate promise to take care of her.

Nate was always available when she needed him. He'd fixed her broken sink and helped her winterize her car and other things like that. She honestly didn't know what she'd do without him. In a way, he'd become her new husband—if you could count someone who lived in a different house and slept with other women while you were abstinent your husband. So, he might not have become her replacement spouse, but he had definitely become her best friend.

He'd been there for her as no one else had when Jordan passed. Not just fixing stuff but letting her literally cry on his shoulder. She knew he was a womanizer and a commitment-phobe, but to her, he was simply Nate.

Piper continued to watch the two men outside as their argument heated up. One might be worried they would hurt

each other, but even though they were trying to act tough, both of them were smiling. Nate swiped his shirt off over his head, and Luke did the same. They looked like they were getting ready to brawl.

Both men were tall and nicely built. Very nicely built. Luke Long was half-Asian and already had a tan that she wouldn't get if she sunbathed every day of summer. His dark hair was wet with sweat, and she could almost see laughter gleaming in his brown eyes. But that wasn't the only thing gleaming on him. The sun shone off the ring he wore on the third finger of his left hand, telling all single women that this man was taken.

And Nate...well, Nate was pure sex on a stick. She might have been married when she met him, but she hadn't been blind. Nate was a mix of African American, Mexican, and Caucasian. He wasn't extremely dark, but his beautiful, bronzed skin definitely showed his mixed heritage. And thanks to his recessive genes, he had the lightest crystal-blue eyes that stood out from his tan complexion. He was just over six feet, and on his left arm, he sported a collection of tattoos. He kept his head clean-shaven, yet his face wore a sexy layer of stubble.

As a woman, she'd never understand why a man would shave one part of his head but not the other. She wasn't complaining though. It looked good on the man. And, if her libido hadn't died along with Jordan, she'd probably be drooling.

Actually, no *probably*. She would have been. Piper had always loved sex, and if she were single, she'd be hitting on Nate daily. But she was a widow with a dead sex drive and now only appreciated attractive men from a more objective point of view.

There was a knock at her front door just as Nate crouched down, put his shoulder into Luke's abdomen, and lifted the other man off the ground.

"Hello? Piper?"

"Back here," she called out to Elise Long, Luke's wife. "Hurry. You have to come see this."

Piper's office was directly off the dining room, so she had a view straight through to the kitchen. She watched as Elise set down a couple of bags from the local fast food place and then scrambled in to join Piper at the window.

Elise's belly bumped against the window as she practically pressed her nose to the glass. "Oh my God, what are they doing?" she asked with a laugh.

Piper shrugged. "Fighting."

"Put me down, motherfucker," Luke shouted loud enough for the two women to hear.

"I swear, those two act like children when they're together," Elise said. "I think it's because they've known each other since they were kids. It's like part of them can't grow up."

Nate set Luke down. He wasn't rough, but he wasn't gentle either. He dropped Luke on his ass, but Luke must have been ready for Nate because, before Nate could straighten, Luke pulled him to the ground and put some sort of wrestling move on him.

Elise was still chuckling, but she sighed. "We'd better go out there."

"Were they like this when they fixed up your house?" Piper asked as the two of them went to the dining room and then out the sliding glass door.

She curled her lip. "Yes. I'm pretty sure it took months longer than it should have to finish. I'd complain, but they worked for free, and it's obvious they love fighting with each other. Who am I to deny them their fun?"

They stepped down from the deck.

When their feet hit the grass, Elise shouted out, "Food's here, boys."

Piper snickered at the other woman's use of the word *boys* when the two were obviously more than men.

Both guys froze at Elise's announcement and looked over at the women.

“Hi, honey.” Luke grinned. He threw Nate’s leg off of him and rolled up onto his knees. He was about to stand when Nate wrapped his arm around Luke’s neck and pulled him back to the ground.

Elise made a sigh of annoyance, but she smiled. She approached the two men and raised her brow. “Nate?”

Nate looked up at Elise, smiling as he used his other hand to pull his arm around Luke tighter. “Hi, Elise. How can I help you?”

“Can you let go of my husband?”

“Yeah, asshole. Your dick is rubbing on my ass,” Luke complained.

“No can do, sweetie,” he said to Elise while he lifted his hips and brushed himself against Luke even more.

Piper put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Gross, dude,” Luke shouted and tried to get away while simultaneously reaching back to punch his friend.

“That’s what you get for calling me a pussy,” Nate told Luke. He looked to Elise again. “I’ll let him go when he learns his lesson.”

Elise rolled her eyes. “Luke, will you please apologize to your friend before I give birth to our firstborn? I really don’t want our child to grow up without a father.”

Piper knew Elise was joking; the woman hadn’t said anything that anybody else wouldn’t say, and part of Piper did think it was funny. There was also a small portion of her, deep inside, that was stung by the words. Because, if she’d had a child, it would now be fatherless.

“Elise,” Luke said, trying to pull Nate’s arm off of him, “I can’t let our child think I’m a total wuss.”

Elise raised her brow again, this time without a smile, and she saw Luke’s body relax as he stopped fighting.

“Fine,” he muttered. “I’m sorry I called you a pussy...”

Nate immediately released Luke.

Luke jumped up and finished his sentence. “Loud enough for you to hear. Next time, I’ll whisper it behind your back.”

“Fucker,” Nate said and made a swipe for Luke.

Luke took off and ran around to the front of the house, and Nate followed.

Elise turned and looked at Piper as she shrugged. “I give up. If they want cold food, that’s their fault. Let’s go eat.”

Piper led the way back into her house and pulled the food out of the bags. She separated her order from the rest, and Elise did the same. The two pulled out the stools at the counter and sat.

“Would you be more comfortable at the table?” Piper asked her.

“Nah, I’m fine here,” Elise said with a wave of her hand. “I have a while left before I’m really big.” She tilted her head. “At least, I hope I do. I’m only twenty-two weeks.”

Luke and Elise had been married for a few months, and Elise had told Piper that she was pregnant before they’d gotten married. Elise’s father had cancer, and they had hoped to have at least one child before he passed away. Piper hadn’t gone to their wedding because it was a small ceremony, and she hadn’t known the couple that well yet.

Piper and Jordan had moved to the area in January the previous year, and when they had first moved, it had been all about getting situated. Jordan had settled into his new job while Piper had to search for her own. Then, before she had known it, it had been May, and she was a widow.

After that had come his funeral and sorting out all the paperwork after someone passed, all while trying to deal with grief. For a while, the only people Piper had seen outside of work were her mom and Nate. She had just wanted to be left alone. Socializing took too much energy.

But she’d slowly started coming back to life a few months ago, and that was when Nate had really started bringing his friends around. She knew he’d been afraid that she’d be lonely with no family in the area. She felt like she was almost back to

normal. Well, her *new* normal because she was never going to be the same person she had been before Jordan passed away.

And, now, she was grateful that Nate had introduced her to Elise. The two of them got along great, and while Nate was her best friend, sometimes, a lady just needed some girl time. They still didn't know each other that well, but Piper hoped that could change.

Nate and Luke burst through the front door, shirtless, sweaty, and laughing. They went straight to the food without a word to either of the women and dug in like they hadn't eaten for a week. Neither of them bothered to sit either; both stood on the other side of the counter.

"I apologize for my husband's table manners—or lack thereof," Elise said.

Luke looked up from stuffing his face. "*Wha—*" he said around a mouthful of food, his brown eyes gleaming with humor.

"You're a pig," Elise said.

Nate nestled in the corner of the counter and laughed.

Luke swallowed and smiled. "But I'm your pig."

Elise shook her head and rolled her eyes, but Piper saw she was hiding a smile.

"Apologies, Piper," Luke said. "I'm hungry."

Elise turned to Piper. "Do you care if I get a glass of water?"

Piper jumped from the stool, feeling like a terrible hostess. "Oh my God, I'm sorry."

"No, you don't have to get up," Elise protested, also rising from her seat.

"Yes, I do. My mother would pass out from shame if I didn't take care of my company."

Elise sat back down and laughed. "I understand."

She looked around to the two guys. "Water okay with you guys, too?" she asked as she walked around to Nate and

Luke's side.

"I can get my own, you know," Nate said.

It was true. He wasn't really a guest in her home anymore. He raided her fridge whenever he was hungry and helped himself to whatever he needed without asking anymore.

"That's okay," she said as she opened the cupboard and reached up for the glasses.

But Nate went for them at the same time she did. As he reached from behind her, she felt his naked chest against her back. A tingle went down her spine, straight to her belly, and she dropped her hands to the counter as she tried to fight a slight tremor.

Apparently, her libido hadn't died with Jordan. It had just gone dormant. And she didn't know what to do with it if it was coming back.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R.L. Kenderson is two best friends writing under one name.

Renae has always loved reading, and in third grade, she wrote her first poem where she learned she might have a knack for this writing thing. Lara remembers sneaking her grandmother's Harlequin novels when she was probably too young to be reading them, and since then, she knew she wanted to write her own.

When they met in college, they bonded over their love of reading and the TV show *Charmed*. What really spiced up their friendship was when Lara introduced Renae to romance novels. When they discovered their first vampire romance, they knew there would always be a special place in their hearts for paranormal romance. After being unable to find certain storylines and characteristics they wanted to read about in the hundreds of books they consumed, they decided to write their own.

One lives in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and the other in the Kansas City area where they both work in the medical field during the day and a sexy author by night. They communicate through phone, email, and whole lot of messaging.

You can find them at <http://www.rlkenderson.com>, [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), and [Goodreads](#). Join their [reader group](#)! Or you can email them at rlkenderson@rlkenderson.com, or sign up for their [newsletter](#). They always love hearing from their readers.

