



*Stay*  
**TONIGHT**

KINCAID BROTHERS BOOK THREE



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**KAYLEE RYAN**

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BOOK 3

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# CHAPTER ONE

Sterling

“Uncle Sterling!” My niece, Blakely, giggles as I spin us around in a circle. I hold her tight in my arms as her head falls back, her hair rippling with each turn.

“Faster?” I ask.

“Faster!” she agrees.

I move my feet, spinning us faster. Her laughter reaches in and binds itself around my heart. This little girl has us all wrapped around her little finger. Knowing that she just had a big slice of her birthday cake with ice cream, I slow until we’re no longer rotating. Blakely places her head on my shoulder, and I don’t have to see her face to know she’s still smiling.

“That was fun.” She snuggles into me.

I kiss the top of her head and squeeze her tightly. I love my brothers and my parents, but when Blakely came along, it was a whole different kind of love. One I’d never known. I remember the first time I held her. She was so damn tiny, swaddled up in a pink blanket. I recall thinking that my brothers and I were fucked, because she was going to rule the roost.

I wasn’t wrong, and we all love every minute of it.

Don’t get me wrong. She’s not a brat. In fact, she appears to be much older than today’s birthday party represents. She’s

five going on fifteen. She's spunky and cute as hell.

"Are you hogging the birthday girl?" Ryder, one of my younger brothers, asks. There are nine of us in total.

"Yep."

"Uncle Sterling, Mommy says you have to share," my niece scolds.

"But I'm your favorite," I tease. We all do.

"I have lots of favorites," she admits with a toothy smile.

"My turn." Ryder pulls her from my arms and tickles her belly as they walk away. Looking around my brother Declan's backyard, I seek him out. I spot him and his wife, Kennedy, our brother Brooks, and his wife, Palmer, all sitting on the back deck. I make my way to them, leaning over the back of Kennedy's chair and kissing the top of her head. "A boy. Congratulations."

Declan reaches over and places his hand protectively over her growing baby bump. It's something that he often does. Hell, they all do. My brothers do not shy away from showing affection for their wives and unborn children. Over the past few years, our family has grown. I have three new sisters-in-law, and we're adding three new babies to the Kincaid clan. Then, our cousin Ramsey, who is more like our little sister, is getting married next month. In just a couple of weeks, we'll be adding Deacon to our list of added family members.

"Is this where all the cool kids hang out?" my oldest brother, Orrin, asks.

I watch as he pulls a chair out for his pregnant wife, Jade, and waits for her to sit before taking one of the open seats next to her at the table.

"You know it." Palmer, my brother Brooks's wife, smiles, rubbing her belly.

"Not much longer," Jade tells her.

"I know. I can't believe we get to meet her in a handful of weeks," Palmer replies.

“It feels like we’ve been waiting to meet her for years.” Brooks leans over and kisses his wife.

We all laugh. If there was ever a man excited to be a father, it’s Brooks. That’s not saying that Declan and Orrin are any less excited, but Brooks, he tells anyone who’s willing to listen that he and his wife are expecting their first baby. My big brother is a softie. Then again, out of the nine of us, three are married, and every single one of them is a big ole teddy bear when it comes to their wives.

“Tink!” I call out to my best friend, Alyssa. I call her Tink because she’s a tiny thing compared to me. She just walked around the corner of the house. She’s laughing at something the twins are saying. Shaking her head at them, she turns to head in our direction. “Come sit.” I pat the empty seat next to me.

“I’m not sure that I should.” She looks around the table at the ladies. “Is it something in the water? Should I be concerned?” She laughs.

“Depends.” Palmer leans forward. “Is there someone you haven’t told us about that could put you in this position?” She motions to her protruding belly.

I think about Palmer’s question. As far as I know, Alyssa isn’t seeing anyone. The thought of her being pregnant by a man I’ve never met doesn’t sit well with me. I sit up a little straighter in my chair, ready to ask her, but relax as soon as I see her roll those big brown eyes.

Alyssa laughs again, shaking her head as she pulls out the chair to take a seat. My sisters-in-law have recently been including her in their girls’ nights, and I like that they’re close to her. Alyssa and I have been friends since kindergarten. She was the shy, quiet one, while I was the rowdy one that never stopped talking. Our teacher thought sitting me next to Alyssa would shut me up. Little did she know, I kept talking until the cute girl with big brown eyes and pigtails became my best friend. We’ve been inseparable ever since.

She raises her brows when I stand. “Where are you going?”



“To make you a plate. We already ate.”

“I’m fine, Sterling.” I ignore her and quickly make her a plate of her favorites, grabbing her a glass of lemonade and placing them both in front of her.

She tilts her head back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I tell her, taking my seat.

“Did you get the nursery furniture finished?” Declan asks Brooks.

“Yep. All set for this little one.” He nods toward his wife’s belly.

“Having the shower at your house was a great idea,” Jade speaks up. “You don’t have to haul all of it home.”

“That’s what Mom, Carol, and I thought too when we were discussing where to have the shower.”

“It’s a great idea, but I could never get away with it,” Kennedy adds. “Grandma would shit a brick if I told her I wanted to have the shower anywhere other than the Willow Manor.”

“Yeah, but at least you get a discount,” I remind her.

“This is true.” She chuckles.

“Well, I think we might steal the idea,” Jade speaks up. She glances over at Orrin, and he grins.

“Babe, it’s your day. You tell me when and where, and I’ll make it happen.”

“What are we making happen?” Maverick asks.

Maverick is one of the twins. They are the youngest of my brothers. They’re identical, but Maverick is about a half inch taller than Merrick. Once you know that and you get them side by side, it’s easy to tell them apart. Maverick is also the more outgoing twin, and most of the time the instigator. He’s easy to point out because of that alone. “Baby showers,” Orrin tells him.

“I think we should take a trip before all these babies get here. One last hoorah, if you will.” Maverick rubs his hands together in glee at the prospect.

“Well, time’s running out,” Palmer tells him. “This little one will be here in less than two months.”

“All the more reason to plan something soon.” Maverick’s gaze shoots around the table.

“What are you thinking?” Brooks asks.

“Just a weekend. Maybe we can rent a cabin or five.” He chuckles. “There are a lot more of us now.”

“Weekend at the lake?” Orrin suggests.

“Yeah.” Maverick gives a slow nod. “I can get behind a weekend at the lake.”

“What do you think, ladies?” Declan asks.

“I hate to leave Blake,” Kennedy replies immediately. “I’m already worried about her and the new baby.”

“She’s going to be fine, Kens,” Declan assures his wife. “She’s wanted this, a wife for us, a baby brother or sister. Hell, she insisted we reveal the gender at her birthday party. She’s going to adjust just fine.”

“Babe?” Brooks asks Palmer.

“You should get the final say,” Jade speaks up. “You’re due sooner than we are. Do you feel like getting away for the weekend?”

“A weekend away to relax before this little one gets here sounds perfect.”

“What about you?” Kennedy asks Alyssa.

“Oh, um, well—I—” she starts, and I know what she’s thinking. She didn’t know if she would be invited.

“Can you get the time off work?” I ask her. I save her from having to answer and let her know that she’s welcome at the same time. Of course she is. She’s been my best friend, my ride-or-die since kindergarten. She’s a part of me. She’s

always invited to family functions and, more recently, girls' nights with my sisters-in-law and cousin, Ramsey. They include her because they know she's important to me.

"What are we talking about?"

"I'd say Thursday through Sunday," Orrin explains.

"We need to see if everyone can get the time off and if there are even any rentals available," I tell him.

"I'll work on the rentals." Orrin pulls his phone out of his pocket. "When are we thinking?"

"Before July," Brooks speaks up. "Palmer is due the middle of July, and I don't want to be too far if she goes into labor early."

"I'll be fine, big guy," Palmer assures him.

"I know you will. Because we're going to be close to the hospital." He leans over and kisses her.

"Let's shoot for the first week of June." This comes from Maverick.

"That's like two weeks away," Orrin comments.

"I'm all over it." Maverick pulls his phone out of his pocket and starts tapping at the screen. A few minutes later, he's grinning when every phone, well, almost every phone left at the party, chirps with a message.

Within minutes, all of my brothers, as well as Ramsey and Deacon, have confirmed they'll make the date work, and getting the time off work shouldn't be an issue.

"Done," Maverick boasts.

"We need to find a sitter for Blake if she can't come with us," Kennedy reminds Declan.

"My parents will be happy to watch her. We deserve a weekend away. That doesn't mean we don't love our little girl," he reminds his wife.

"I know. I just hate leaving her."

“This might be the last one of these, fellas,” Brooks says. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to leave our little girl. My heart is breaking just hearing Kennedy talk about leaving Blakely.”

Palmer rests her hand against his cheek. “Having an adult weekend is good for parents.”

“We’ll see.” Brooks doesn’t sound convinced. However, I know Brooks, and his wife can convince him to do anything.

“Think?” I turn to Alyssa. “You think you can get the time off?”

She shrugs. “I have the time, but you know that Tamara hates me.” Tamara is Alyssa’s boss at the Doctors’ office. She’s basically a queen bitch. She treats everyone who works there as if they’re an ant under her shoe. Especially Alyssa. She’s been there the longest and knows more about Tamara’s job than Tamara does. Tamara is jealous.

“I thought you were going to start looking for a new job?” Kennedy asks her.

“Yeah,” Alyssa agrees. “I’ve been looking.”

Reaching over, I place my hand on her arm. She gives me her full attention. “Try?” It would really suck if she wasn’t able to be there. Don’t get me wrong, I love my family, but Alyssa and I do everything together. I don’t really want to go without her.

“I’ll talk to her at work on Monday.”

“So, where are we staying?” I ask Orrin.

“I found a cabin at Lake Oconee. It’s eight bedrooms, nine bathrooms, twenty-eight acres, a pond, a hot tub, an inground pool, outdoor kitchen. This place is beautiful,” Orrin says, holding up his phone so we can see a picture.

“How much?” Brooks asks.

“Nine hundred a night plus tax. Dividing that by ten, it’s a hundred bucks a night and some change,” he says, meaning we’ll need to add some additional money for tax.

“Damn,” I mutter. “That’s cheap.”

“Yeah. Us married folk will double up,” Orrin goes on as if we didn’t assume they would be rooming with their wives. “Alyssa can have her own room, and then the remaining six will double up as well.”

“Hell yeah!” Maverick chants.

“Wait, that’s eleven,” Alyssa speaks up.

“Eight bedrooms,” Jade replies.

“Yeah, I know... I get that. But you said to divide it by ten. It should be eleven.”

“Nope,” Brooks speaks up. “You might not be his wife, but you keep his ass in line.” He grins, and the table laughs at my expense.

I’m good with it. I’m not out of control, but I do tend to mope around if my best friend isn’t in attendance. I’m assuming my brothers don’t want to deal with my mopey ass.

“I can pay,” Alyssa insists.

“Nah, it’s all good,” Declan tells her. He looks at me and nods. I can’t read his expression, but that’s a conversation for another day. I’m just glad they’re making it known that she’s welcome.

“I’m going to book it now for Thursday through Sunday. We have to cancel seven days before to get a full refund,” he says, staring down at his phone.

“I can’t believe that place isn’t booked,” Kennedy speaks up.

“That’s why I’m going to go ahead and book it.” Orrin pulls his credit card out of his wallet. “I don’t want to take the chance of losing out on it.”

“I hope everyone can go,” Palmer says. “This sounds like so much fun.”

“Everyone replied like it wouldn’t be a big deal.” Maverick holds up his phone and gives it a shake.

“If the wicked witch lets me take my time. The rule is one week’s notice, and I’m giving her two. Hopefully, it won’t be

an issue. No one else is off that week that I'm aware of." I can hear the irritation in Alyssa's voice at her boss.

"We need to get you out of there," I tell her.

"Right?" Kennedy agrees. "That's what I've been telling her. She doesn't need to stick around and deal with that."

"Are we doing this?" Merrick steps up behind his twin and grips his shoulders. "Are we getting out of town for a few days?"

"We are," Orrin says, sliding his credit card back into his wallet. "I just booked it."

"Hell yes!" He shakes Maverick, and they both laugh.

"What's all the ruckus about?" Rushton asks, stopping to stand beside the twins.

"It's a go," Merrick tells him.

"Nice." Rushton nods.

"What about Blake?" Kennedy asks Declan. "Are you sure it's good with your parents?"

"I'll text Mom and Dad. Too bad we didn't think of this before they left." His fingers fly across his screen.

"I'm positive they'd still be here if it wasn't for the fact that Mom volunteered to make dinner for Mrs. Jenkins. She had surgery earlier this week," Archer explains.

"Mom and Dad are on board," Declan says, showing his wife, Kennedy, his phone. "They're happy to keep Blakely for the weekend. They don't have her as much as they used to, and as you can see"—he nods to the message on his phone—"they miss her."

"We're lucky, Dec. So incredibly lucky to have them."

"Your parents are moving here soon, right?" Jade asks her.

"They are. Their house is on the market. It's been listed for three days, and there is already a bidding war."

"The market is hot right now," Jade comments.

“It really is. They want to be here in Willow River full time before the baby gets here.” Kennedy places her hand on her belly, and the smile on her face is nothing short of blissful.

“I should get going,” Alyssa says, looking at the time on her phone. “I have a ton of laundry to do for work this week.” She stands, and I do as well.

She waves to my family, and we stop by the swing set so that she can give Blakely a hug. Archer and Ryder are taking turns pushing her in the swing.

“Thank you for coming to my baby brother’s party,” Blakely tells Alyssa, pulling out of her hug.

“Sweetheart, this was your birthday party,” I remind her.

“Yeah, that too, but it’s also for my little brother.”

I don’t even know how to reply to that, so I don’t. My niece has the biggest heart of anyone I know. She’s wished for this—a mom and a sibling—and in her five-year-old mind, her wishes are coming true.

With my hand on the small of her back, I walk Alyssa to her car. I was supposed to pick her up today, but she was running late. Apparently, she was out of tape and couldn’t finish wrapping Blakely’s present. I offered to bring mine, but she insisted that I go on and she would meet me here. Now that she’s leaving, I wish I’d insisted that I drive her. I feel like I’ve barely seen her this week.

Not that I’m in a hurry to leave, but at least I’d know she got home safely. “Text me when you make it home,” I tell her, pulling open her car door for her.

“Yes, Dad.” She playfully rolls her eyes.

“I’m sure your dad would agree with my concern. We’re just looking out for you.”

“You are aware that I’m an adult, right? I have a job, my own place, and I even wipe my own ass.” She mock glares at me.

“Ha-ha, funny girl. Just text me so that I don’t worry.”

“I always do.” She slides behind the wheel and starts her car.

I wait until she’s buckled in before closing the door. She rolls down the window and sticks her head out. “Dinner this week?”

“Definitely.”

She waves, and I do the same, stepping back. I watch her until I can no longer see her car before walking back around the house and joining my family.

“Alyssa get off, okay?” Jade asks.

“Oh, shit!” Maverick spits out his drink as the table erupts in laughter.

“That’s not what I meant, and you dirty-minded fools know it.” Jade shakes her head at them, but it’s easy to see that she’s amused with their interpretation of her question.

“She got off just fine.” I smirk.

If you can’t beat them. Join them.



# CHAPTER TWO

Alyssa

It's almost quitting time, and I still have my time off request sitting in an envelope in my purse. I hate dealing with my boss, Tamara, but I know that if I want to go for the long weekend with my best friend, Sterling, and his siblings, I need to turn it in today. The rule is a week's notice. We have plenty of staff. Tamara just likes to be controlling.

"The doctor will be right with you," I tell the last patient of the day as I finish checking her in. I busy myself with cleaning up my work area, and once the medical assistant calls the last patient back to a room, I grab the envelope, take a deep breath, and head to Tamara's office.

"Knock, knock," I say, rapping my knuckles lightly on the door frame.

"Why did you say it if you were going to knock? Everyone knows that you don't do both," Tamara asks snidely.

"I wasn't aware." What I want to tell her is that she's lost her damn mind. There is no hard and fast rule of when to say "knock, knock" if you are entering a room. "I have this for you." I hold up the envelope. I don't dare step into her office without being invited. She's reamed me for that before. Lesson learned.

"What is it?"

"A time off request."

She sighs. “Bring it here.”

I step into her office and hand her the envelope. “It’s for a couple of weeks from now. Wednesday through Sunday.” We’re closed on Saturdays and Sundays, so I’m only taking three days off. We’re not leaving until Thursday, but I was on the phone with Sterling last night, and he convinced me to take an extra day just for me. I never take time off, and a day just to do nothing or something other than work sounded amazing, so that’s what I’m asking for. I have over eighty hours of paid time off saved up. It’s definitely time I use some of them.

“Fine. I’ll look at it when I get a chance.”

“Can you sign it for me? There are two copies. I just like to keep one for my records so that I can keep track of my time.” It’s not a complete lie, but not the main reason either. I’ve had her tell me she never received my time off requests in the past and had to miss family events because of it. I’m not letting that happen again.

Tamara rolls her eyes, but she opens the envelope and pulls out two identical copies of time off requests. “I can’t sign this until I approve it.”

“Can you do that now? I have close to one hundred hours of paid time off in my bank.” I hold my breath as I wait for her to reprimand me for even asking.

“I’m heading out.” Dr. Jones steps into Tamara’s office without an invitation.

Tamara is not his boss, but she acts like she is. Her job as office manager is to run the office and manage the staff. The physicians in the practice report to the Director of Physician Services at the hospital since we are a hospital-owned medical practice.

“I’m leaving soon too,” Tamara tells him.

“Alyssa, are you done as well?” Dr. Jones asks.

He’s a nice guy, a great doctor, who keeps bringing up retirement. He’s one of the reasons that I stay here. He’s good to the entire staff.

“I am,” I tell him. “I was just asking Tamara to approve a time off request before I go.” I’m tossing her under the bus, and I couldn’t give two shits. I can see it in her eyes and the frown she’s sporting that she’s not impressed. She hates to look incompetent in front of the physicians. It happens a lot, hence the reason she’s always in a pissy mood. Honestly, I don’t really know how she’s keeping her job as office manager. She pushes all of her tasks off to the staff and sits in her office with the door shut all day. None of us really know what it is that she does all day.

“Good for you. It feels like you’re always here,” Dr. Jones tells me. “Big plans?”

“Just a long weekend with friends.”

He turns to Tamara. “Well, put the girl out of her misery and sign the slip.” He chuckles light-heartedly, but something tells me that Dr. Jones knows exactly how Tamara treats the staff. I make a mental note to do something nice for him. Of course, I’ll have to make it seem as though it’s for the entire office, but I’m fine with that. I bring in goodies often. Maybe that’s why Tamara doesn’t like me. I’ve long since stopped trying to figure it out.

“Of course,” Tamara says tightly. Her fingers click against the keys on her laptop as she verifies if I have the time that I say that I do. I’m not worried. I know how much time I have. As Dr. Jones said, I’m always here. At least, that’s what it feels like. Maybe it’s because of my boss’s not-so-sunny disposition that makes the days drag on.

“Approved,” Tamara says, handing me one of the signed papers.

“Don’t forget to sign yours,” I remind her. She glares at me but signs the second copy on her desk. I’m not taking any chances when it comes to this woman. “Thank you, Tamara. I really appreciate it.” I feel sick being kind to her when she treats me with nothing but disdain, but I won’t stoop to her level.

“Enjoy your time off, Alyssa,” Dr. Jones tells me.

“Thank you. I’ll see you both tomorrow.” I turn on my heel, my signed time-off paper in hand, and bolt to the break room to grab my things and get the hell out of dodge. I hear Dr. Jones talking to Tamara as I push open the back door, but I don’t care to stick around to know what they’re talking about.

I really need to find a new job.

As soon as I’m in my car and headed home, I hit the Call button on the steering wheel. “Call Sterling,” I tell my car.

“Calling Sterling Cell,” my car system repeats back to me as the phone rings through the radio’s Bluetooth system.

“Hey, you. You just get off work?” Sterling answers.

“Yes. I’m headed home now. Are you still working?”

“Just getting in the truck to head home. What’s up?”

“Tamara approved my time off request.”

“Seriously? Already? I was sure you’d have to fight with her over it.”

“Me too. I got lucky. Dr. Jones stopped by her office when I was there. I pretty much threw her under the bus. He insisted she take the time to approve my request right then.”

“Hell, yes. Wait, are you going to be paying for that now?”

I shrug, even though he can’t see me, as I pull up to the stop sign. “Probably, but it’s nothing I’m not used to dealing with when it comes to her. And it’s been more than just me lately. She’s been rude to everyone. Except the doctors, of course.”

“Of course,” Sterling says sarcastically. “We need to get you out of there, Tink.”

“I know. There aren’t many options in Willow River, and I do love my coworkers and the physicians. I just wish she wasn’t so damn mean. I’ve been looking, but after our trip I need to get serious about it.”

“Good. You deserve better.”

I don't comment because we both know I've put up with Tamara's shit a lot longer than I should have. "What are you doing for dinner?" I ask.

"Depends. What do you feel like?"

"Anything. I'm starving. My place or yours?"

"Mine. I have laundry I need to do."

I chuckle. "Always waiting until the last minute."

"Not always," he defends.

"Fine. Your place. I'm going to stop and grab something."

"Let's just throw some burgers on the grill."

"Do you have what we need?" I ask.

"I do."

"Okay. I'll meet you there."

"Use your key if you beat me there."

"Will do. Be safe," I tell him.

"You too, Tink." The call ends as I pull into the parking lot of the grocery store, even though he said he has everything we need. I pick up a bag of salad and some potato salad from the deli to go with our burgers. I also pick up a package of buns. If he has some, he can just toss these in the freezer. I hate eating burgers on bread. That's what we had to do the last time. He thought he had everything we needed. I breeze my way through the self-checkout line, and I'm on my way to Sterling's less than ten minutes later.

Even with stopping, I beat him to his place. That's because he works in Harris, which is twenty minutes away. Using my key, I let myself in the house. Kicking off my shoes by the door, I make my way into the kitchen. I place the potato salad and bag of salad mix in the fridge, leaving the buns on the island. I gather the pound of hamburger from the fridge that was already thawed out, and drop it into a bowl. I grab a jar of Ramsey's dad's seasoning that we all love and begin to mix it into the burger before making patties and placing them on the plate. I'm covering them with foil when Sterling walks in.

“Just in time,” I tell him, nodding to the plate of burgers.

“Let me change and wash up, and I’ll toss them on the grill.” He leans in and places a kiss on the top of my head before disappearing down the hall to his room.

Instead of waiting on him to do it, I unlock the patio door and step outside. As I pull the cover off the grill, I know he’s going to give me shit because this is usually his job, but I’m starving. I turn on the gas and light it, closing the lid and letting it get to temperature.

It’s a nice evening. The weather is warming up, and it makes me even more excited for our trip in a couple of weeks.

“Step away from the grill, woman.” I hear from behind me. I grin because I knew I’d get some version of him staking his claim.

“You know, I can grill these burgers just as good as you can.”

“The hell you say.” He mock glares at me, which has us both cracking up laughing. “You know mine taste better.”

“It always tastes better when someone else makes it,” I counter.

“Not true.”

“You don’t fuss when your brothers are manning the grill.”

“It’s a Kincaid trade secret, Tink. We’ve talked about this.” He shakes his head as if he’s disappointed in me, but the small smile tugging at his lips tells me otherwise.

“Yeah, yeah, just hurry up, would ya? I’m withering away over here.”

“Hush you.” He points the spatula at me, then gets to work placing the burgers on the grill.

“I’m going to go make us a couple of salads,” I tell him as I make my way inside.

“I don’t have salad,” he says, following after me.

“I know. I stopped at the store. I also grabbed buns.”

“I have buns.” He opens the cabinet where he keeps his bread and pulls out a pack of buns. He flips them over, and you can see the mold growing.

“How long ago did you buy those?” I ask him.

“Not sure.”

“Which is why I stopped.” I point to the new package of buns I left out on the counter. “I also grabbed some potato salad.”

“You know what else sounds good?” He reaches into another cabinet. He holds up a can of baked beans. “I’ll warm these in the microwave.”

“Check the expiration date,” I tease.

“One time,” he fires back. “One time, we ate expired beans.” He shakes his head, barely containing his laughter.

“I told you they smelled funny.”

“Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“Nope. Don’t worry. One day when you finally find your other half, I’ll be sure to make sure she knows that she should be in charge of food preparation so she doesn’t eat moldy buns and expired baked beans. Or even worse, eat a hamburger on two slices of bread. That’s just a shame, Sterling, and you know it.”

“I’ll be sure to tell your future husband that you’re a bread snob.” He chuckles, and I laugh right along with him. “I’m going to go check on the burgers,” he says, stepping back outside.

I get to work making our salads while he goes outside to man the grill. The microwave beeps, so I pull out the bowl of baked beans and place them on the stove. I get everything set up for us just as Sterling comes back inside with a plate full of burgers. The smell makes my mouth water. It doesn’t take us long to make our plates and head back outside to eat on the patio.

“How was your day?” I ask, taking a huge bite of my burger. Sterling grins. Covering my mouth with my hand, I

mumble, “I told you I was hungry.”

He nods. “It’s over. I made sure to put in my time off request too.”

“You’re lucky that you don’t have to wait for the approval.”

“Well, I kind of do. I need to let my boss know, but yeah, he’s cool. As long as we have the time and there aren’t a bunch of other people off at the same time, he’s good with it.”

“I really need to find a new job.”

“I’ve been telling you that for years. How much shit did she give you?”

“Not as much as I was anticipating. Dr. Jones being there helped a ton. I know she wasn’t happy that I made her sign both copies, but she’s burned me before.”

“That was a smart move on your part.”

“I’ve learned how to deal with her over the years. I wasn’t willing to take a chance of missing this trip. It sounds like so much fun.”

“Of course it’s going to be fun. You’re going with my family and me. We are the kings of fun.”

“The kings? Really?” I ask, amused.

“You know it. Did you take off an extra day?”

“Yep,” I reply proudly. “Now I wish I’d have taken off Monday too, just to get caught up on laundry and whatnot, but all I should have is what I take on the trip. I’ll be able to get caught up on Wednesday before we leave.”

“I’ll call my brothers this week, and we’ll figure out driving arrangements. I don’t mind driving, and I’m sure Declan will take a carload in his Tahoe.”

“I can drive if I need to,” I tell him.

“No. You’re riding with me. I don’t know if I’m driving or if we’re riding, but you’ll be with me.”



I don't argue with him. I know my best friend well enough that when he's made up his mind about something, he's stubborn as hell until he gets his way. Sterling has always been protective over me. It doesn't matter who we're with, he wants me close to him so he can, as he says, "watch out for me." I don't know how many times we've had this conversation, that I'm an adult and can take care of myself. He doesn't care. He's got it in his mind that he's my protector, and that's that.

I can't tell you how many dates I've been on where he lectures the guy. You'd think he was my dad or my older brother, not my best friend. I stopped trying to convince him that I don't need his overbearing protection a long time ago. Instead, I decided that Sterling will always be a part of my life. A huge part of my life. If the hypothetical guy I'm with can't handle my best friend looking out for me, then he's not the man for me. Plain and simple. I know Sterling feels the same way. We've both had relationships that have ended due to how close we are, and that's okay. One day the right one will come along. Until then, we have each other's backs, no matter what.

"It's going to be nice to get away for a few days," Sterling says, finishing off his burger.

"So nice. The house is insane. Jade sent the link to us in our group chat."

"I love that they include you."

I shrug. "I never took offense when they didn't. I'm not a wife or girlfriend."

"You're better. You're my best friend and have been around a hell of a lot longer than any of them."

"Sterling!" I scold. "Don't let your brothers hear you say that."

"It's the truth."

I love being included. Sterling's family is amazing, and that includes the ladies that have joined the Kincaid ranks the last few years. I don't let myself think about when Sterling does find a wife or girlfriend who sticks around long enough to be added to the chat or invited on family trips. I'd like to

think that I'll still be included, but I can't be sure. I dread that day when our dynamic changes. When he falls madly in love. I don't expect him to put me over the love of this life, but my heart aches just thinking about missing him.

# CHAPTER THREE

Sterling

I'm exhausted. This week has been the longest week in history. Okay, that's a gross exaggeration, but I've worked over sixty hours in the last five days, and I'm ready for a break. My boss came to me Tuesday morning, asking me to put in overtime to complete a project. I said yes, hence the exhaustion. Next weekend's getaway can't get here soon enough. My boss is cool as hell, so I hate telling him no when he asks me to work overtime. Not to mention it's good for the bank account.

It's just after eight when I pull into my driveway. The lights are on in my house, and Alyssa's car is in my driveway. That tells me my best friend took pity on me for working so many hours this week and is here, hopefully with dinner. Who am I kidding? She either bought or made dinner. If I know my best friend as well as I think I do, she cooked, and damn, I need to make sure I get her a little something extra for Christmas this year.

Pulling my truck into the garage, I kill the engine and climb out. My feet are killing me, and so are my arms. Welding over your head for hours and hours at a time is grueling. Pushing open the laundry room door, I step into the house, and I'm immediately hit with the smell of what I hope is Alyssa's spaghetti and meatballs. She makes them from scratch, and my mouth is watering just thinking about it.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Alyssa says when I step into the kitchen.

“Come here.” I drop my keys and phone on the counter and realize that I left my lunch box in the truck. Fuck it. I’ll get it tomorrow. I open my arms wide for a hug. She steps into my arms without hesitation, not a bit concerned that I’m still dirty from this long-ass workday.

“How was your day?” she asks.

“Long but better. Thank you for making dinner.” My stomach grumbles from the delicious smell in my house.

“I know this week got crazy for you, so I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“You have no idea.” I kiss her temple. “I’m going to shower real fast, and then I’ll join you.” She steps out of my hold and reaches for a bottle of water sitting on the counter, taking a quick drink.

“It’s ready when you are.”

“Go ahead and start without me. You know I’m about to eat my weight in pasta.” She laughs, her eyes sparkling because she knows damn good and well that I’m right. I love her spaghetti and meatballs, and I ate lunch eight hours ago. I’m starving.

“I’ll make our plates. And pull the salads I premade from the fridge.”

“I’ll be quick.” I don’t wait for her to reply. I turn on my heel and rush down the hall to my bedroom to take the world’s fastest shower.

Ten minutes later, I’m walking back into the kitchen, pulling a T-shirt on as I enter the room. “Let’s eat,” I announce, making Alyssa laugh.

“You could have taken the time to get dressed.” She points to where I’m pulling the T-shirt down.

“Shorts and a T-shirt is dressed.” I give her a cheeky smile, and she playfully rolls her eyes.

“The table is set. I assumed you wanted a beer, but I can get you something else.”

“This is perfect. Thanks, Tink. You are truly a life saver tonight. I would have ended up with a frozen pizza because I was in a hurry to just be home and no way do I feel like going back out.”

“It’s all good,” she says, taking the seat across from me at the kitchen table. “Did you get the project finished?”

“Yes. Thankfully. I feel better about taking off three days next week now that it’s done.”

“Three days?”

I nod, swallowing my food before replying, “I decided to take my own advice. I have the time, and I need to mow our yards before we leave. They’ll be a mess when we get back if not.”

“I keep telling you I can pay to have that done until I get a new mower.”

“And I keep telling you there is no need for you to pay someone when I can do it. That’s what friends are for, Alyssa. Like this.” I point to the plate of food in front of me. “You take care of me, and I take care of you. That’s our thing.”

She smiles softly, her brown eyes sparkling. “Well, I appreciate you.”

“How about you? How was the rest of your week?” I ask, shoveling a meatball into my mouth.

“Same old. I think once we’re back from our trip, I’m going to get serious about looking for something else. A job isn’t just going to fall into my lap, and I can’t handle working for her for the rest of my life.”

“Are you looking to stay in the same field?”

“Yeah, I mean, I guess so. It’s all I know, other than fast food in high school.” She shrugs. “I enjoy what I do, just not who I do it for. Well, that’s not true either. The physicians are all really nice, but Tamara is just so moody. I know that not all jobs are sunshine and roses, but she’s so hateful all the time,

and I'm tired of walking around the office on eggshells. I mean, I've been there for years. I shouldn't have to stress to the point of not being able to eat because I'm asking for time off."

"I agree with you. I'll keep an eye out too."

"Thanks, Tank."

"Tank, it's been a minute since you've brought that one out," I tease. She started calling me Tank when I nicknamed her Tink. Ironically both names fit. Alyssa is a tiny thing and standing next to me, the names Tink and Tank just fit us.

"I gotta keep you on your toes," she tells me.

"Good thinking, Tink." I wink at her, and she again rolls her eyes playfully. I've just shoved my last bite into my mouth when my phone rings. Digging it out of my pocket, I see Archer's name. I chew faster. That last bite was huge. Alyssa laughs and takes my phone. She smiles and shakes her head as she answers, hitting the button for the speaker so that I can hear the conversation.

"Hey, Archer," she greets my brother.

"Alyssa, did I call you?" he asks her, laughing.

"No. Sterling's mouth was full, so I answered for him."

"Was it now?" He snorts.

"He's eating."

"I'm sure he is."

"Dinner, asswipe," I say, finally swallowing my food. "Tink made spaghetti for dinner."

"Nice. Where was my invite, Lys?" he asks.

"Not my house," she quips.

"I see how it is." Archer's laugh fills the room.

"What's up?" I ask him.

"Just seeing what you're getting into tonight? Thought maybe we could go to the Tavern and grab a beer."

“I’m beat,” I tell him. “I put in one hell of a week.”

“I hear you there. Well, I guess I’ll just head over to Declan’s to play with Blakely.”

“Surely you have other options?” Don’t get me wrong, I love my niece to pieces, but Archer is young and should be out painting the town and all that. “You’re too young to be settling for a night in with our five-year-old niece,” I tell him.

“Ha! I’m only four years younger than you, and you’re sitting at home on a Friday night.”

“I’m not alone. Alyssa is here.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have an Alyssa in my life.”

I glance across the table at my best friend. I’m damn lucky to have her. “Want me to have Alyssa fix you up?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah, no, I’m out on that.”

“We have plenty,” Alyssa speaks up. “You can come and have dinner.”

“Might as well,” I tell him. “She made a ton.”

“Because you eat a ton, Tank,” Alyssa sasses.

“We’re growing men, Alyssa,” Archer tells her.

“Just come on over before I put it all away. Oh, and stop and grab your brother a six-pack. He just had the last one with dinner.”

“Twelve-pack. Got it.” Archer chuckles. “I’m putting my shoes on now.”

“See ya soon.” I tap End Call on my phone, not waiting for his answer.

“You hung up on him.” Alyssa gives me her best stink eye.

“I did not. We were finished.”

“You didn’t say goodbye.”

“He’s going to be here in like fifteen minutes. He can tell me whatever else you think he needed to say when he gets

here.”

“I’d be pissed if you hung up on me like that.”

“I didn’t hang up on him. We were done talking. Besides, you know I’d never hang up on you.”

“Well, I’m glad that he’s coming over. That way, you don’t have to eat leftovers all weekend.”

“You know if you make it, I’m eating it even if it’s for days.”

“I’ve already made you dinner. You don’t have to suck up.” She grins. She stands and grabs our empty plates, but I reach out, placing my hand on her wrist to stop her.

“You cooked. I clean. You know the rules, Tink.”

“I know that’s how we usually do it, but you’ve had a long week.”

“Doesn’t matter. It will take me no time to rinse these and put them in the dishwasher. Besides, I’m leaving it out until Archer gets here. Go sit. Pick us a movie, and I’ll be right there.” She nods, hands me our empty dirty plates, and moves to the living room.

“What do you want to watch?” she calls out to me.

“I don’t care. You pick.” We both know I’ll be sound asleep within minutes. This work week really did kick my ass.

It takes no time to rinse our dishes and load them into the dishwasher, that I know was full. Alyssa must have taken care of that when she got here earlier. Reaching into the fridge for a beer, I remember that I’m out, and Archer is restocking me. Instead, I grab a bottle of water for Alyssa.

“That was fast.” She smiles up at me from her spot on the couch.

I set the bottle of water on the end table next to her and plop down on the couch. She instinctively lifts her legs and places them on my lap. “Did you decide?”

“No. I’m trying to find something manly since Archer is coming over.”



“You cooked. You can watch whatever you want, and neither one of us will say a damn word about it.”

“I know, but I don’t want you two to be miserable. Remember the last time I picked when your brothers were here? There was that royal romance movie playing, and they made fun of me through the entire thing.”

My hands begin massaging her feet. “That won’t happen. I promise. I got on their asses about it, and it won’t happen again. I gave you free rein. They needed to accept that.”

“Regardless, I’m looking for something manly.” She scrolls through the options and nods. “This will do.” She queues up some combat movie.

“You’re going to sleep right through this.”

She grins and shrugs. “I’m not afraid to nap it out, Tank.”

I chuckle. “I know you’re not. There’s nothing wrong with a nap. However, you won’t sleep tonight, and then you’ll be pissed tomorrow because you’re tired.” Instead of replying, she sticks her tongue out at me, and I toss her a wink. We both know I’m right.

The sound of the front door opening and heavy footsteps down the hall has me turning my head to greet one of my little brothers.

“Damn, Lys, it smells good.” He nods toward the twelve-pack of beer in his arms, and I nod, reaching out to take one from him.

“You’re staying if you’re drinking, right?” Yes, I know he’s twenty-four and a grown-ass man, but he’s still my little brother.

“You good with me staying?” he questions.

“You know which room you can use.” I have two spare rooms, and one is reserved strictly for Alyssa. She doesn’t stay over often, but when she does, it’s her room. She has clothes and toiletries she keeps here, and I don’t let anyone ever sleep there. I have the same setup at her place. Makes it nice when

we're out late or just hanging out like this with a beer or two, and neither one has to worry about getting home.

"Alyssa?" Archer offers her a beer.

"No, thanks."

"We left everything out. Make a plate and come sit. She's got a movie ready to go." I point toward the television.

"On it. You both already ate?" he asks.

"Yep. Knock yourself out." My plate had been heaped. Between that and the salad, I'm stuffed. I wait until he's in the kitchen before turning my attention back to my best friend. "Thank you for making dinner and inviting him over."

"Of course. He's family."

I nod because Alyssa is my family too. She thinks of my brothers as her own, and they think of her as a sister. "What are we doing tomorrow?" I ask.

"I'm going shopping with Kennedy and the girls. We're going to pick up some new items for our trip."

"Why do women need new clothes to go on vacation?" I ask.

"It's not that we need them, as much as it's nice to have them. I don't know. There's just something about a new outfit or bathing suit when you're already in a relaxed setting. It makes you feel good about yourself."

"That makes sense, I guess. Guys are just different. I couldn't care less what I am wearing as long as it's clean."

Alyssa laughs. "Did you ever buy new swim trunks since yours split open at the end of the season last year?"

"Damn. No, I didn't. I'm probably going to need those for the trip, huh?"

"Yep."

"Remind me to give you my card before you leave, and you can grab me a pair. Actually, grab me two. You never know what could happen."

“Any special requests?”

“Nope. You know my style just as well as I do.”

“You mean clean, wrinkled, and some just a little bit faded from welding all day.”

“Smartass.” I reach over and poke her side, making her splutter with laughter. “And yes, that’s exactly it,” I concede. “But the wrinkle thing is no more. Not since I started giving my clothes a couple of spins in the dryer. I’m wrinkle-free.”

“You know that’s wear and tear on your dryer and hell on your electric bill. You could just hang them up or fold them as soon as they’re dry, and voilà, no wrinkles.”

“I seriously hate laundry.”

“Your future wife is in for a battle with that one, huh?” she teases.

“It’s called compromise.”

“What are we compromising on?” Archer asks, taking a seat in the recliner with a heaping plate of spaghetti and meatballs.

“I was just telling Sterling his future wife is going to have a field day with the way he does laundry.”

“She’s right.” Archer points his fork at me. “You suck at it.”

“Like you’re any better.”

“Hey, I might live out of clothes baskets, but at least they’re all folded.”

“Progress.” Alyssa nods her approval. “Oh, do you want me to make you a salad?” she offers.

“Nah, if I’m still hungry after this, I’ll make one. It’s great, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re spoiled,” Archer tells me. “Not only do you have a cool-as-hell best friend, but she also makes you these awesome dinners.”

“Don’t forget that I do his shopping too.”

“Shopping?”

“Yep. The girls and I are going shopping for our trip tomorrow, and I’m going to pick up some swim trunks for him.”

“Oh, shit, that night was the best. It’s a good thing Blakely wasn’t there when you jumped out of the pool with your twig and berries hanging out for all to see.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I defend.

“It was pretty bad,” Alyssa tells me. “All I saw was your bare ass, but rumor has it the front was just as bad.”

“They split up both sides. I couldn’t do that again if I tried.”

“Let’s not try,” Archer says, reaching for his beer. “I’m scarred for life. I can’t afford any more damage.”

“Whatever.” I flip him off, and he rolls with laughter, almost spilling his plate of spaghetti on my floor.

“Are you ready for the movie?”

“Yep, and I don’t even care if you make me watch a chick flick after this dinner. It’s delicious, Lys, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She hits Play, and the three of us settle in for the action film.

The only thing that would make this night any better is if the rest of my family were here.

# CHAPTER FOUR

Alyssa

“Brooks is already freaking out,” Palmer tells us.

We’re sitting at the food court at the mall having lunch. We’ve been shopping since early this morning and have been finding some good deals.

“About what?” Ramsey asks.

“Next week I’ll be six weeks from delivery, and he’s convinced we should stay home.”

“We’re not going to be far from a hospital,” Kennedy tells us. We all must be giving her weird looks because she grins and says, “Declan looked.”

“Of course he did.” Ramsey laughs. “If anyone should be freaking out, it’s me. We’re going the week before my wedding,” she reminds us.

“How are you not freaking out?” Jade asks her.

Ramsey shrugs. “Stressing won’t change anything. As long as at the end of the day, Deacon is my husband, and all of my favorite people are there, I can’t ask for more.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to be my sister.” Palmer wipes at her eyes. “Don’t mind me. Pregnancy hormones.”

“What she said,” Kennedy adds, also wiping at her cheeks.

“It’s real,” Jade chimes in. She bats her eyelashes, which are beading with tears. “I freaked Orrin out the other night. He

came into the bedroom, and I was sitting on the bed with the remote in my hand, crying. I was watching a stupid commercial for coffee. You know, the ones where the soldier comes home surprising his family by waking them up with a fresh pot of coffee. Tears, lots and lots of tears.”

“I wanted kids. I want kids—” she places her hand on her belly, “but damn these hormones are no joke,” Piper mutters.

“Right? This isn’t a glowing review, ladies,” I tell them.

“For all of the hormones and trips to the bathroom, it’s still worth it.” Palmer smiles, placing her hands over her baby bump. “When I get to feel her move, it’s life-altering.”

“Stop.” Ramsey blows out a breath. She takes a minute to gather her emotions before speaking again. “I can’t wait until that’s me. Deacon and I want to start a family right away. We want our kids to be raised with all of yours.”

“Heath and I have been talking about marriage,” Piper confesses. “We did things backwards,” she shrugs. “He wants to do it now, but I don’t want to get married just because we’re pregnant.”

“You know that’s not why,” Palmer speaks up. “He loves you.”

“We can all see it,” Jade tells her.

“I know.” Piper blows out a breath. “Damn hormones. I’m surprised Heath isn’t running for the hills.” We all laugh at that.

“Don’t worry about anyone but the two of you. Do what feels right,” Ramsey tells her.

Piper nods. “We’re not going to find out the gender,” she announces.

“Really?” Palmer asks. “Mom is going to flip.”

Piper grins. “We want to be surprised. Life has so little good surprises these days.”

“Heath is good with that?” Kennedy asks.

“He is.”

“What about you?” Kennedy asks me.

“Me? I’m single as a Pringle. No babies in my future.”

“You should let us set you up with someone,” Palmer suggests. “I’m good at it.” She points to Ramsey and grins.

“The issue is that I’ve lived in Willow River my entire life. I either grew up with them, I’ve already dated them, or I have no desire to date the men in this town.”

“Well, there’s that,” Ramsey agrees.

“And there’s the fact that you and Sterling are so close,” Kennedy says.

I shrug. “He’s my best friend. He has been since we were kids. If any potential man in my life can’t handle that, they can hit the road.”

“I get that,” Jade says cautiously. “But what happens when one of you finds someone that takes more time than what you’ve given a relationship in the past? What happens then?”

“Sterling will always be a part of my life. He’s family.”

“We get that,” Piper agrees with me. “But you have to admit that if and when either of you decides to settle down, your current relationship will change.”

“Sure, I mean, we won’t get to hang out as much. He’ll have a wife to make him dinner after a long week at work. That doesn’t mean I can’t do that for both of them.” Suddenly my mind is filled with thoughts of what life might look like with my best friend married and me sitting on the sidelines. I admit it’s not something I’ve ever had to do where Sterling is concerned.

“Or, the two of you can just get married.” Palmer gives me a pointed look.

“He’s my best friend.”

“Deacon is my best friend,” Ramsey tells me.

“Brooks is mine,” Palmer states.

“Heath is mine,” Piper adds.

Kennedy raises her hand. “Declan for me.” She grins.

“Redundant, but Orrin is mine.” Jade winks.

“I’m sure that when I meet him, my husband will be mine as well.”

“Or maybe you’ve already met him?” Kennedy asks.

“Baby and wedding fever has got you ladies romancing everything around you,” I say, grabbing my iced tea and finishing it off. I’m uneasy with their insistence that Sterling and I could be more. That ship, or shall we say idea, sailed a long time ago.

“Let us set you up.” Palmer gives me a look, daring me to say no.

“Fine. Whoever it is, I’m meeting them wherever we’re going, and I don’t want some strange man at my house. Sterling has reminded me enough times to know I need to be careful about who I trust.”

“Oh, Sterling did, did he?” Piper grins.

“He’s my best friend,” I repeat. I let my eyes scan each of theirs, and I can see it plain as day. They’re not buying it. “You’d think that his family, our friends, would understand our relationship. I shouldn’t have to defend it to you.” I’m a little hurt, to be honest. I’ve spent my entire life arguing with people about my friendship with Sterling Kincaid. The last people I thought I’d have to do that with is the group of ladies that surround me. Kennedy is the newest, but she and I have spent a lot of time together. We’ve been over this.

“We’re not trying to upset you,” Ramsey says gently. “That’s not our intention at all. However, we see things differently. We’re not exactly outsiders, but we do see the two of you together. It just seems like there might be something there.”

“I mean, he’s hot.” Palmer smiles. “And yes, I’ll tell my husband that. All his brothers are easy on the eyes.”

“I’m not blind,” I tell her.

“Oh, so you think he’s hot too?” Jade asks.



“They all are.” The confession rolls off my tongue with ease. Willow River is a small town, and all the ladies, hell, and even the men in this town know the Kincaid brothers. They give all-new meaning to tall, dark, and handsome. Not to mention they’re great guys, hard workers, and know how to treat a lady. Carol and Raymond made sure of that. Any woman would be lucky to call one of them hers.

“Does Sterling know you think his brothers are hot?” Piper asks.

“By the way, thanks.” Jade winks. “I know my hubby is fine, and I don’t mind if you look.”

“What she said,” Palmer and Kennedy say at the same time, causing us all to laugh.

“I don’t know that it’s ever come up,” I answer Piper.

“Hmm.” She sips her drink.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “Just processing this new information. On second thought, fixing you up isn’t our best idea.”

I groan. “I’ve heard all of you admit the same thing before. Why is the heat all of a sudden turned my way?”

“Because you’re in denial,” Palmer replies.

“I’m not in denial. There has never been anything between Sterling and me outside of our friendship. He’s been my best friend since we were kids. That’s it.”

“Then explain why his eyes follow you everywhere you go?” Ramsey asks.

“He’s protective. I’m more like a little sister.”

“I call bullshit,” Jade replies.

“I say we test this theory,” Kennedy chimes in.

“Oh.” Palmer points at her. “I like the way you think.”

“Fine.” I huff out a laugh. “There is nothing to test, but if you ladies want to try, go right ahead.” I shrug, knowing damn

good and well it's going to be a wasted effort on their part.

Sterling is my best friend. I love him, but that's all we are. Is he hot as sin? Yes. Have I thought about more with him. Yes. I'm human, and the younger me romanticized about us being more hundreds of times. Adult me, rational me, knows that's not going to happen. We've been friends for over twenty years. We've had plenty of time to change our relationship status, and neither of us has ever attempted to do so.

"You're wasting your time," I tell the group.

"This is going to be fun." Ramsey grins.

"Your idea of fun is skewed, my friend," I tease.

"I can't wait to watch him get all jealous," Piper tells me.

I just shake my head at them. He's not going to get jealous. I can only assume their earlier offer to set me up with someone is how they're going to prove their theory. I've dated lots of guys, just none that I want more with. Sterling knows this and doesn't care. He warns me about safety. He tells me not to let them pick me up at my place, definitely not on the first date, always carry my Mace, and if at any time I need him, I'm to call him. No questions asked. Never once has he shown an ounce of jealousy over a man in my life.

"Pick."

I turn to look at Palmer, and she has a smug look on her face. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, this is good." Ramsey grins.

"It's our thing. You have to pick which Kincaid brother you would choose for your own."

"That's crazy."

"We've all done it," they remind me. "Well, except for Piper. She already had her eye on Heath."

"I'm not choosing. That's ridiculous."

"You have to pick," Ramsey tells me. "That's the only way."

“The only way what?”

“It’s the only way the universe will know,” Jade replies.

“I love you, all of you, but you ladies have lost your damn minds.” I chuckle. They all stare at me with these creepy-ass, knowing smiles on their faces.

“Stop.”

“Pick,” Kennedy says softly.

“You.” I point at her. “I never once pressured you with Declan.”

She shrugs. “I chose. He’s now my husband.” She places her hand over her pregnant belly. That’s an entirely different story for another day. Let’s just say that she and Declan had a major curveball sent their way, but they are happier than they have ever been.

“I chose Declan.” Kennedy grins. “You didn’t have to pressure me.”

“Come on. Just between us. If you had to pick one of the single brothers, which would you choose?” Piper asks.

“You realize this is insane, right?” There is only one brother I would choose. My best friend is the greatest man I know. He’s more than just his looks. He’s a hard worker, he loves his family, and he’s my rock. There isn’t a single good memory in my life that Sterling hasn’t been a part of.

“Come on. Humor us.”

“Don’t we have more shopping to do?” I evade. I don’t care that it’s obvious. I can’t choose, and not just because I don’t want them to romanticize our relationship more than they already are. I don’t want to let my mind think that there might be a sliver of a chance. Teenage Alyssa struggled with that. Adult Alyssa knows better and has accepted that he will be in my life forever as my best friend. I’m good with that.

“We do,” Jade agrees.

“What do you have left to get?” Piper asks.

“I still want some new lingerie for the honeymoon,” Ramsey tells us.

“And I need to get something for Blakely,” Kennedy says. “Declan tells me that I’m spoiling her, but I feel bad that I didn’t bring her with me today.”

“You could have brought her,” Palmer tells her.

“I know, but I wanted some girl time. I love that little girl with everything I am, but Momma needed some adult time.”

“We should make that a thing. I know we have girls’ nights with Blakely, and I’m sure this little one too.” Palmer rubs at her belly. “The baby boys can come as well,” she assures Kennedy. She and Declan are having a boy, and Jade and Orrin haven’t found out what they’re having yet.

“However, we need to make sure that just because we’re all becoming moms, we don’t give up adult girls’ night. Daddys can pull kid duty.” Palmer nods as if she’s loving her own idea.

“Deal,” everyone but me speaks up. I’m the only one unattached. The others are pregnant or talking about marriage, and then there’s me.

“Do you have more shopping to do?” Kennedy asks me.

“Yeah. I need to get Sterling some new swim trunks. His ripped at the end of the season last year, and he never replaced them.” I stand from my chair and gather my trash. I’m not waiting for them to spout more nonsense about me pursuing something with my best friend.

Surprisingly, they stay quiet as we finish out our day of shopping.

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“This is a nice surprise,” I tell Sterling as I pull into my driveway.

“I figured I’d help you carry in all your bags.”

“I didn’t buy that much. Besides, there were some great clearance deals. You know that I’m a bargain shopper. Oh, and I found you three pairs of trunks. Two were buy one get one. So, I figured, why not.”

“Thank you. You used my card, right?”

I nod. What I don’t tell him is that even though the girls didn’t comment directly when they found out I was using his card, they did all wear what I can only describe as knowing smiles.

“Thanks, Tink.” He presses his lips to the top of my head before reaching into the back seat of my car and grabbing all the bags.

“Did you all drive separately?” he asks.

“We took three cars. Kennedy and I went in Declan’s Tahoe. Piper and Jade rode together, and Palmer and Ramsey.”

“We need to all go in and buy a party bus or conversion van or something so we can all ride together.”

“Ha!” I push at his arm, and he doesn’t budge. “We didn’t want to move Blakely’s booster seat, and Palmer already has the base and car seat in her car for the baby.”

“I would expect nothing less coming from Brooks. My brother is nervous as hell for this baby to get here. He’s nervous and excited.”

“A baby is exciting.”

“Agreed. But my brother is going to be one of those dads who drives fifteen miles under the speed limit the day they bring her home.” Sterling chuckles.

“It’s endearing.”

“Yeah, I mean, I like to give him shit for it, but I can’t imagine how I would feel if that were me. I know Declan was scared as hell, but he was in a different situation. Blakely went home from the hospital with her mom.”

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask, changing the subject.

He shrugs. “What do you feel like doing?”

“I’m going to do laundry and wash these new clothes. I need to get a head start on packing for the trip.”

“You took off Wednesday,” he reminds me.

“I know, but I hate waiting until the last minute. Besides, I assumed you’d need help packing, and I could do that while you take care of the yards.” I push open the front door and allow him to step into the house before me, closing the door behind us. Sterling carries the bags into the living room, placing them on the couch before turning to face me.

He points at me and grins. “That is why you are my favorite human.”

“I see how it is. Using me for my laundry and packing skills.”

“Hey, this is mutually beneficial. I mow your lawn. You help me pack and maybe do a load of laundry or two. We both win.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “I guess I’ll keep you.”

He lunges for me. I turn to run from him, but his long-ass legs eat up the distance. He grabs me from behind. His arm tightens around my waist as he lifts me into the air. “You’re stuck with me, Tink.”

He moves his free hand to my side, and I know what’s next. He’s going to torture me by tickling me, and I already have to pee. “Uncle!” I shout before he has the chance. “I give up. I have to pee, and it’s not going to be pretty if you move forward with your plan.”

His laughter fills my living room, and I smile right along with him. “Fine.” He kisses my cheek and sets me back on my feet. I race down the hall to the restroom.

I find him in the kitchen a few minutes later. “What should we eat?”

“Are we hanging out?” I ask him.

“Don’t we always?”

“No. Not always. You go out with your brothers.”

“Well, not tonight. How about homemade pizza? I can go grab whatever we need from the store.”

“I actually have everything we need. I’ve been craving it.”

“Great minds.” He smiles, and I’m once again reminded why he’s my best friend. Sterling really is the greatest man I’ve ever met. He, too, is my favorite human.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Sterling

My cell phone vibrating on the nightstand pulls me from a deep sleep. Blinking my eyes open, I peer at the alarm clock, which tells me it's just after seven in the morning. We're not leaving until ten today because we can't check into the rental until one in the afternoon. My bags are already packed, thanks to Alyssa, and we were just going to grab groceries when we got closer to the rental house. My plan was to sleep in. Something I don't get to do often, but apparently, someone has other plans.

Grabbing my phone, I see my brother Ryder's name on the screen. "What's up?" I answer groggily.

"Did I wake you?"

"Yep," I say over a yawn.

"Sorry."

He doesn't sound sorry at all. He also doesn't sound like himself. "What's up? Everything okay?" It's not unusual for one of my brothers to call me this early in the morning, but they're typically trying to wake my ass up. This isn't one of those times.

"Yeah. Yes. Everything is fine. I just wanted to run something by you."

"At seven in the morning?"

"Yes."



He sounds nervous, which has me sitting up in bed, giving him my full attention. “I’m listening.”

“About the trip?”

“What about it?” I feel like I’m prying the information out of him, and he’s the one who called me.

“I want to bring someone.”

“Someone, as in one of the guys? Or someone as in a female someone?”

“Female. Definitely not one of the guys.”

“She must mean a lot to you.”

“I wouldn’t bring her otherwise.”

That’s something that he didn’t need to tell me. We’re all like that. Time with our family is sacred. You don’t invite someone to a family event unless our hearts are invested. Or if that person is your lifelong best friend like Alyssa is to me.

“So, what do you need from me?”

“Well, I was supposed to be rooming with you.”

“Ah, so you want me to sleep on the couch, is that it?” I laugh.

“No. I didn’t, actually. I just assumed you could share a room with Alyssa. She has one all to herself. It’s not like you’ve never done that before.”

He’s right. Alyssa and I have shared a bed before, but it’s been a long time. I think that the last time was right after we graduated from high school. We went on a vacation to Florida with her parents, and the hotel we stayed in had two queen beds. Now we have our own places and spare bedrooms when we crash at each other’s place, which also doesn’t happen as often as it used to.

“I don’t think that will be an issue. Let me run it past Alyssa, and I’ll call you right back.”

“Do you want me to call her?” he offers. “It’s me who’s making the change.”

“Nah, I’m sure she’s going to be fine with it. If not, I’ll sleep on the couch. It’s not a huge deal. Call your girl and tell her to get packed.” I end the call and immediately dial Alyssa.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you this early,” she answers.

“Ryder called and woke me up.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s all good. He actually wanted to ask me if you and I could share a room this weekend. He’s going to bring someone.”

“Oh, is it the girl that he’s dating? He’s been so secretive about her. All I know is that they met at the club in Harris.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s her. He’s hooked and is ready to bring her around the family. He and I were supposed to be sharing a room.”

“Oh, well, you can share with me. I can even take the couch. I’m not picky. I felt bad getting a room all to myself anyway.”

“I told him that if you weren’t okay with sharing with me that I would take the couch.”

“Um, no, you’re too big for the couch. You wouldn’t even be able to stretch out all the way, but I’m fine with it. We’ve shared a bed before.”

“That’s what I told him.”

“Yay!” she cheers, way too chipper for this time of the morning. “I’m excited to meet her.”

“Same. Since we’re both up, we’re going to grab breakfast. I need a shower and toss my bags in the truck. I’ll be there to get you in about forty minutes or so.”

“Dorothy’s Diner,” she tells me. “I want bacon and eggs, and hashbrowns, and maybe even a pancake. I’m starving.”

I smile even though I know she can’t see me. “Anything you want. I’ll be there soon.”

“See you soon.”

Ending the call, I shoot Ryder a message.

**Me:** Alyssa's fine with it. I figured she would be.

**Ryder:** Thank you. I'll be sure to thank Alyssa as well.

**Me:** Do the others know you're bringing her?

**Ryder:** Not yet. I was waiting to hear back from you.

**Me:** I told you to tell your girl to start packing.

**Ryder:** She's got time. I'm going to text everyone now.

**Me:** Good.

I set my phone back on the nightstand and head to the shower. I mentally go over the items I need to add to my bag before I leave. Alyssa came over last night, and we had dinner, and she pretty much packed my clothes. She said she wanted to make sure nothing was wrinkled. I just let her do her thing. She knows me well enough to do it. I, for one, wasn't the least bit worried about wrinkles. The house has two washers and two dryers. The wrinkles are nothing a spin in the dryer can't fix, just like when I'm at home. My best friend didn't agree, so she took over for me.

I still have to pack my phone charger and my toiletries, and I need to make sure my sunglasses are in the truck. I do not want to be on the weekend getaway without them. Ten minutes later, I'm dressed and tossing additional items into my bag. My phone is pinging like crazy with messages which

means Ryder told our brothers about his girl in our group chat. I don't want to get caught up in that, so I continue to ignore it and finish packing what I need.

Tossing my bag over my shoulder, I grab my phone and head to the living room. The trash is almost full, so I take that out so I don't come back to a house that stinks. I learned that lesson the hard way. I take a walk around the house, making sure all doors and windows are locked before loading my things into my truck.

Before taking off, I read through the thread of messages with my brothers.

**Ryder:** I'm bringing someone with us. Her name is Jordyn. I already talked to Sterling, and he's cleared it with Alyssa for them to share a room.

**Maverick:** Oh, I'm sure he did.

**Merrick:** Like it's going to be a struggle for him to sleep next to his hot "best friend."

**Orrin:** Can't wait to meet her.

**Brooks:** Leave Sterling alone, and what Orrin said.

**Rushton:** Alyssa can share a room with me, and Archer can room with Sterling.

**Archer:** Nope. I'm taking Alyssa. You get Sterling.

**Rushton:** I called dibs on Alyssa.

**Declan:** I'm pretty sure Sterling already called dibs, Rush.

**Declan:** Are you sure you're ready to bring her into this madness?

**Ryder:** Never been more certain.

**Orrin:** Well, all right then.

**Deacon:** Sterling's going to kick your asses, and I'm going to watch. I'll even keep him out of jail.

**Brooks:** See everyone here at ten. We'll be on our best behavior, Ryder.

**Ryder:** And I have oceanfront property in Arizona I'd like to sell.

**Maverick:** I think we made Sterling mad.

**Rushton:** Yes! I get the girl.

These assholes. I'm shaking my head and smiling at the same time, only something my brothers can manage to make me do.

**Me:** Alyssa is off limits. Can't wait to meet her. See you soon.

Tossing my phone in the cupholder, I pull out of the garage and head toward Alyssa's. My phone pings the entire drive, and I can only imagine the shit they're saying. When I make it to Alyssa's, I put the truck in park and read their replies.

**Rushton:** You're greedy, Sterling.

**Archer:** Right? Brothers are supposed to share.

**Maverick:** Oh! Are we sharing Alyssa now?

**Merrick:** Maybe she has a twin fantasy.

**Me:** OFF LIMITS!

My text is followed by a laughing emoji from Maverick, Merrick, Rushton, and Archer. The others seem smart enough to leave it alone. They know I'm protective of Alyssa, and I always have been. It's not that my brothers aren't great guys. They are. However, I know myself. I know I would be jealous that they got her time, and I didn't. It's bad enough that one day she's going to meet someone, and I'm going to have to share her. I'm not going to adjust well to that, and if it were one of my brothers, yeah, I don't think so.

"What's got you scowling at your phone like that?" Alyssa asks.

I turn to look where she's standing with the passenger door hanging open, her suitcase at her feet, and a small backpack thrown over her shoulder. I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't even hear her open the door.

“Nothing, my brothers are being shitheads. Let me help you with that.” I move to open my door, but her words stop me.

“I got it.” She’s already opening the back door to my truck and hefting her suitcase inside and placing her backpack on the seat.

“Do you have everything that you need? I thought that we could just head on over to Brooks and Palmer’s after we eat.”

“I’m all set. The house is locked up, but I want to stop and get some gum, mints, and stuff for the road.”

“Good idea. I have my small cooler in the bed. I want to grab some ice and drinks as well. It’s only about a two-and-a-half-hour’s drive to where we’re going.”

“You can’t have a road trip without snacks.”

“That’s why I brought the cooler. I know you like to be well-stocked.”

“You never know what’s going to happen. It’s best to always try and be as prepared as possible.”

“And who doesn’t like snacks?”

“Right? You get me, Kincaid.”

I just smile and shake my head. Alyssa has always been a candy junkie. In fact, I keep a drawer full of the stuff for her at my place for when she’s there. “That I do,” I say as I pull into the parking lot of Dorothy’s Diner.

Climbing out of the truck, we head inside. I follow Alyssa to a booth in the back corner. “Why did we eat dinner so early last night? I’m starving,” she comments as she picks up a menu from the table and begins to look at her options.

I do the same, but I’m not sure why we even bother with the menu. We’ve eaten here enough over the years. We should have it memorized by now. “Because we both skipped breakfast yesterday and had an early lunch.”

“This being off-work business has my system all out of whack.”

“Are you saying you’d rather be at work?”

“Whoa, now. Let’s not start talking nonsense. I can’t tell you how excited I am to get away for a few days. When I get back, I’m definitely moving looking for a new job to the top of my priority list.”

“Good. You deserve better.”

“Honestly, I don’t know how she’s kept her job this long.”

“It’s because you and the rest of the staff put up with her shit. I’ve been telling you for years to speak up.”

“I don’t like confrontation. You know that.”

“I know you don’t, but sometimes it can’t be helped.”

“Well, I’m just going to start searching instead of just waiting for something to fall into my lap. I’d like to stay in the same field, or at least the same type of work.”

“Maybe mention it to the girls this weekend, and they can all be on the lookout as well.”

“I don’t want to bother them with my career woes.”

“They’re your friends, Tink.”

Her eyes soften. “They’re my friends because they’re your family.”

“Bullshit. That might be how you connected with them, but remove me from the equation, and they’re still your friends.”

“Fine,” she grumbles. “I’ll mention it.”

“Thank you.”

She sticks her tongue out at me. “You’re welcome. I have to use the restroom. If our waitress comes, will you order for me?”

“I think I remember everything you rattled off earlier,” I tease. We both know that I can order for her with ease.

“All the things, Kincaid. I want all the things. Oh, and an orange juice.” She gives me a wide smile as she slides out of the booth and heads toward the restroom.



“What can I get you, darlin’?” Dorothy asks as she approaches our booth.

“Are you short-staffed today, Miss Dorothy?” I ask. It’s unusual for her to take orders.

“Nah, I still like to work the floor from time to time. Are we waiting on that girl of yours to come back?”

I don’t bother correcting her. Dorothy is just another member of this town who’s convinced that a man and a woman can’t be best friends, even though Alyssa and I are living proof that it can be done.

“Nope. I’ll have a stack of pancakes with a side of bacon, extra crispy, and two eggs over easy. Alyssa will have two eggs over easy, toast, hashbrowns, bacon, chewy, and one pancake. Oh, and a glass of orange juice for both of us.”

“Coming right up.” She shoves her pen back behind her ear into her hair, which is in some kind of updo with a net covering it, and limps back to the kitchen to put our order in.

A younger waitress, who appears to be barely old enough to be working, delivers our drinks and silverware just as Alyssa is sliding back into the booth. “Thanks for this.” Alyssa works on opening her straw and sliding it into her glass of orange juice before taking a huge drink. “What did you get me?”

I rattle off her order, and she nods her approval. “Just hearing you say it has my belly growling.”

“How much do I have to beg for you to make your pasta salad sometime this weekend?”

“Which one?”

“The one with the tomatoes and cucumbers. The ranch one.” My mouth waters just thinking about it.

“That’s the one that Rushton likes too. I’ll make it. You don’t have to beg. Just remind me when we stop to get food so I can pick up everything we need.”

I want to tell her never mind. My earlier messages with my brothers are still in my head. I don’t want Rushton to get any

ideas, thinking that Alyssa is making it just for him. I'll be sure and announce that she's making it for me. I sound like a jealous asshole, but as I said, I can't stand to share her with my brothers. Not intimately, anyway. I know that none of them would ever pursue her for real, but just the thought has me twitchy.

When our food arrives a few minutes later, Alyssa wastes no time diving in. I do the same, and by the time our plates are cleared, we're both complaining about eating too much.

"It was so good," Alyssa says, climbing back into my truck.

"Definitely hit the spot."

"Take me to the snacks," she says, fastening her seat belt.

"How can you think about snacks after all the food we just consumed?"

"Road trip, Tank. Road. Trip. We've discussed this."

I chuckle at her enthusiasm for said road trip and the need for snacks, and drive one block over to the gas station. "My lady," I tease.

"Thank you, kind sir. Do you have any requests?"

"No. Just our usual is fine. I have drinks, but we need a bag of ice. I'll just come in with you." Pulling the keys from the ignition, I climb out of the truck and make my way inside. We take our time since we've still got plenty, and move up and down each aisle, filling our hands with snacks. By the time we make it to the counter, both of our arms are full.

"It's just going to be four of us in our vehicle," I remind her.

"Hey, you grabbed just as much as I did. Besides, Kennedy is eating for two, and she might have a special craving for sweet, salty, or sour. We've covered all of our bases here."

"Good thinking." I tell the guy behind the counter we need a bag of ice and give him my debit card before Alyssa has a chance to pay.

“Hey, snacks were my idea.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to make that pasta for me, so we’re even.” She just shakes her head but doesn’t argue with me. She learned a long time ago that there is no use. I always get my way. I like doing nice things for her, even if it means dropping a Benjamin on gas station snacks for our road trip.

As we drive to my brother’s place, where we’re all meeting, I feel the excitement start to build. There have been several new additions to our family, and I love that my brothers and my cousin, Ramsey, have all found someone to share their lives with who understands how close we are. I can only hope that one day it happens for the rest of us. I know for certain if the woman doesn’t love my family and my best friend, she’s not the one for me.

# CHAPTER SIX

Alyssa

“Wow,” I say as we pull into the driveway of the rental house that will be home for the next few days. “This place is beautiful.”

“The pictures don’t do it justice,” Kennedy replies.

Declan stops the car behind Orrin’s truck, and the others pull up behind us. Everyone piles out of their vehicles and stretches as we take in our surroundings. The house sits right on Lake Oconee with a long, paved driveway. The eight-bedroom monstrosity looks like a house you would see on an episode of *MTV Cribs*. It’s gorgeous and fancy, and with its inground pool, hot tub, and lake access, it’s the perfect weekend getaway.

“How are we picking rooms?” Rushton asks. He slings his arm over my shoulder. “I want to make sure me and my girl have some privacy.” He winks at me as Sterling growls.

“Fuck off, Rush.” Sterling slaps his arm away and pulls me to stand closer to his side.

“You couldn’t handle me,” I tease Rushton.

“Tink.” Sterling’s tone is clearly a warning. One that Both Rushton and I ignore.

“I’ll take that wager,” he replies confidently.

At twenty-six, Rushton is just two years younger than Sterling and me. He’s like a brother to me and in no way do I

think he's being serious. What I do know is that the Kincaid brothers like to give each other hell, and Rushton knows how protective Sterling can be. He's been cooped up in the car too long, and it appears as though Sterling is his first form of entertainment on this trip.

"I say we let the ladies who are expecting pick their rooms first," Ramsey suggests.

"Oh, you don't need to do that," Palmer tells her. "Look at this place. I can guarantee all the rooms are going to be more than sufficient."

Ramsey shrugs. "We have to start somewhere."

"Well, since I'm the oldest, and my wife is expecting, we're going first." Orrin pulls his phone from his pocket and taps at the screen. "Besides, I have the code to get in." He grins as he takes Jade by the hand and leads her up the steps toward the front door.

"We might as well go by age. Deacon, since you and Orrin are the old men of the bunch, you all go next," Archer teases.

Deacon points at Archer. "Respecting your elders. I like it." He smirks as he places his hand on the small of Ramsey's back and leads her into the house.

"Is there a waiting period for this selection process?" Brooks asks with a chuckle.

"This is ridiculous," Declan speaks up. "Let's just go in." With that, we all start piling into the house. Everyone pairs up with their room partner and sets off to select their rooms.

"Come on." Sterling grabs my hand and leads me through the kitchen and down a small hallway. Pushing open the door, he reveals a huge bedroom with a massive king-sized bed sitting in the center.

"How did you know this was here?" I ask him.

"Orrin sent the link for the house. I studied the pictures and layout description. I was going to suggest you take this room, but since you and I are sharing, we both get it." He grins, proud of his discovery.

“Good find.”

“Agreed. It’s away from everyone else and has its own bathroom. I believe they called it an in-law suite.”

“Don’t all the bedrooms have their own bathrooms?”

“Yes, but they all share walls. This one is private.”

“Because I would have needed all the privacy staying in a room by myself?” I raise an eyebrow in question.

“No. Well, at least I didn’t think about that until now. I knew you’d feel odd being the only one having a room all to yourself, so I thought if it was secluded, you might feel more comfortable.”

“You’re always taking care of me.” My chest swells with love for my best friend.

“You know it.” He moves around the room, taking it all in. “You like it?”

“It’s perfect.”

“I think so too. I’m going to run out and get our bags.”

“I’ll come and help.”

“I can get it.”

“I need to get my bag of snacks and the cooler. We have all the groceries to pack in too.”

“Us guys can get those,” he tells me. “I can handle all of our things.”

“I can help.” I place my hands on my hips, challenging him.

“You can,” he agrees. “But you’re not going to. You’re going to relax and unwind. This weekend you’re going to let me spoil you. The guys and I already talked about it. It’s ladies’ weekend. We’re doing all the heavy lifting. And the cooking.”

“I thought you wanted me to make my pasta salad.”

“Nope. You’re going to teach me how to make your pasta salad. I’m doing all the work.”

“Oh, brother.” I laugh. “This is going to be interesting.”

“Hey! I can cook.”

“I know. I’m just teasing you. Your mom made sure you all could survive on your own. But none of you have ever cooked for a group this size.”

“There are ten of us, counting Deacon. I’m sure we can figure it out. Besides, I said we were doing all the work. Not that we wouldn’t need instructions.” He winks, then turns and walks out the door.

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Twenty minutes later, I’ve unpacked both of our bags, placed our toiletries in the bathroom, and set off to find the rest of the group. I find them all on the back patio. “Wow.”

“It’s perfect, right?” Palmer asks.

“Can we stay here forever?” I ask, only half joking.

“You’ve got my vote,” Jade says.

“Are you starting the party without us?” Declan asks as he and Kennedy step out onto the patio.

“Just getting started,” Brooks tells him.

“Now that we’re all here, I’d like to introduce everyone.” Ryder glances over at the girl standing next to him. She has long brown hair with blonde highlights. She has a worried look in her eyes, but that’s to be expected. There are a lot of us.

“I’d like you all to meet Jordyn. Jordyn, this is my family.” He waves his hand in a circle at all of us before he moves to start pointing each of us out, calling us by name. We all wave and tell her it’s nice to meet her. “I know there are a lot of them.”

“You’ll get to know us in no time,” Ramsey assures her.

“It’s nice to meet all of you. Thank you for inviting me.”

“We’re glad you’re here,” Orrin tells her.

“All right, so I’m starving,” Maverick announces, making us all laugh.

“Right.” Declan nods. “You ladies, go and... do whatever it is that you do when you’re hanging out, and we’ll take care of the food.”

“Babe, you sure you don’t need help?” Kennedy asks him.

“Nope. It’s ladies’ weekend. We’re doing all the work,” Declan tells his wife.

“What?” Palmer asks.

“We talked about it a few days ago. We decided that the ladies get a break this weekend, and the men are taking care of everything.”

Ramsey opens her lips to say something, but Palmer places her hand over her mouth to stop her. “Let them. The men have spoken.”

“Damn right,” Brooks tells his wife. “Now go.” He kisses her on the temple.

“I can stay back and help,” I tell them.

“Nope. You and Jordyn are included in this. It’s been decided,” Ryder tells me. He gives me a look that I take as pleading. I get what he’s asking without him having to say a word. He wants me to take care of Jordyn to make sure she’s included. As the only other person here who is not a Kincaid, I understand why. They can be a lot to take on. Don’t get me wrong, everyone is nice and welcoming, but sometimes it’s easy to let yourself feel like the outsider that you are.

I will never be a member of this family beyond being Sterling’s best friend. I’ve accepted that. I also hope that when I do find someone to spend the rest of my life with, that they have a family as loving and as accepting as this one. Then again, they’ll have to. I refuse to settle for anything less. Being best friends with Sterling Kincaid since I was a kid has shown me what I want.



“Well, all right then.” I move to stand next to Jordyn and link my arm through hers. “Alyssa,” I remind her. “That one’s best friend.” I point to Sterling. “Let’s go sit by the lake.”

“Now you’re talking,” Kennedy says.

The five of us make our way down to the lake. There’s a fire pit with several Adirondack chairs sitting around it. Ten in total, which is more than enough for us. We each take a chair, and I swear all five of us sigh with contentment as we do.

“Are they really going to do everything all weekend?” Jordyn asks.

“Yep,” Palmer replies.

“They’re all stubborn as hell. Once they set their minds to something, there is no changing it,” Ramsey tells her.

“The men in my family can’t boil water,” Jordyn says, making us all laugh.

“My mother-in-law, Carol, made sure they were all independent. In fact, the twins, Maverick and Merrick, are the only ones who still live at home,” Jade explains.

“It’s going to take me a while to learn everyone’s names. Ryder does talk about all of his brothers, and even all of you often, but it’s putting the names to the faces that is going to take me some time,” Jordyn confesses.

“How about we help you out with that.” Ramsey smiles kindly. “I’m Ramsey. Ryder and his brothers are my cousins. Their parents, Carol and Raymond, are my aunt and uncle, but they are more parents to me than my own ever were. I’m marrying Deacon next weekend. Oh, you should come to the wedding. Has Ryder mentioned it?” she asks.

Jordyn nods. “He said he needed to make sure it was okay with you, though.”

“It’s more than okay with me. It’s a small gathering of those we care most about. I insist that you come with Ryder,” Ramsey tells her.

“I’d like that. Thank you.”

“Okay, me next.” Palmer raises her hand. “I’m Palmer, Ramsey’s best friend, and wife to Brooks. He’s the third oldest in the lineup of brothers. I’m also Deacon’s sister, who is Ramsey’s fiancé. I set them up,” she boasts.

“Are you ever going to let me live that down?” Ramsey chuckles.

“Is that even a real question?” Palmer replies. “Anyway, I’m married to Brooks, and our baby girl is due in four weeks. If you see my husband freaking out if I sneeze, he’s a little overprotective and stressing about our baby girl’s birth. He didn’t want to come, but I insisted.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. Oh, and my sister is Piper. She’s dating Heath. They’re not here this weekend. They already had plans with Heath’s family for the holiday weekend. They’re also expecting their first baby.”

“I’m Jade. I’m married to Orrin, the oldest of the brothers. I’m twenty-one weeks, and we found out what we were having yesterday.”

“What?” we all ask loudly.

Jade grins. “We stopped by both of our parents’ places last night to tell them. We’re going to tell you all this weekend.”

“You meant to say I’m going to tell you now,” Palmer replies.

Jade tosses her head back in laughter. “Not without Orrin, but we are spilling this weekend.”

“Fine,” Palmer grumbles, but the smile on her face is vibrant.

“I’m Kennedy. Declan’s my husband. He’s the second oldest of the brothers. This is our second baby. We have a five-year-old daughter at home.”

“Blakely?” Jordyn asks.

Kennedy beams with pride. “That’s her.”

“She has Ryder wrapped around her little finger,” Jordyn tells her.

“It’s not just Ryder,” I chime in. “All of them. Even Deacon and Heath will do her bidding at a simple bat of those long eyelashes of hers.”

“She’s something else.” Kennedy smiles. “We’re having a boy, and we couldn’t be happier.”

I smile at Kennedy. She and Declan have been through some rough waters, but they’ve made it look easy. They’re so in love, and the family they’ve created is something special.

“I guess that leaves me.” I raise my hand. “Alyssa, best friend to Sterling, which I’ve already mentioned. No husband, and no babies, although being around these ladies definitely gives you baby fever.”

“Right?” Ramsey says. “One more week, and I can toss those damn pills in the trash.”

“I’m so excited for our kids to grow up together.”

“Agreed,” Jade says. “I don’t know that I want nine like Carol and Raymond, but to know our kids will have tons of cousins to wreak havoc with makes my heart happy.”

Kennedy places her hand over her baby bump. “We want more. If we are able.” She turns to look at Jordyn. “I had a medical issue when I was younger. I wasn’t sure I would ever be able to get pregnant.”

“I hope it works for you a third time,” Jordyn replies.

Ramsey quickly changes the subject. “So, tell us about you.”

“Not much to tell, really. I graduate from college in a couple of weeks.”

“Congratulations,” we all say at once.

“Thank you.”

“What’s your major?”

“I have a double major. Fashion design/merchandising, and business administration. I’d like to open my own boutique one day.”

“Are you from Willow River?” Ramsey asks her.

“No. My family lives in Atlanta, which is where I went to school.”

“How did you meet Ryder?” Jade asks.

“We met at Sage. It’s a nightclub in Harris.”

“Ladies.” I laugh. “Let’s ease up a little.”

“No. It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“Do you plan on staying in Atlanta?” Kennedy asks her.

She doesn’t have to say it. We can all read between the lines. If she and Ryder get serious, well, more serious than they are since he has to think a lot of her for her to be here. If her heart is set on Atlanta, then that means we might lose Ryder. Sure, Atlanta is only an hour away, but I know it would break the guys’ hearts if Ryder moved. It’s likely inevitable that one of them will eventually not be close by, but I know we all hope that we stay close to Willow River.

Kennedy moved here for Declan, but her grandma already lived here. She had ties. It doesn’t sound like Jordyn does.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’m waiting to hear back about an internship before I make my next move. They’re supposed to decide by the end of June.”

“That sounds exciting. Where will you be interning?” I ask.

“Paris.”

We all freeze. “Paris?” Ramsey asks.

“Yes. It’s a hard program to get into. They only take five applicants every year out of thousands. The chances of me getting in are slim.”

“How long is the program?” Jade asks.

“Eighteen months.”

“And if you do get in, have you and Ryder talked about long-distance at all?” Palmer asks.

None of us tell her she’s being intrusive because we all want to know the same thing.

“A little. Not much.”

“You need to.” This is from Kennedy. “I don’t know what your relationship status is, but you need to be open and honest and talk about it.”

“He says he’ll wait.” Jordyn looks down at her hands that are clasped in her lap. “We’re so new. I just don’t know if we’d be able to survive that.”

Curiosity has me asking, “Do you want to?”

“He’s almost too good to be true. I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“It’s not going to.” Kennedy shifts in her seat but keeps her gaze locked on Jordyn. “Trust me. I’m not from Willow River. I was new in town, and I remember feeling the same way. I thought many times that Declan couldn’t be real, but he was. They all are. They’re good men, who were raised by incredible parents, and they are all what you see is what you get. Trust in that. Trust in him.”

“Damn,” Ramsey mutters, wiping at her eyes. “Well said, Kens.”

“I’m sorry,” Jade speaks up. “Please don’t feel like we are attacking you. We’re all really close, and we don’t want to see Ryder get hurt. Please don’t take our protection and worry for him as us not accepting or liking you.”

“No. Not at all,” Jordyn is quick to reply.

“Talk to him,” Kennedy says again. “I promise you it will all be okay.”

“Eighteen months is a long time.”

“It is,” I agree. “I’m not a wife or a girlfriend, but Sterling and I have been best friends since we were kids. One thing I know for certain is that the Kincaid brothers, all nine of them,

are determined and stubborn. If they set their mind to something, watch out.” I give her a kind smile.

“Speaking of Sterling....” Palmer turns her attention toward me. “I still think there’s something there.”

“Nope,” I say, popping the *p*. I don’t even try to stop them. It helps that I already have alcohol in my system. I know they mean well, but it’s just never going to happen.

“I think we should make a wager.” Jade grins.

“What? That’s insane.”

“Oh, we’re betting.” Ramsey laughs.

“Terms?” Kennedy asks, ignoring my protests.

“I say we all take bets on when they get their heads out of their asses and realize they’re perfect for one another,” Palmer says.

“I’m in,” Kennedy says.

“I’ll go first.” Ramsey taps her chin. “I say by New Year’s.”

“I’m taking Labor Day,” Palmer announces.

“Thanksgiving,” Jade chooses.

“Jordyn?” Palmer asks.

“I don’t know the two of them well enough.”

“Choose anyway,” Ramsey tells her. “You’re here, which means you’re important to Ryder, so you get a vote.”

Jordyn shrugs. “Halloween?”

“Got it.” Palmer is typing away on her phone. “I added it to the notes app on my phone.”

“What do we win?” Kennedy asks.

“Bragging rights,” Palmer and Ramsey say together before falling into a fit of laughter.

“What about me? What do I get when you all lose?” I ask them.

“What do you want?” Kennedy asks me.

“When I win, when we make it to the New Year and Sterling and I are still just best friends, you all drop this ridiculous notion that we’re more.”

They all look at one another, and it’s Kennedy who answers. “Done. But I really don’t think we’re going to lose.”

I look over at Jordyn. “You see what I have to deal with?”

She smiles. “I love the dynamics. I love how close you all are. It’s nice to see.”

“We’re family,” the four of us reply.

I might not be related to them, but in my heart, they are my family.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Sterling

“Stop feeling up my wife,” Brooks grumbles. He wraps his arms around Palmer’s waist, where she’s snuggled up on his lap.

“Stop.” Palmer laughs. She swats at his hands playfully, but it’s no use. He’s still trying to push our younger brother Maverick’s hands from her belly.

“Say something else, B. She moves around like crazy when you talk,” Maverick says, his hands still embracing Palmer’s baby bump. He doesn’t seem to be the least bit fazed at Brooks’s attitude.

“Because she’s my daughter,” Brooks counters.

“Oh! That was a big one. Did you feel that?” Maverick asks Palmer.

“I felt it.” She smiles at him.

“Move over,” Merrick tells his twin. “I want in on this.”

Maverick drops one hand to allow Merrick to replace it with his own. “Come on, baby girl,” Merrick whispers. Not two seconds later, a smile lights up his face. “You love your uncle Merrick, huh?” he asks Palmer’s belly.

“Enough.” Brooks swats their hands away again, and this time they let him. Only they don’t go back to their seats. Instead, they move to Kennedy, who’s also snuggled up on Declan’s lap. In fact, that’s how we’re all sitting. Alyssa



included. She's on my lap as well. She insisted she could sit on the ground or go up to the house and bring down a chair, but that wasn't happening. There are only ten chairs down here by the lake, and there are fifteen of us. My brothers and Deacon were all too happy to have the women in their lives sitting on their lap. I pulled Alyssa onto mine. It's not like she's never sat like this before. She protested, but I won in the end.

She's finally relaxing with her head resting on my shoulder as she laughs at my twin brothers and their antics. My arms are resting on the sides of the chair, but I'm not gonna lie. They itch to wrap around her. To have that closeness that my brothers have found with a woman. It's not a feeling I've ever had watching them with their wives until now. I keep my hands to myself because Alyssa isn't mine. At least not like that.

"How about little man?" Merrick asks Kennedy. "Is he moving around too?"

"Dec, say something and get him moving," Maverick instructs.

Declan just shakes his head and grins. "Fine." Maverick pouts. He turns and smiles at Jade. "Any activity over there, Momma?" he asks her.

"Sorry." Jade smiles. "Baby is sleeping." She pats Orrin's hands, which are already resting on her belly.

"Is it time?" Palmer asks her.

Jade looks over her shoulder at Orrin, and he nods. "It's time," Jade agrees.

"Time for what?" Rushton asks.

"We found out what we're having yesterday," Orrin tells him.

"What?" my brothers and I reply all at once.

"What?" Deacon says, laughing. When we all turn to look at him, he shrugs. "I felt left out."

Ramsey kisses his cheek and turns back to Orrin and Jade. "So, are you going to tell us or keep us in suspense?"

“We’re going to tell you,” Orrin replies.

“Today?” Archer asks.

“We were, but now I’m not sure,” Orrin teases.

“Come on, man. We need to know if we’re going to have another Kincaid princess or a prince to spoil,” Archer says.

“Fine.” Orrin sighs as if telling us the gender of his baby is a hardship. We all know he’s being dramatic. He wants to tell us just as bad as we want to know. Maybe even worse. He’s been looking forward to finding out what they’re having for weeks. “It’s a boy.” He’s wearing a wide grin as we all hoot and holler and offer them congratulations.

“It’s hard to believe Blakely isn’t going to be the only grandchild anymore,” Rushton tells us. “For so long, she’s had all our attention. How do you think she’s going to handle a baby brother and two cousins within a matter of weeks of one another?”

“She’s going to be just fine,” Kennedy speaks up. “She’s going to be the best big sister and big cousin out there.”

Declan gives his wife a goofy grin. “She really is.”

“Two boys and two girls,” Archer muses. “Mom is going to be in heaven.”

We all nod because he’s right. Not just Mom, but our dad too. They had nine kids, so of course they want a house full of grandkids as well. The way we’re starting off gives a pretty good indication that’s going to happen for them.

“Who’s going to be next?” Maverick asks.

“Yeah, we need more than four. There are nine of us, ten counting Deacon. We need at least that many so we don’t have to compete for the favorite spot. Convincing Blakely every time we see her is exhausting.”

I huff out a laugh. “If you were her favorite uncle like I am, you wouldn’t need to convince her every time you see her.”

“I’m the favorite,” Rushton speaks up.

“Nope. That would be me.” Ryder raises one hand while keeping the other around Jordyn.

“Palmer, did you remember to bring the pack of rulers?” Alyssa calls out.

Everyone stops talking. “Rulers?” I ask. She ignores me.

I look across the fire at my smirking sister-in-law. “Damn it. How are we supposed to let them have a dick-measuring contest when I forgot the rulers?” Palmer taps her forehead and groans. The smile on her face is evidence that there were no rulers.

The men grumble while the ladies crack up laughing. I glance over at Jordyn and see that she’s smiling and laughing as well. “You sure about all this?” I wave my hand in a circle around the campfire. “We’re a little bit nutty.”

“Speak for yourself,” Maverick chimes in. “I’m not nutty; I’m special.”

“Oh, we know.” Ryder laughs.

“We all know that mine is the biggest,” Merrick speaks up.

“Nope. No. Just no.” Ramsey slices her hands through the air. “We are not having this conversation. You’re all like my brothers, and just... nope.”

“I agree,” Jade replies. “I don’t want to know or need to know the results of that contest.”

“Facts,” Alyssa agrees.

I tickle her sides, causing her to squirm on my lap as she sputters with laughter. I don’t let up until she claims she’s going to piss all over my lap. I drop my hands, and she stands and takes off, running for the house.

“Sterling scared his girl off,” Rushton jokes.

“Best friend,” I correct him.

“Let’s talk about that,” Palmer speaks up.

“Talk about what? Alyssa?”

“Yes,” Palmer, Ramsey, Jade, and Kennedy say all at once.

“What about her? Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” they all say again in unison.

“Okay, you all are freaking me out with the togetherness of your replies,” Archer tells them.

“What’s wrong with her? She was acting fine,” I tell them. I sit up a little straighter in my chair, giving them my full attention. Whatever it is, I’ll fix it for her. That’s what I do.

They share a look before all eyes turn back to me. “Okay, so there’s nothing wrong with her.” Palmer looks concerned.

“She’s fine,” Ramsey adds.

“It’s okay, Sterling.” Kennedy reaches over from her spot next to me, where she’s sitting on Declan’s lap, and places her hand on my arm. “Breathe.”

“You can’t tell me there’s something wrong with her just to get my attention.” There’s more bite to my words than I intended, but my heart rate is out of rhythm from the panic rising inside my chest.

“He’s right,” Brooks tells them.

“I’m sorry,” Palmer speaks up. “I was just teasing. What I was going to say before you went white as a ghost is that what’s wrong with her is that she’s still single.”

“Seriously?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest. “You scared the hell out of me,” I scold. My tone is much nicer, and my breathing is more regulated than before. “And the fact that she’s single isn’t a flaw,” I bite out.

“That’s not what we meant,” Ramsey says gently. “We were kind of hoping you could take care of that issue for her.”

“What?” I know I heard her wrong. How in the hell can I take care of her relationship status? Does she want me to hook Alyssa up with someone? Yeah, no, that’s not going to happen. No way do I want to be a part of that. What happens if he breaks her heart? Then it’s my fault. Nope. No way.

“You could help her out with the whole being single thing,” Palmer clarifies.

“I’m not setting her up with someone.” I leave no room for negotiation in my stance on the matter in my tone.

“I have to use the restroom. I think I’m going to call it a night.” Jordyn stands from her spot on Ryder’s lap. “Thank you all for today. I’ll see you in the morning.” She waves politely and starts to walk away, but my brother reaches out and laces his fingers through hers.

“I’m throwing in the towel too. Who’s on breakfast duty?” he asks.

“We are,” Orrin tells him. “All weekend.”

Ryder nods. “Text me when it’s time,” he says, and turns and leads Jordyn into the house.

“I’m sorry,” Ramsey and Palmer say at the same time.

I nod in acceptance, but I don’t bother with words. “I’m heading in too.” Alyssa has not come back out yet, so maybe she’s thinking the same thing.

“It’s getting late.” Kennedy stands. “Sterling, will you walk with me to the house?” she asks.

“I’ll take you.” Declan starts to stand, but his wife waves her hand.

“Sterling can walk with me. I’m going to shower before bed.”

“Are you sure?” Declan asks.

“Positive. Just come in when you’re ready. Enjoy time with your family.” She smiles at him with so much love in her eyes, I can feel it coming off them in waves.

Kennedy links her arm through mine, and we walk away. Her steps are slow, and I know she’s taking her sweet time because she has something to say. “You can say it,” I tell her. “Whatever it is you’ve got on your mind, you can say it.”

“They love you. We love you,” she corrects.

“I know that.”

“We also love Alyssa.”

“I know that too.” I’m not sure where she’s going with this, but I’m indulging her anyway.

“Out of everyone here tonight, I’m the newest.”

“You’re old news, Kennedy,” I tease.

“You know what I mean. I didn’t grow up in Willow River, so I don’t have the history that the rest of you have.”

“Go on.”

“We all want you to be happy. We want Alyssa to be happy.” She stops walking and steps in front of me. “You might not see it, but from the outside looking in, there’s more there.” I start to give her my speech, the one that I’ve perfected over the years, but she raises her hand to stop me. “I know you two are just friends. I know you have never been anything more than friends.”

“Then what’s this about? Alyssa is my ride-or-die. We’ve spent the entirety of our friendship defending it. Out of everyone I’ve had to remind that a man and a woman can be platonic friends, my family is the last lot I thought I would have to still be defending us to.” I run my fingers through my hair. “Even my brothers have brought it up recently.”

Kennedy nods and smiles. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I believe you when you tell me that the two of you are just friends. I believe you when you tell me it’s never been anything more. However, I want you to listen to me this time when I tell you that you should think about it. Think about your future. Think about how you want that to look.” She pauses as moments flash in my mind of hanging out with Alyssa. “Now, I want you to picture that same scenario with her married and with kids.”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

Kennedy gives me one of those looks. The one where the other person raises their brow and purses their lips because they know you’re full of shit. Yeah, one of those. “Because I know you, Sterling Kincaid. I know that you are fiercely protective of your best friend, and I know that in your mind, no one will ever be good enough for her.”

I hold her gaze, not sure where she's going with this line of reasoning. "Is there something wrong with that?" I ask. "Is it bad that I want the best for her?"

"Not at all. But I think you need to open your mind to allow yourself to consider that you might be what's best for her." She smiles up at me while patting her palm flat against my chest. "I can see your wheels turning. I'm not going to lecture you. I just want to plant a small seed. Do you think that it's possible that you both won't settle for anything other than what you already have?"

"I won't risk losing her."

"Life is about chances, Sterling. Don't lose her. Just love her a little harder." Dropping her hand, she turns and disappears into the house.

I stare after her, letting her words bounce around in my mind and the fact that she spouted off the family motto. I can't lie and say that I've never noticed that my best friend is a fucking smokeshow. Back in high school, I even considered asking her to be more, but I chickened out. The risk of losing her in my life wasn't worth it, and it's still not worth it. I don't even know what my life would look like without her in it, and I never want to find out.

"Hey." Alyssa's voice pulls me out of my thoughts. She's standing just outside the door that Kennedy disappeared through only moments before. "You all right? Kennedy said you were coming inside."

"Yeah, I think we're all calling it a night."

"I saw Ryder and Jordyn when they came in. We were chatting. That's what took me so long."

"You ready for bed?" I ask.

"Yes. But you don't have to go with me."

"No. I'm ready too." Without another word, I take a few long strides to reach her. Placing one hand on the small of her back, I pull open the door with the other, and usher her inside, with me on her heels. "Water?"

“Yes, please.” Stepping to the refrigerator, I grab two bottles of water and follow her down the hall to our room.

“Are you positive you’re good with sharing a bed?” After my discussion with Kennedy, I feel as though I need to ask.

“Have you seen the size of the bed? We can both sprawl out and still never touch. I’m fine with it. More than fine. It’s not the first time we’ve shared a bed, and besides, you’re too damn tall to sleep on the couch.”

“I just wanted to make sure.”

“There’s plenty of room for both of us, Tank.” She grins, and something in my chest squeezes.

Damn meddling sisters-in-law. The conversation by the fire and the one I just had with Kennedy are playing like a movie reel in my head. “You take the bathroom first,” I tell her.

“Thanks. I’ll be quick.” She grabs clothes to change into and disappears behind the door.

I sit on the edge of the bed, resting my elbows on my knees. I run my hands over my face. Sleep. I’m just tired. What I need is a good night’s sleep, and everything will look the same in the morning.

“You okay?” Alyssa asks. Her small hand runs over the top of my head, her fingers gliding through my hair.

“I’m fine. Just tired. It’s been a long day.”

She nods. “That it has. The bathroom is all yours.”

“Thanks, Tink.” I stand and press my lips to the top of her head before grabbing my own clothes to change into. When I open the bathroom door not long after, the room is lit with a soft glow from the bedside lamp.

“I can’t believe how big this bed is. It feels much larger than a king. Maybe because it sits up so high?” she asks as I make my way to the bed and slide beneath the covers.

“It’s not high, Tink. You’re just short.”



“Hey!” Her laughter fills the space between us. “I’m built low for stability.” She rolls over and turns off the lamp before settling back into her spot. “On another note, the girls and I had a chance to talk to Jordyn a little today. She’s nice.”

“She is. And I give her props for putting up with my little brother.”

“Stop.” I can hear the laughter in her voice. “It’s not just Ryder. All the ladies need medals for putting up with a Kincaid man. Even me. I mean, I’m just the best friend, but I should still qualify.”

I want to tell her she’s not “just” anything, but I keep my mouth tightly closed. My head is all over the place. I don’t know what’s happening to me. My thoughts immediately go to that she’s more. She’s family. Any other time I’d be quick to tell her that, but my head is such a jumbled mess, I don’t this time.

“You qualify, Tink.”

“Anyway, she seems nice, but I’m worried she might break his heart. I know that her being here means she’s important to him, and she’s up for an internship for fashion in Paris. Paris, Sterling!”

“Good for her. I’m sure Ryder knows, and I’m sure if he cares about her, it won’t matter.”

“Just like that?” she asks.

“Just like what?”

“It’s that easy? He cares about her, so you accept that he’s going to be fine?”

“Love harder,” I remind her.

“I know... but, Tank, she could be leaving.”

“They’re figuring it out.”

“What if he goes with her?”

“That would suck. I’d miss him, but Ryder knows what’s best for him.”

“I can’t believe you’re being so chill about this.”

“Must be my lack of sleep.” And the fact that her friends, my sisters-in-law, planted a seed and made my head a mess of feelings, questions, and what-ifs.

She yawns. “Me too. Night, Tank.”

I feel the bed shift as she moves over and places a kiss on my cheek. There’s a small filter of light from the full moon that allows me to make out her form but not her features. Not that I need to see to know every curve and line of her.

I return the sentiment, kissing her cheek. “Night, Tink.” I fall back to my side of the bed and close my eyes, willing sleep to claim me.

I don’t know how much time has passed, but Alyssa has been asleep for quite a while. She rolls over and seeks me out. She wraps her arms and legs around me and sighs with contentment.

Unable to resist, I wrap my arm around her. Hold her. I’ve held her before, lots of times, but this is the first time I’ve realized this is what I need.

*She* is what I need.

This time when I close my eyes, sleep finally claims me.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Alyssa

I'm in the state where I'm still asleep, but my body's trying to wake. I don't want to, though. I'm fighting it. I'm so damn comfortable and warm. So warm. This bed is magic. I burrow a little deeper into the mattress, but it's not the mattress. My hand moves out to tap my surroundings, and it's not the mattress beneath my palm. It's rigid and warm. I freeze, and I hear a deep chuckle. Forcing my eyes to open, I take in my current situation.

I'm not on my side of the bed. Not even close. There's a ton of real estate on this fluffy cloudlike mattress, and I'm crowding Sterling on his side. It's more than just crowding. My head is resting on his chest, and my legs are thrown over his. Basically, I've managed to wrap myself around him like a vine.

"Morning, Tink." His voice is deep, laced with not only sleep but humor.

"Morning," I reply, burying my face in his chest to hide my embarrassment. "I guess I became a bed hog overnight."

"I don't mind," he replies gruffly.

"What are the plans for today?" I ask him, changing the subject. I lift my head from his chest and peer at him, only to find his eyes already on me.

"Just hanging out as far as I know. I heard some movement down the hall not long ago. Hopefully, it's one of my brothers

making breakfast.”

“Are you all really doing all of the cooking this weekend?”

He nods. “They wanted to give their wives a break, and we were all on board.”

“This isn’t one of those remember-when-we-did-this situations, is it? In six months from now, you and your brothers and Deacon aren’t going to be guilt-tripping us into some adventure or task as payback, are you?”

His chest vibrates with his silent laughter. I can feel the rumble beneath me. “No. This isn’t a trap.” He shakes his head.

“I’m holding you to that, Kincaid.”

He rubs his hand slowly up and down my spine. “You know I wouldn’t do that to you.”

It feels as if there is something else behind his confession. Something more than him just trying to convince me that the efforts of the men in attendance this weekend are admirable.

“Thanks for being my pillow,” I say, moving away from him. I instantly miss his heat, but I choose to ignore that. I’m also ignoring my body’s reaction to being snuggled up with him. I blame the girls and all their meddling. I’ve cuddled with my best friend thousands of times, and other than that small stint in high school, I’ve been able to look at him as just my best friend. However, this morning, that small detail was hard to focus on when I was burrowed into his warm body, with his hands trailing up and down my spine.

“I call dibs on the shower,” I say, climbing off the bed and gathering my clothes before rushing into the en suite bathroom, closing and locking the door for good measure.

I avoid looking at myself in the mirror. I don’t need to. I know what I’ll see. My cheeks will be flushed, and my chest will be heavily rising with each breath. I just hope that I managed to slip away before Sterling noticed. Leave it to me to make things awkward between us. I make a mental note to scold the girls when I can get them away from the guys. They did this. They put these crazy ideas in my head, and now my

body is no longer my own. Sterling is hot as hell, but it's been years. *Years* since I've responded to him in any way other than friendship. They cursed me, and you can bet your ass I'm going to give them hell for it.

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By the time I open the bathroom door, our room is empty. I hear loud voices and laughter from down the hall, and I assume that Sterling is one of them. Placing my dirty clothes in the mesh laundry bag that I brought, I pull in a deep breath before leaving the room and making my way to the kitchen.

"There she is." Archer smiles. "We thought Sterling had you tied to the bed or something," he jokes.

The room erupts with laughter, and I can feel the heat spread to my cheeks. "More like I'd tie him to the bed," I joke. I hope that I appear unaffected by his words. I bend over and pretend to be messing with the bracelet on my ankle, hoping I can blame my red cheeks on the blood rushing to my face from bending over.

When I stand up, everyone has long since forgotten my reply and Archer's dig and has moved on to what we should do today.

"I vote absolutely nothing," Brooks says. He's standing behind Palmer with his arms around her, his hands resting over their unborn daughter.

I admit my heart melts when I see these guys with their wives. It's definitely relationship goals. I want what they have.

"Agreed," Deacon chimes in. "I marry the love of my life next week. Just relaxing before the chaos of all the wedding stuff sounds perfect."

"What chaos?" Palmer asks. "Your bride has it all worked out. It's a small affair. Everything is going to be perfect," she tells her brother.

Deacon's eyes soften as they look between his fiancée, Ramsey, and his little sister. "Regardless of what happens, the

day will be perfect because, at the end of the day, I get to call this one”—he points to Ramsey—“my wife.”

“Aww,” the ladies in the room coo.

“Just like that, panties dropping all over the place,” Maverick jokes.

“Don’t talk about my wife’s panties,” Declan grumps.

“He’s not wrong,” I speak up. “It’s sweet.”

“Right?” Kennedy agrees.

“Consider my panties dropped.” Jade chuckles.

“Hey now.” Orrin pulls her into his chest, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “No one is dropping your panties but me.”

“Ramsey Setty has a nice ring to it.” Ramsey winks at her fiancé, and the smile that lights up Deacon’s face can only be described as blinding.

“So, hanging by the pool?” Rushton asks.

“Two more days to do absolutely nothing? Sign me up,” Merrick says, snagging a piece of bacon from the plate in the center of the island of this huge kitchen.

“Oh, I have something for us to do today.” Palmer grins.

“What?” Brooks asks.

“Just a little something I thought would be fun.” There is an evil glint in her eyes. That look alone tells me that we’re in for a treat.

“You holding out on me, beautiful?” Brooks asks her.

“I would never.” Palmer turns to look at him over her shoulder. “You’ll be involved,” she assures him.

“That’s really vague, but I’m in,” Maverick tells his sister-in-law.

“Eat up, ladies,” Ryder says, handing Jordyn a plate. “We’ve got a heated pool and some rays calling our name.”

Everyone does what he says and digs into the piles of bacon and pancakes that are on multiple plates on the island.

“You know,” Ramsey says. “I could get used to you all spoiling us like this.”

“Come on now, Rams.” Archer laughs. “We all know Deacon dotes on you. It’s all right. We’ve already taken his man card.”

“Pfft. I handed it over willingly,” Deacon counters.

“Little brother, there is nothing wrong with spoiling the love of your life,” Brooks tells him. “That’s how you earn your man card.”

Archer taps his index finger against his chin as he lets his gaze roam over his brothers.

“What are you doing?” Declan asks, laughing.

“I’m trying to decide which one of us is next to lose their balls,” Archer jests.

“We didn’t lose them,” Orrin tells him. “We just found good women to love with all we’ve got. You’ll get there. In fact, you might be next.”

“Stop!” Archer holds his hand up, shaking his head. “Don’t curse me like that.”

“You think that love is a curse?” Ramsey asks him.

“No, but I’m too young to settle down like these old asses.” He points to Deacon, Orrin, Brooks, and Declan.

“Love knows no age,” Brooks tells him.

“Come on, man. It’s our family motto,” Declan adds. “Work hard, love harder. Don’t fight it.”

Archer again raises his hands in defense. “I’m not fighting anything. I’m just enjoying my time being single. Besides, I get bored easily. It’s going to take someone with spirit to tame me.”

“Oh, I can’t wait.” Orrin rubs his hands together.

“You’ve got some time,” Archer tells him.

“I agree,” Palmer adds.

“Me too,” Jade says.

“Yeah, we all know that Sterling is the next to fall,” Ramsey says, causing Sterling to choke on the piece of bacon he just shoved in his mouth.

I watch as Merrick smacks him on the back harder than necessary. Sterling grabs his glass of milk and takes a hefty drink. I find myself watching the column of his throat as he swallows. How have I never noticed how sexy that was before?

“What are you talking about, Rams?” Sterling manages to ask, still dazed by her proclamation.

Ramsey shrugs as if her statement is no big deal. She can’t see what her words are doing to me. My heart is racing, and my hands are clammy. I don’t know if it’s the thought of losing my best friend to the love of his life or the thoughts she and the rest of the ladies have put into my head that maybe, just maybe that person could be me.

“I think you’re next.”

“Why do you think that?” Sterling gives her his full attention as if the answer that she gives will dictate his entire future.

“Just a feeling.”

“You scared?” Declan taunts him.

“No.” Sterling’s voice is firm. “Just not sure why out of all of us that are single, I’m the one she thinks is next.”

“If it helps matters, I agree with her,” Palmer tells him.

“Me too,” Jade and Kennedy reply at the same time.

Sterling is quiet for a minute before he nods. “I kind of hope you’re right,” he tells them.

My heart stalls in my chest at his confession.

“If this”—he waves his hand around the room, at his brothers and Ramsey, who are happily married or about to be



—“is what that will get me, then I’ll take it.”

“Pussy,” Maverick coughs.

“The same one,” Merrick reminds him. “For the rest of your life.”

Sterling’s gaze lands on me. “Yeah,” he says softly. “I could get behind that.” He quickly looks away and takes my breath with him.

Without a word, I stand and slip down the hall into our room. I don’t stop until I’m in the bathroom with the door locked behind me for the second time today. This time I brace my hands on the counter, focusing on my breathing. A slow, deep breath in and a slow exhale. I repeat this process a few times until I feel like I’m breathing normally. Just in time for a knock on the door.

“Tink?” Sterling’s voice is cautious. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” I call back.

“Open the door.”

“I’ll be right out.” He doesn’t argue, and I take the time I need to steel my resolve and face him. When I open the door, I shriek when I see him standing there with his arms braced above the frame. His head hung low.

He lifts his head, and his eyes find me. There’s something there. Something I can’t name. It’s not a look I’ve ever seen from him, at least not when he’s got his eyes on me. I shift my stance, not because I’m uncomfortable but because the urge to reach out and touch him is strong. Stronger than it’s ever been. I inwardly curse myself and my friends for lighting this... fire inside me.

When Sterling drops his hands, one of them moves to cradle my cheek. On instinct, I lean into him. He’s always been my safe place, my comfort. “What’s wrong?” he asks. His voice is thick and husky. It’s sexy, and my lady bits take notice.

“Nothing.” I stay leaning into his touch, unable to help myself.

“Tink.” He tilts his head to the side. “What’s wrong?” he asks again. His eyes bore into mine as if, he looks deep enough, he can actually read my mind.

“Just tired, I guess.” I shrug.

“You slept peacefully wrapped in my arms all night, Lys.”

“Yeah,” I reply, because what can I say? I can’t tell him that his sisters-in-law and cousin planted ideas in my head that I had long since stuffed in a “do not open” box in the back of my mind and even further in my heart. I can’t tell him that the huskiness of his voice has my panties ruined, and me wishing I was his someone. Not just his best friend.

Needing him to believe me, I try to act like I always have with him. Openly, platonically affectionate. I mimic his move and reach up, placing my hand on his cheek. He, too, leans into my touch. The soft stubble of his thin beard feels familiar beneath my palm.

“I’m fine, Tank,” I assure him. “I was just using the restroom. Now shoo. I need to get my suit on. We have a day in the sun that’s waiting for us.”

He studies me a little longer. It’s mere seconds but feels like hours before he drops his hand and pulls me into a hug. Something you should know about the Kincaid brothers; they give the best hugs. All nine of them. They’re an affectionate family, and I’ve been on the receiving end of my fair share from all of them. However, none of them are as good at it as Sterling.

He puts all of him into every single embrace, just like now. Both of his muscled arms are wrapped around me, and his head is buried in my neck. He breathes in deeply, something he’s always done, before pulling back, pressing his lips to my forehead, and releasing me. It’s been the same since we were kids, and the act is another form of comfort for me. One that only Sterling can provide.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he tells me as I step around him and dig around in the dresser to find my bikini.

I stop and turn to look at him. “Thanks for inviting me. Hanging with you and your brothers is always a good time.”

He nods. “Do you know what Palmer’s plans are?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

I force myself not to look at his powerful limbs or think about the way he often lifts me with ease. I don’t think about him lifting me and tossing me on the cloudlike bed and having his way with me. Nope, I don’t do that. Instead, I keep my eyes trained on him and ignore how damn sexy he is. I’ve been doing it for years. I should be able to do it now.

“I don’t know. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s going to be good. You know Palmer,” I tell him. “If she knows anything, it’s relaxing and having a good time.”

“You’re right about that. I hope my niece is just like her.”

“Brooks is going to have his hands full.”

“Yeah, but he’s all in. He’ll love every minute of it.”

“I think he will too.” I hold up my bikini. “I’m going to change.” I move to walk past him, where he still stands in the doorway of the bathroom. He reaches out and snakes his arm around my waist, pulling me into him.

“You sure you’re good?” he asks, tucking my hair behind my ear with his free hand.

“I’m positive.” I pat his chest and smile up at him. I hope it’s reassuring and he can’t see through the desire I’m trying to hide.

“You’d tell me, right? If there was something on your mind?”

“Don’t I always?”

He nods.

“Are you going to let me pass, or do you plan on helping me change?” The question is out of my mouth before I even realize what I’m saying. My subconscious has taken over.

His eyes fill with heat, and I watch as he slowly licks his lips. “You need me to help you, Tink?” he asks, his voice

gravelly.

“N-No.” I shake my head. “I’m all set.”

It’s a good thing he’s holding onto me because when he leans in, moving his lips next to my ear, and whispers, “You sure about that?” my knees go weak, and I’m pretty damn sure I’m going to have to toss these panties in the trash.

“I can manage.”

He gives my hip a gentle squeeze before releasing me. He steps back but keeps his eyes on mine while I go back into the bathroom and close the door.

If I take forever, he’s going to know something is wrong, so I make quick work of cleaning up because, yeah, these panties are.... I’m embarrassed that my body is reacting to my best friend this way. I ball them up so I can shove them deep into the mesh laundry bag. Thankfully, I always pack extra. Quickly, I slip into my bikini and slide the black coverup over the top of it before pulling my hair up into a messy knot at the top of my head. Satisfied, I pull open the door to find Sterling sitting on the edge of the bed.

“All yours,” I say brightly, moving to shove my panties in the laundry bag and lay my other clothes on the dresser so I can change into them later.

“I’m going to shower. I’ll be out soon.”

“Okay!” I say with way too much enthusiasm as I grab my phone from the dresser and hightail it out of the room. I rush through the kitchen and out the patio door. I’m thankful that just the twins, Maverick and Merrick, are outside. The ladies are off the hook for now, but they’re going to hear from me. They’ve broken me, and I need them to fix this.

# CHAPTER NINE

Sterling

We're all sitting around the pool watching as Deacon lets Ramsey convince him that they should do a mock wedding rehearsal to get ready for next week since most of the guest list is already here. When I say let her convince him, that's exactly what's going to happen. He might be putting up a minimal fight, but we all know he would bend over backward for my cousin. He's going to cave.

"Babe," Deacon starts, "I don't think we need to do this. I'll be waiting at the altar. You're going to walk to me. We're going to say I do before I kiss the hell out of my wife, and voilà, you're Ramsey Setty. Piece of cake," he explains.

"Please?" Ramsey draws out the word. Her back is to me, but I can only imagine she's batting her eyelashes at him or promising him something dirty that I don't want to think about with her eyes, because my boy caves like a beer-can pyramid falling to the ground.

"If we have to." He tries to make it sound like it's an inconvenience, and I give him an A for effort, but we all knew this was how this was going to unfold.

"Yay!" Ramsey stands and offers Deacon her hand, pulling him to his feet.

"Wait," Palmer calls out. "I have an even better idea. What if you have two people stand in for you, and then that way you can watch and know what you're supposed to do."

“Even better.” Deacon grins.

“Been there, done that, got the wife to prove it,” Orrin jokes.

“Me too, and my wife needs to stay off her feet.” Brooks lowers his sunglasses to the tip of his nose to meet his wife’s eyes. Palmer just grins and waves him off.

“Mine too, and what Orrin said. Been there, done that,” Declan declares.

“Too much pressure,” Ryder speaks up. “No way am I making Jordyn act out your wedding. I’m trying to keep her, not scare her away.”

Jordyn’s cheeks are pink, and she turns into Ryder’s shoulder. I watch as he presses a kiss to the top of her head before sliding his arm around her and pulling her to his chest. From the looks of things, she comes willingly.

“Good point.” Palmer points at him.

“Sterling and Alyssa, you’re our final hope.” Ramsey turns to me and bats her eyelashes. That shit works on Deacon, and it used to work on my brothers and me, but it’s been a damn long time since she’s tried it, not since Deacon became the most important person in her life.

I look over at Alyssa. “How are your acting skills, Tink?”

“I’m not going to be performing on Broadway anytime soon.”

“Come on,” Kennedy urges her. “It will be good practice for your big day.”

“Wait. Hold up.” Rushton turns to look at Alyssa. “Are you dating someone?” His eyes flash to me for a heartbeat, but I’m sure everyone picked up on it.

“Am I not allowed to date?” Alyssa counters.

*No. Not unless it’s me.*

What the fuck? No. I can’t think of thoughts like that. Not about Alyssa. *No. No. No.*

“No,” Rushton says, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Why the hell not?” Alyssa fires back.

“Because.”

“Oh, that’s original, Rush.” Jade laughs. “Give the girl a break. She’s single and ready to mingle.”

“Sterling, back me up here.” Rushton looks at me. “Tell her she can’t date. We don’t need some loser moving in on our girl.”

*My girl.*

Fuck!

“What’s wrong with her dating?” I don’t look at Alyssa for fear that I’ll rush over to her, wrap her in my arms, and never let her go. As it is, the words taste like acid coming out of my mouth.

“Seriously?” Rushton asks.

“Come on, you two.” Kennedy stands. “Sterling, you go with Ramsey, and I’ll take Alyssa with me. The gate will be the altar.”

Just like that, the subject’s changed. Alyssa stands and follows Kennedy to the opposite side of the pool. I have to fight with myself to keep my gaze from following her.

“What the fuck is going on?” Archer asks.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Is she dating?” Ryder asks.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Is she really not allowed to? She’s an adult, right?” Jordyn asks.

“She’s an adult, but we all know she’s going to end up with Sterling,” Maverick explains.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I glare at my little brother.

“We know you’re just friends now,” Merrick explains. “But we all know it won’t be that way forever.”

“Who is we?”

Merrick shrugs. “All of us.” He waves his hand around in the little area that we’re sitting in.

“On that note, I think Kennedy needs help.” Jade, Ramsey, and Palmer climb to their feet. “Jordyn, you’re going to want to let them hash this out. Come with us,” Ramsey tells her.

Jordyn nods and follows the girls to where Kennedy and Alyssa are already standing, discussing what she’s supposed to do.

“Start talking.” I make it a point to glare at all of them. Even Deacon. I’m all about consistency with my angry glares.

“Back off, Hulk,” Archer teases.

“Have all of you lost your damn minds? Why would you say that shit?”

“We just always assumed...,” Ryder confesses.

“All of you?” Again, I make eye contact with each of them. They all nod. “Fuck.” I drop my elbows to my knees, burying my hands in my hair. In the last twenty-four hours, I feel like my life has been tipped on its axis.

“Sterling?” Orrin waits for me to lift my head to look at him. “We didn’t mean to upset you. We just always assumed that one day the two of you would figure it out.” He shrugs. “We know you’re just friends, but we all kind of hoped Alyssa might be one of our sisters one day.”

“I mean, I can make that happen.” Rushton raises his hand.

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” I seethe at him.

“That”—Brooks points at me—“is why we always assumed. You protect her like she’s yours.”

“She is mine.” Brooks grins at my admission. “No. She’s my best friend. Of course I’m going to be protective.”



“So then you want her to be happy.” Rushton pats his chest. “I can be that guy.”

“Rush,” I growl, making him almost fall out of his chair laughing.

“Never, man?” Declan asks.

“I’m not having this discussion. Again.” I stand and stalk off to the gate, which is also going to be the makeshift altar. I’m playing Deacon, so I’m going to stand here and wait for further instructions. In the meantime, maybe I can get my head straight.

My mind instantly goes to last night and this morning. I woke up around three with her body still wrapped around mine. The right thing to do would have been to not snuggle her and pull her closer. I couldn’t help myself. I wanted her close to me. Not because she’s my best friend, but because she’s a beautiful woman, and the ladies in my family had my mind going places it’s not allowed to go.

Now, here I am, just hours after waking up with her in my arms, and my brothers are talking the same shit. Is this a conspiracy against me? I know they mean well, but damn... all we ever do is defend our relationship, and I accepted that we were never going to be more. My teenage self moved on. We were doing just fine, being us, until this weekend.

Everything is fucked.

My mind.

My family’s perception of us, and if I’m being honest, my heart.

“That look on your face tells me that you’re starting to figure it out,” Deacon tells me.

“I wish.” I sigh, looking up at the blue sky.

“I get it. You’re afraid that if you tell her that you love her, you’re going to lose her.”

“She knows that I love her.” I tell her all the time. She tells me too. That’s our thing.

“Let me rephrase that. You’re afraid if you tell her that you’re *in* love with her, that you’re going to lose her.”

“Ramsey’s got you watching the Hallmark Channel again, doesn’t she?”

Deacon laughs. “Sometimes, but I don’t mind it. She usually curls up on my lap, and I get to hold her while she watches. It’s one of my favorite things for us to do.”

“You’re going soft, Deacon.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “But I’m a happy man. So fucking happy. I never knew that life could be like this. That I could feel so... fulfilled. Hell, that’s not even the right word to describe it. She changed me. She makes me a better man, and instead of working my life away, I get to live it with her by my side. I wouldn’t trade what I have with Ramsey for anything in this entire world.”

“I’m happy for both of you. Orrin, Brooks, and Declan too.”

“We see you, Sterling. We see the two of you together. I know that if I’d let our age difference, or the fact that Orrin was my best friend, that all of you are close friends, stop me from pursuing Ramsey, it would have been the biggest mistake of my life.”

“You’re telling me that if I don’t try with Alyssa that it will be the biggest mistake of my life?”

He shrugs. “More than likely. You have to take the risk in order to get the reward.”

“I just— I need time. I’m not going to lie and say there has never been a time I didn’t think about taking my shot. Deacon, that was years ago, man. I had come to terms with the fact that we were never going to be that for each other. Then we get here, and everyone keeps trying to push us together, and we’re sharing a room, and she smells like heaven—” I stop, already saying too much.

“Test the waters. Do right by her, and be certain that she’s what you want long term. If she is, if you see yourself in five years with Alyssa standing next to you, go all in. Ease into it if

you want. Ramp up the flirting, touching, whatever to test it out. You two have always been affectionate. Let it marinate in your mind and in your heart, and see what happens.”

“Sage advice.”

“I got the girl of my dreams,” he reminds me. “I struggled, but I didn’t let the obstacles we faced scare me. In the end, I knew she was worth it.”

“Alyssa is worth it.”

“So are you.” He claps a hand on my shoulder as Ramsey approaches us.

“Okay. So, Alyssa is going to walk around the backside of the pool, which will be our aisle. I’m going to marry the two of you, just because I know this one will rush through it.” She points at Deacon and blows him a kiss.

“So, I just stand and wait for her?” I ask.

“Yep. Then when she gets here, you’ll take her hands in yours and stare into her eyes, just like a wedding.”

“You know how to do all of this. Is this really necessary?” I ask my cousin.

“Honestly, no, it’s not. It’s something to do. We have a real rehearsal next week.”

“Then we can stop this.”

“Look across the pool, Sterling. Tell me what you see,” Ramsey says softly.

I do as she says and see Alyssa. Her hair is now falling around her shoulders. Her coverup is tied around her waist to look like a skirt, and she’s got her head tilted back, laughing at something Palmer just said.

“Play along, yeah?” Ramsey asks.

I nod because words fail me. My best friend is a goddess. That’s not new information, but when she’s looking like she does, all sun-kissed and happy, and I can still feel the press of her tight little body against mine, a nod is the best I can do.

The next thing I know, the wedding march plays through the outdoor speakers, and Alyssa slowly begins to walk around the pool toward me.

I keep my eyes locked on her. She smiles, and it's that simple gesture that has a series of events flashing in my eyes. Alyssa dressed in white, walking toward me. Alyssa growing round with our babies. Falling asleep with her curled up next to me every night and waking up the same way every morning.

I swallow hard.

I'm in love with my best friend.

That internal confession almost knocks the air from my lungs. I inhale deeply and slowly exhale as she reaches me. Without being told, I reach out, taking her hands, and guide her to stand before me.

"You're beautiful," I tell her.

"Oh, he's good." I think it was Kennedy who whispered that, but I don't take my eyes off Alyssa to find out.

Instead, I do what any decent groom would do on his wedding day. I bring her hands to my lips and kiss her knuckles.

"Damn." I think that was Jade, but I can't be sure.

"Dearly beloved," Ramsey starts, and I tune her out after that. I can't seem to focus on anything but Alyssa's brown eyes and the way they're watching me intently. There's a question in those deep orbs, and I'm sure she thinks I've lost my damn mind, and maybe I have.

All I know is that the seed has been planted. Hell, it was planted years ago, but it's just now being watered, and it's starting to grow. I can see my life with her, not just as my best friend, but as my partner.

As my wife.

"Sterling?"

I tear my gaze from Alyssa to look at Ramsey. "Sorry."

She gives me a knowing smile. “This is where you say ‘I do.’ We’re skipping all the other stuff.”

I clear my throat and turn back to Alyssa. “I do.” My voice is clear, and there’s a certainty in my voice that I’m positive my family doesn’t miss.

“I do,” Alyssa says when it’s her turn.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

Knowing I need to follow through, I lean in and kiss her cheek.

“Come on, Kincaid!” I hear one of my brothers call out. My head is too foggy to decipher which one. “You can do better than that.”

I open my mouth to tell them to fuck off, but then I see the way Alyssa’s tongue peeks out and wets her lips. Sliding my hand around her waist, I pull her close. “They want a show.”

“Seems like it.”

“What do you think we should do, Tink?” Everything and everyone around us fades away. I’m aware of what’s about to happen and that my family is going to witness it, but the need to feel her lips against mine after all of these years is strong and overpowering.

“Who are we to deny them?” she whispers.

I lean in a little closer. “We don’t have to.” I feel like it’s important that I give her an out. More cheers from my brothers as they start to chant “Kiss” over and over again.

“They’re not going to stop until we do.”

My mouth moves closer to hers. “Last chance,” I whisper.

“Tank?”

“Yeah?”

“Kiss me already.”

No more words are needed. I close the remaining distance, and for the first time since we were kids, my lips press against

hers. The last time I kissed her, we were nine years old, and it was during a game of Truth or Dare. It felt wrong, and it lasted maybe a second before we were pulling apart and wiping our mouths.

This time is different. Nothing about this kiss feels wrong. Keeping one hand around her waist, I slide the other behind her neck, angling her mouth where I want her, and kiss the breath from her lungs.

I've shared a lot of kisses in my lifetime, and none of them have lit my body on fire like this one. A tingle of anticipation washes over me. I can't ever remember my heart stalling in my chest at first contact.

More cheering and whistles pull me back to the present. Slowly, even though I don't want to, I pull out of the kiss and make sure she's steady on her feet before releasing my hold on her and stepping back.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kincaid!" Ramsey cheers. "Thank you," she tells us. "I know we didn't need to do that, but it was fun."

"Speaking of fun." Alyssa turns to look at Palmer. "What was your surprise?"

"Oh." Palmer rubs her hands together. "I'll be right back."

"I'm going to run to the restroom." Alyssa takes off behind her and disappears into the house. Not before I caught the pink hue to her cheeks, and the sight of the rapid rise and fall of her chest, and let's not forget to mention the way that she licked her lips, placing her fingers against them in a gentle touch.

I turn to look at my family. "Not a word. Not one single word. We got shit to figure out, and I don't need the peanut gallery confusing us."

"We just want to see you happy," Kennedy says.

"I know. This is— Fuck me, I don't know what this is, but I need time. *We* need time."

"That kiss." Maverick nods his approval. "I give you a ten, brother."

“Don’t.” I rub my hands over my face. “I’ve heard what you all have to say, and I just kissed my best friend, like she was mine, and she’s not, but I think I might want her to be, and I’m confused, and just... don’t.”

“We’re going to stay quiet for now. We know you need to work this out, but if we feel like we need to intervene, we will. Just like you would with us. We love you, brother,” Orrin says.

I nod. “Understood. This weekend, can we just... not? Let’s just let it be for the rest of the time we’re here, and don’t make her feel uncomfortable about the kiss.”

A chorus of “Done” and “You got it” surrounds me.

“Thank you,” I tell them. I think I’ve bought us some time without the meddling of my family. Now I just need to figure out where we go from here. Alyssa and I should probably talk, but I think I’m going to take Deacon’s advice. I’m going to take it slow, feel her out, and see what happens.

I just hope at the end of this that she’s still my best friend, and if I’m lucky, I’ll also get to call her mine.

# CHAPTER TEN

Alyssa

I'm slumped against the wall outside our bedroom, trying to catch my breath and wrap my head around what just happened. We were pretending to be Deacon and Ramsey, and then— Well, things took a turn.

My lips are still tingling.

I can still taste him.

Closing my eyes, I let the moment flow through my mind. The way Sterling looked at me, the huskiness of his voice. His grip on my waist. The way his eyes heated just before he slanted his lips over mine. I can still feel his hand holding the back of my neck, angling me to just the right position.

Over the years, I often thought about kissing him and the logistics of making that happen. He's a foot taller than me, hence the reason behind our nicknames. I wasn't sure we would be able to pull it off with those twelve inches of difference, but it was... dare I say perfect?

"Alyssa?" I open my eyes to find Palmer standing next to me. "Are you all right?"

"Yep. Good. Fine." I stand to my full height.

"He really laid one on you, huh?" She grins.

"It was all for show." I say the words, but I'm not sure if they're true. Yes, it started out for show, but something about that kiss seemed like it was more.



“When a man kisses you like that, when you have to rush off to catch your breath, that’s not for show.”

“He’s my best friend,” I whisper. I’m still reeling from our kiss and the what-ifs that have been bouncing around in my head since we got here.

“Guess what?” she asks.

“What?” I’m eager for her to give me some words of wisdom here.

“Brooks is my best friend too.” She winks and takes a step back. “Oh, I have something planned that you’re not going to want to miss. I’ll stall but get your wits about you and meet us back outside. And can you do me a favor? When you get back out there, and we’re all sitting, ask me if I’m nervous about this one’s delivery.” She grins, placing her hands on her belly, then turns and walks away. You can’t even tell she’s pregnant except for the slight waddle in her gait. She’s all baby belly.

I watch until I can no longer see her before closing my eyes once again. My insides feel like I’m being twisted in a blender. I don’t want things to change between us, but at the same time, the thought of being with Sterling is.... The idea of us truly together lights a fire in my soul.

I feel a rough hand against my cheek, and I don’t have to open my eyes to know it’s him. However, I do it anyway. I need to see him. See how he’s feeling.

“Hey.” His voice is gruff. “You okay?”

I nod. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” He gives me a slow, sexy smile. “Come here, Tink.” He drops his hand and opens his arms wide.

I don’t hesitate to step into his embrace. My heart is instantly calm, and my breathing is regulated. Sterling is my comfort, my constant in life. He hugs me close, his arms not leaving any space between us.

We stand enfolded in one another, neither ready to let go. I don’t ever want him to let go. It’s at this moment that I realize that all those old feelings that teenage me thought were

fleeting were anything but. They're back with a vengeance, and I don't know how to handle them.

Eventually, I come to my senses. We can't stay wrapped around each other in this hallway, so I loosen my grip and tilt my head back.

"You ready to go back outside?" he asks.

*No.* "Yes."

He nods, places his hand on the small of my back, and leads me outside. I assumed everyone would have something to say about the kiss, but I'm shocked when Sterling leads us to a double lounger, and not one of them makes a comment. He nods for me to sit, and I do. He takes the spot beside me, as he has hundreds of times before today.

Today just feels different.

*We* feel different.

That kiss changed things. I just don't know if it's all one-sided or if things have changed for both of us. Palmer looks over at me and gives me a slight nod, and I remember that I'm supposed to ask her a question. It's the last thing that I want to do, bring attention to myself, but I told her that I would.

"Are you ladies nervous about giving birth?" I ask generally. Palmer winks at me, and I feel my shoulders relax.

"Sure, it's scary," Jade admits. "But it's also incredible." Orrin pulls her close, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Nothing good in life comes easy." Kennedy smiles. She looks over at her husband, and Declan winks at her. "We're blessed, and any pain of delivery will be worth it."

Declan mouths, "I love you," and a slight blush coats her cheeks.

"Men don't know how easy they have it," Palmer speaks up.

"Hey now," Brooks speaks up. "Watching the love of your life grow a tiny human that you know will own both of your hearts is a hard job. I constantly worry about both of you, and

the stress of making sure you have what you need and are safe and comfortable is a full-time job.”

“You take such good care of me, big guy,” Palmer assures him. “But admit it. You don’t have to deal with monthly cycles or push a watermelon out of your body.”

“I could do it,” Brooks tells her. “It’s anatomy, but if I had to or if I could, I would do it so that you didn’t have to.”

“I believe you,” she tells him. “I do, but still the pain the three of us”—she motions to herself, Kennedy, and Jade—“are going to have to endure for our babies is one a man will never know. Unless....” She lets her words trail off, knowing damn well every man around is going to ask her to finish.

“Unless what?” all ten men ask at the same time.

“Whoa? That was like coming at me in surround sound.” Palmer laughs. “I have a little something that will help you experience labor pains if any of you think you’re up for it.” She holds up the small black case and grins.

“What is that?” Brooks asks her.

“A TENS device.”

“Oh, shit.” Jade laughs.

“What?” Orrin asks her.

“Nothing.”

“What, you think we can’t handle it?” he asks his wife.

“It’s intense and not even the full spectrum of contractions,” Brooks tells them. He looks back at Palmer. “Beautiful, you’re evil.” He smirks.

“You up for the challenge, big guy?” she asks him.

“You do realize I’m a nurse, and I know that shit can be painful. Especially in sensitive areas.”

“Oh, so you’re chickening out,” Palmer coos.

“Fuck that.” Brooks stands and whips off his shirt, letting his abs hang out. “Hook me up.”

Palmer's face is full of glee as she unzips the bag and does just that. "Okay, are you ready?"

"Yep." Brooks is leaning back on the lounge with his hands above his head. Palmer places the leads on his abs.

"Here's level one," she tells him. She hits a few buttons, and Brooks grins.

"Easy. Don't go easy on me, beautiful. Go ahead and ramp it up a little."

"You sure about that?" Palmer asks him.

"Positive."

"All right." Palmer punches the small screen again. "This is five."

I keep my eyes on Brooks. He flinches, and his abs contract, but he quickly schools his features. "He's handling that well," I whisper to Sterling.

"It's on five, and he's on the struggle bus. Look at his forehead. It's pinched, and his legs are now raised, his feet flat on the lounge. He is not sprawled out and relaxed like he was. He's feeling it," he assures me.

"Well?" Palmer asks her husband.

"Give me more," he tells her.

"This time, we're going to jump to seven. Are you sure you're ready?" she taunts him.

"Bring it," Brooks says, his jaw tight, as if he's already preparing for what's to come. Palmer taps at the screen, and Brooks's back flies off the lounge before he sits back once again. "Fuck, okay." He pulls in a deep breath. "That's... a lot." His chest is rapidly rising and falling with each breath, and he can't seem to keep still. He lifts his arms but then lets them fall back to his sides. This is a process that he keeps repeating. He's also constantly moving his legs. One second his feet are flat on the lounge. Next, his legs are stretched out in front of him. It's obvious he's trying to find a comfortable position and isn't able to do so.

“How are you doing, big guy?” Palmer asks. You can hear the amusement in her voice.

“Good,” Brooks grits.

“You sure, brother?” Orrin asks. He has a look of horror on his face.

“Yep.”

“You can tap out,” Declan tells him.

“Hell with that,” Ryder speaks up. “Crank it up to ten, Palmer.”

“I vote for ten too,” Maverick cackles.

“I’m in for ten,” Merrick adds.

“Damn,” Rushton mutters. “We totally should have bet on how far we thought he would go.”

“Shit, that would have been a good idea,” Archer tells him. “For what it’s worth, I think he can take ten.”

“Thanks.” Brooks breathes heavily.

“I’d have put money on ten,” Sterling speaks up from his spot beside me.

“No way,” I whisper to him. “He’s going to lose his shit if she goes any higher.”

Sterling looks over at me and winks. “I know.”

Something inside me settles. This is us. It’s who we are. We confide in one another and tease each other, and that’s something that I cherish about our relationship.

“Sorry, B,” Deacon says with regret in his tone. “I think you’re at your max.”

“Give me ten, Palmer,” Brooks says. His jaw is tight, and he called Palmer by her first name, something he almost never does. It’s “wife” or “beautiful” since they were married. He’s in pain, and I feel sorry for the guy.

“He looks miserable,” I tell Sterling.

“He does,” he agrees.

“Palmer.” Brooks drops her name like a warning.

“Are you sure?” she asks him. The glee is no longer shining on her face as she bites on her bottom lip.

“Do it.”

“Here goes nothing.” She taps at the screen, and Brooks cries out.

“Fuck!” He rolls to his side and curls into a ball, then lies back on his back and then back to his side. He rolls off the lounge onto the soft grass. The guys are laughing, all of them except for Orrin and Declan. There’s fear in their eyes as if their wives are going to make them Palmer’s next victim.

“Son of a motherfucker!” Brooks screams.

“I’m not even sure he knows what he’s saying at this point.” Merrick laughs.

“Fuck off, Mer.” Brooks manages to glare at his brother.

“That’s enough.” Palmer taps the screen, and Brooks falls to his back in the grass. He’s breathing heavily as he rips at the leads on his abs. “That thing is the devil.” He tosses the leads away from him.

“That’s not even the full effect of labor,” Palmer reminds him.

“I love you for doing this for our baby girl,” he tells his wife.

I watch as Palmer melts before my eyes. She’s all tough and fun until it comes to her husband. Brooks makes her soft. He brings out that side of her. They’re perfect for each other.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” she tells him.

“It’s all good, beautiful.” Brooks moves to sit next to her on the lounge and pulls her to his side.

“Any takers?” Palmer asks.

“Uh, that’d be a no.” Archer shakes his head.

“Fuck no,” Rushton chimes in.

“Pussies,” Brooks taunts.

“I’m going to have to let that one fly this time,” Merrick tells his older brother. “That looked painful as shit.”

“It wasn’t exactly a picnic,” Brooks tells him.

“Well, ladies, I bow down to you,” Sterling says.

“What he said.” Ryder nods toward Sterling. “I don’t want any part of that.”

“You couldn’t handle it,” Ramsey teases.

“I’m not disputing that,” Ryder tells her. He looks over at Jordyn and grins. “That gives all-new meaning to me telling you that your body is amazing.” He winks.

Jordyn covers her face with her hands, but not before we see a blush color her cheeks. Her shoulders shake with silent laughter, and I find myself grinning. It’s a good thing she likes him already. That comment might have gotten him slapped otherwise. We know what he meant. A woman’s body is incredible for being able to grow a human, but he probably shouldn’t have embarrassed her like that with his double meaning.

“I’m starving.” Archer changes the subject.

“What are you making us?” Kennedy asks him.

“After seeing that?” Archer asks. “You can have whatever in the hell you want.” We all laugh.

“Let’s go out to dinner tonight,” Ramsey suggests. “My treat. We needed this.” She nods at Deacon. “Stressing about the wedding even though it’s all set has been a lot. It’s been nice to be with everyone and just hang out. So, yeah, dinner on me.”

“We can go out,” Sterling tells her, “but you’re not buying.”

“I want to. You’re my family. You saved me. Gave me a safe place to land and folded me into your lives with ease. I can afford to do this. Let me. Please.”

“You know there’s no point in arguing with her. She’ll just find some other way to do it if you don’t agree,” Deacon tells

us.

Sterling nods and the others do as well. “Yes!” Ramsey stands and pulls Deacon to his feet. “We leave in thirty,” she calls over her shoulder as they head for the house.

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We had dinner at a restaurant on the lake. We spent a couple of hours sitting on the patio, laughing and talking. The guys told stories of their younger days, and I had to back them up with the ladies when they didn’t believe them. I’ve been around for all of it, so they looked to me to give them the validity of the stories. They were all true. There was never a dull moment growing up with these boys—men.

We ended up closing the place down, and now we’re all dragging ass as we pull back into the driveway of the rental house.

“I’m calling it a night,” I tell the truck. Ryder and Jordyn rode with us to the restaurant.

“Me too,” Jordyn agrees.

Sterling parks the truck, and we all file out, heading for the house. There’s a herd of us, as the others arrived at the same time. I’m just about to open the door when Sterling’s arm appears around me. He pulls it open, placing his other hand on the small of my back and leading me into the house.

“Night!” he calls out to whoever cares to listen. A chorus of “Nights” follows us down the hall to our room. Once inside, he closes the door and points to the bathroom. “You go first.”

“I’ll be fast.” I grab my clothes and disappear behind the bathroom door. I quickly change into my night clothes and brush my teeth. Deciding I need a few more minutes, I run my fingers through my hair and pull it up on top of my head. Finally, I gather my dirty clothes and head back to the room.

Sterling stands when he hears the door open and smiles softly. “All set?” he asks.



“Yep.” I smile and move to shove my dirty clothes into my mesh laundry bag. I hear the bathroom door click, and I take a deep breath. Swiftly, I climb under the covers and keep the light off this time. I close my eyes and pretend to be sleeping. It seems like hours, but I know it’s only mere minutes when the bathroom door opens and the bed dips.

I feel him slide in beside me, but I don’t move a muscle. Opening my eyes, I stare into the darkness. With the silence surrounding us, it’s easy to let my mind go back to our kiss earlier today. I managed to push it out of my mind while we were with the others, but now it’s there. I lick my lips, still feeling the ghost of his pressing against them.

Can we do this?

Can we be more?

Am I willing to risk what we have for the possibility of more?

“Tink?” Sterling’s voice is a gruff whisper.

“Tank?” I tease, hoping to keep my tone light.

“Come here.”

Taking a deep breath, I turn so that I’m looking toward his side of the bed. The glow of the moon gives us just enough light to make out each other’s form.

“Closer.”

I move a few inches closer.

He sighs. “Let me hold you, Alyssa.”

I part my lips to protest but quickly close them. Instead, I will my heart to stop racing. I count to thirty before I open my mouth to tell him it’s not a good idea, but again close it quickly. Bad idea or not, I want that. Besides, I’d probably just end up there sometime during the night anyway. Maybe tonight, I can pretend he’s mine and I’m his.

Not giving myself the time to overthink my decision any longer, I move across the bed until I reach his side. I snuggle

into his chest. Something I've done a million times, but this time it feels different.

It feels better.

Sterling wraps his arm around my shoulders and holds me close. I feel his lips press to the top of my head, and he exhales heavily as if he *needed* me in his arms. No words are spoken between us. We're comfortable with one another, and it's not long before sleep claims me.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sterling

Last weekend was incredible, insightful, and stressful in ways. All of a sudden, all I can think about is sinking balls deep into my best friend. We spent three nights at Lake Oconee, and on all three of those nights, I held her in my arms and woke with her tight little body pressed against mine.

Deacon suggested I take some time to think, but I already know.

I want her.

I want my best friend to be more than just my friend. Hell, if I'm being honest with myself, she already is. Alyssa is everything I could ever want and more. I just never allowed myself to go there in my mind, but now I'm there. I'm living it. Dreaming of what life with her would be like. Nothing would really change except for the fact that I'd get to make love to her.

Nope. No. I can't go there. I shake my head as I pull into her driveway. Deacon and Ramsey are getting married today, and even though Alyssa received her own invite, she's my plus-one. What would she say if I told her I wanted her to be my forever wedding date?

Fuck. Admitting that I'm in love with my best friend is making me a pussy. Yeah, I'm past denying it. Now, I need to decide what I'm going to do about it.

Climbing out of the truck, I jog up to her door and turn the handle, walking in. We never knock at each other's places, and we both have keys to let ourselves in whenever we need. "Tink!" I call out for her.

"Why are you yelling?" she asks, walking into the living room from the kitchen.

My mouth drops open as I take her in. "Wow."

She looks down at herself. "What? Is this not okay?"

"You look beautiful, Alyssa."

A light pink coats her cheeks. "Thank you. Ramsey says casual, but I felt like I needed to dress up a little."

I don't know dick about fashion, but she looks incredible. Her dress is a bright pink, and it's some kind of wrap that ties at her waist. It hits her about midthigh, and she has these strappy sandals that lace halfway up her calf. She's casual and dressy at the same time.

She's sexy as fuck.

"Look at you," she says.

"All of us guys are wearing the same thing. Khaki shorts and a polo."

"Handsome." She smiles, and I want to kiss her. I want to lean in and press my lips to hers and feel the tingle of anticipation that I've only ever felt with her.

"We should go. Do you have what you need?" I ask her.

She turns and goes back into the kitchen. She returns with her phone in one hand and the other outstretched for me. I already know it's going to be her driver's license, her debit card, and some cash. Two of which she won't be needing, more than likely all three since it's an open bar at the small reception they're having at the Willow Tavern afterward. I don't want to know what Ramsey and Deacon had to pay Hank to have him shut the Tavern down to the public on a Saturday night.

"Anything else?"

“Nope.” She grins. “I’m ready.” She turns and walks out of the house with me trailing behind her. I wait for her to lock the door and stroll with her to my truck, pulling open the passenger door.

“And they say chivalry is dead,” she teases. “Your future wife will appreciate your efforts, I assure you.” She smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

Her comment is something we’ve teased each other about before—when we find that one person to spend the rest of our lives with. However, after last weekend, her words hit differently. I wait for her to get buckled in before I lean in and whisper, “I’m a fucking gentleman in the bedroom too.” I pull back and give her my final words. “Ladies first.” I wink and close her door. Not before I hear her small intake of breath.

Good. I need her to be as worked up as I am after seeing her in that damn dress. I take my time getting to the driver’s side of my truck. I want to give her time to catch her breath, and my cock is pressing against my zipper. I have a ten-minute drive to Willow Park, where the wedding will be held, to get my attraction to my best friend under control.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says when I finally slide behind the wheel.

This is it. She’s going to bring up the kiss, and we’re going to hash it out. It’s time to tell her I want more with her. I thought that I had more time, but if we’re doing this now, I’m going to be honest with her.

“About?” I prompt.

“I think I want to turn my spare bedroom into a reading room. Bookshelves, and a little nook area, with one of those big bean bags that take up half the room, maybe some twinkle lights.”

“Right. A reading room.” I clear my throat. “You have bookshelves for your paperbacks in there now.”

“Yeah, but they’re cheap. I’d like to have some of those open-shelf cases. The kind that are metal with wood shelves. More modern.” She chuckles. “Hold on. I know I’m confusing

the hell out of you.” She grabs her phone and taps at the screen. I stop at the stoplight in the center of town, and she shows me her phone.

“Nice.”

“Yeah, I think so. I read on my Kindle mostly, but I’d love to have a place to display my paperbacks. I’m jealous of all the shelves I’ve seen others post online.”

“You have shelf envy?” I ask with a chuckle.

“Yes! That’s my goal. I’m going to redo that room. Well, after I find a new job. For now, I’m going to hold onto my meager savings in case I take a pay cut. I’m ready for something new.”

“I think you should talk to Orrin and Declan. I’m pretty sure one of them was saying they needed to hire someone for the desk.” I think it was Declan. I make a mental note to talk to both of them and see if they’re still looking to hire someone.

“Maybe,” she says, not really committing. “I’m just going to see what I can find on my own. I don’t really want a handout from your brothers.”

“It wouldn’t be a handout,” I assure her. “They need the help, and you kick ass at what you do.”

“You have to say that as my best friend.”

“No. I don’t have to say that. It’s the truth.”

“We’ll see,” she says as I pull into the park.

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“Welcome to the family,” I tell Deacon, slapping a hand to his back.

He holds up his left hand where his wedding ring now resides. “It’s official.” He grins. “Ramsey Setty.”

“I thought Brooks was bad when he married Palmer, but I think you might beat him. You’re going to walk around calling her Ramsey Setty all the time, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll probably use Mrs. Setty just to break it up a little.” He laughs. “She’s my wife, man.” There’s awe in his voice.

“You’re good for her.”

“She changed my entire fucking life, Sterling.”

I nod. I’ve come to realize what that feels like. Sure, Alyssa and I have been friends for years, but it wasn’t until I admitted that I was in love with her that I felt the shift. Speaking of my best friend, I catch her eyes from across the room and smile at her. She waves and holds my stare until Piper says something that pulls her attention from me.

“How’s that going?” Deacon asks.

“It’s not. Not really.”

“You been thinking?” he asks.

“Yeah.” I laugh. “You could say that.”

“Consumes you, right?” He nods. “I’d love to tell you that it gets better once you make it official, but it doesn’t. She’s always going to consume you. It’s just better because you get to come home to her, fall asleep next to her, and wake up the same way. It’s... the fucking best,” he confesses.

“All the single ladies!” the DJ calls out. “I need all the single ladies in the center of the dance floor.”

I watch as Piper grabs Alyssa’s and Jordyn’s hands. The three of them are the only single women in attendance. Deacon and Ramsey wanted a small intimate wedding and reception, but she still wanted all the traditions.

I watch as the three ladies stand in the center of the floor laughing, and it hits me that I wish, with everything inside me, that Alyssa wasn’t in the singles category. I wish she was attached to me.

“On the count of three. Mrs. Setty, are you ready?” the DJ asks.

“My wife!” Deacon calls out from his spot next to me, and the room erupts in laughter. Ramsey turns to look over her

shoulder at him and blows him a kiss.

“One. Two. Three!” the DJ shouts.

Ramsey’s arms fly into the air, and her bouquet goes soaring. I watch as Piper and Jordyn both jump out of the way, letting the bouquet fall into Alyssa’s arms. I stand up a little straighter, my eyes following her as she laughs and holds the bouquet in the air.

“I was set up,” she calls out, her laughter filling the bar and my heart.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ramsey grins and pulls Alyssa into a hug.

“Can we get the groom out on the floor?” the DJ asks.

“That’s me.” Deacon grins, hands me his glass of beer, and moves toward his wife. As soon as he reaches her, he pulls her into his arms and kisses the hell out of her.

I keep my eyes on Alyssa as she steps off to the side with Piper and Jordyn. The three of them are laughing and cutting up. She holds up the bouquet, and even though I can’t hear her, I know without a doubt that she’s giving them shit about abandoning her. There’s no guarantee she would have caught it if they’d been out there putting in some effort.

“All right, Deacon,” the DJ calls out. “We need that garter.”

We all start hollering and encouraging him while a Marvin Gaye song fills the room. Deacon hams it up, making a big deal of dropping to his knees in front of the chair that Ramsey is sitting on and climbing under her dress. I don’t want to know what he’s doing under there, but I’m a man. My imagination, I’m sure, is spot on when I think about what he’s doing while hidden beneath Ramsey’s dress.

She laughs, her smile radiant. A few seconds later, Deacon appears with the garter in his mouth. He thrusts his arm in the air, and we all cheer and clap for his job well done.

“Success!” the DJ announces. “Now, I’m going to need all of the single men to the dance floor. Come on, fellas. I’m told



there are more of you singles than we had with the ladies. Maybe one of you will be lucky enough to take the lovely lady who caught the bouquet home with you tonight.”

I fist my hands and realize I’m still holding Deacon’s beer. Placing it on the table, I make my way out to the center of the floor.

“Come on, pretty lady. Give them some encouragement.”

I growl in frustration as I feel a hand land on my shoulder. Glancing over, I see Archer standing next to me. “Don’t worry, brother. We’re all family here. We’re not going to move in on your girl.”

“Speak for yourself,” Rushton says, standing on my other side.

My head whips around to glare at my brother. He tosses his head back in laughter, but I don’t find anything about this the least bit funny.

“Deacon, we’re going on three,” the DJ explains. “One. Two. Three!”

Deacon swings his arm in the air and lets the garter fly. I glance over to see Alyssa watching me. Her eyes widen as something hits me in the face. I quickly grab the garter and look around. The guys all pat me on the back and congratulate me, and all I can think about is her.

Alyssa.

“Uncle Sterling! You won!” Blakely launches herself at me. I catch her with ease, letting her wrap her legs around my waist. “Momma says that whoever wins gets a wife next. Who’s gonna be your wife?” she asks. I part my lips to tell her I’m not getting a wife when she starts again. “I know!” She places both of her hands on my cheeks. “Your Tink can be your wife. She’s really pretty, isn’t she, Uncle Sterling?”

My throat is thick, and my reply never comes as the DJ speaks. “Mr. and Mrs. Setty would like the two lucky winners to join them on the dance floor.”

“That’s you,” Orrin says. He reaches for Blakely, and she goes to him willingly, talking about her new baby cousin and how excited she is. Orrin puts his hand on my back and pushes me toward Alyssa as she slowly walks in my direction.

“Silly traditions,” she says, smiling and stretching her arms to place her hands around my neck. I’m a foot taller than her, so it’s a stretch. Luckily those sandals have a little heel on them, making this easier for her.

My hands span her hips as I pull her a little closer. “I guess we’re the lucky ones, huh?” I ask, peering down at her.

“I’d say yes, but you know they’re going to look at this as more than what it is.”

“What is it?”

“A wedding tradition. Two people standing in the right places at the right time.”

I nod. “Or maybe it’s something else.” I let the words hang between us. She doesn’t reply, but it’s because she doesn’t have time to. Maverick and Merrick come up to us and start dancing around us, being their goofy selves, and part of me is pissed at them taking this time from us, but there’s an even bigger part of me that’s relieved. I don’t need my entire family watching as I take my shot with my best friend.

The night moves on, and I have to watch as all of my single brothers dance with her. The ones who are married only have eyes for their wives, but the others, they’re all too willing to grind up on her. They know it’s pissing me off, but I can’t say that’s the only reason they’re doing it.

Everyone is having a great time, laughing and dancing, and there are only three single ladies to the single men. Actually, scratch that. Make it one. Heath is here with Piper, and Ryder has been attached to Jordyn’s hip since they walked through the door. It’s not like my brothers have options.

I still don’t like it.

When it’s finally time to go home, Alyssa is more than a little tipsy, and she’s all smiles. “Tank!” she calls out for me.

“You called?” I tease, pushing her hair out of her eyes. She leans into me.

“You smell nice,” she says.

I bend my head. “So do you,” I whisper in her ear.

“Oh, no. You can’t do that.” She wobbles on her feet, and I tighten my grip to steady her.

“Can’t do what?” I ask.

“You can’t talk all sexy. It confuses me.”

“What are you confused about?”

“Kisses and friendships, and all the things,” she slurs, waving her hand in the air.

“I think it’s time I get you home.”

She tilts her head all the way back and grins. “My Tank always takes care of me.”

I’m not going to lie. Her calling me her Tank does things to me. My cock thickens behind my zipper, and my heart thinks it’s now a gymnast as it flips over in my chest. I swallow thickly. “I’ll always take care of you.”

“Take me to bed, Tank. I mean, take me home.” She giggles. “I need to go to bed.”

“Come on, you.” With my arm around her waist and hers around mine, I lead her to the door. “We’re heading out,” I announce. My parents left a couple of hours ago with Blakely, as did Deacon’s parents. It’s just my brothers, their wives, Hank, who owns the bar, Heath and Piper, and the bride and groom left in attendance. Basically, everyone who’s been here all night, minus our parents and Blakely.

“Drive safe!” Ramsey calls out, and I wave at her.

I should probably make my rounds and say goodbye, but everyone was starting to do that, and I really do need to get Alyssa home. When we reach my truck, I lift her inside and buckle her in.

Her head lulls to the side. “I don’t want to lose you,” she whispers.

I lean into the cab and rest my palm against her cheek. “Never,” I assure her. “You will never lose me.” I mean that with every ounce of my soul. Even if that means I have to sit on the sidelines and watch her love someone else, Alyssa will always be a part of my life. It’s a fate I’ll have to accept, and one that has bile rising in my throat. No one can love her like I can.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Alyssa

“If I keep sitting here, I’m going to fall asleep,” I tell Sterling. We’re sprawled out on my couch, watching a new series we started last night, and now we’re both addicted.

“We can change it so you won’t miss anything, and then you can go to sleep,” he offers helpfully.

He’s been this way for all the years I’ve known him. He’s selfless and always puts me first. Every time I hear that song by Gabby Barrett, “The Good Ones,” Sterling always comes to mind. All his brothers are that way, but he’s always been the standout brother to me.

“I have to make something to take tomorrow.”

“To take where?” he asks, pulling my legs onto his lap and massaging my feet.

I’ve managed to sit on the opposite end of the couch from him, even though he tried to get me to snuggle. My heart screamed yes, while my head reminded me that I needed to put up some boundaries.

*Friends.*

*Friends.*

*Friends.*

“To your parents’.” I bite down on my cheek to keep from moaning when he hits a sore spot on the arch of my foot. He gives the best massages. My mind instantly goes to being

sprawled out naked on my bed with his hands all over me. That image has been happening a lot since our weekend getaway, and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to stop it. I overanalyze every touch and every look. Every conversation. *Everything!* I feel like I'm on one of those rides that spin at the county fair. You know, the one where it spins, and you fall from one side to the other? That's me in my mind. One minute I'm firm that we will only ever be friends, and the next, I'm planning how I can seduce him and make him mine in every way possible.

I'm losing my mind.

"I told you that you don't have to make anything."

"I know, but I want to. Your mom cooks for all of us, and I just feel like I need to take something. We go over this every time we go. You know this about me," I remind him.

"And you need to remember that you're not a guest, Tink. You're family. You know Mom's going to give you shit like she always does."

He's not wrong about that. Carol Kincaid scolds me every single time. She claims I'm family and she enjoys taking care of her family. It melts my heart for the woman who has been a second mom to me for the majority of my life. I love Carol and Raymond Kincaid like I love my own parents. "That's fine, but I'm doing it anyway. The others are pregnant. They have a good excuse, and even then, they still bring something."

"Not every week like you."

I shrug. "I can't help it. It's just something that I need to do." It's hard to explain. I know that Carol and Raymond tell me that I'm family, and so do the rest of them. However, I still feel as though contributing in some way is important. It's how I was raised, and I'll probably never change.

"Just something else I love about you." He smiles, and his blue eyes are soft as they take me in. "What are we making?" he asks.

It's not the first time he's said those words to me, but I'm suddenly wishing they meant something different. I wish that he was in love with me. "I don't know yet. I need to see what I have without having to go to the store."

"Come on then, lazybones." He smirks and maneuvers my legs so he can stand. Instead of offering me his hand to help me up like I expect him to, he tears the cover off my lap, bends, picks me up, and hoists me over his shoulder.

"Sterling!" I laugh, smacking his ass as he carries me to the kitchen. "I can walk, Tank," I remind him loudly. The blood is rushing to my head and all I can think about is taking a bite out of his tight ass in the loose-fitting basketball shorts he's wearing. It would be easy to just slide my hands beneath the waistband.

Before my mind can go any further in that particular runaway train, he places me on the small island in my kitchen. Instead of pulling away, he braces his hands on the counter on either side of me. The pulse in my neck starts to race. Two months ago, I would have laughed it off, maybe looped my arms around him and blown a raspberry on his face. Now, all I can see is the intimacy between us.

"I know you can, but why do you need to if I can carry you?" he asks. His voice is low and, dare I say, tender.

He steps close, and in an instant, I wrap my legs around his waist. He's right there, where I need him. I gasp when he presses closer and feel that he's hard. I look into his blue eyes and will him to kiss me. I've craved the feel of his lips on mine for weeks. I'm too afraid to take that next step. We haven't talked about it, and it's not happened again, but I'm hoping that's about to change.

He presses his forehead to mine. "What are we doing, Tink?" he asks gruffly.

"Baking?" My voice is raspy and filled with desire for him, but my answer has him pulling back. I know that's not what he's asking, but I chickened out. I'm cursing myself for not being honest.

Sterling kisses my forehead and steps away from me, easing back to lean against the counter. His hands are braced behind him. My eyes travel to his crotch, where he's unable to hide his attraction. Women might have to suffer through childbirth and a monthly menstrual cycle, but we can hide our desire. At this moment, I think that's a good trade-off.

"Tink." His voice is gravelly.

My eyes snap to his. Mortification from being caught staring at his hard dick washes over me. "I-I need to see what I have." I start to jump off the counter, but he's there in an instant, his hands on my hips. He lifts me effortlessly, placing me on my feet. "Thanks, Tank."

Pulling in a breath, I move to the small pantry in my kitchen and survey my options. "Cupcakes or brownies?" I tell him, still staring into the shelves of my pantry. I'm afraid my eyes will betray me. I hear his footsteps and then his arms wrap around me while he rests his chin on the top of my head. We've stood like this many times, but it feels different.

*We feel different.*

"You know I love your cupcakes."

I suddenly have the mind of a teenage boy because it's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that he can eat my cake. Swallowing thickly, I reply, "Cupcakes it is. I have white cake and the white fluffed icing."

"Sprinkles?" he asks. His question is light and hopeful.

"Are they even cupcakes if they don't have sprinkles?" I turn to look at him over my shoulder, and that's a mistake. Our mouths are close. He's bending down as if he was about to whisper in my ear.

So. Damn. Close.

"Tell me what you need," he asks.

*Kiss me.* "W-We should preheat the oven." His face falls a little. Does he want to kiss me as badly as I want him to?

"I'm on it." With a gentle squeeze of my hips, he releases me and moves to preheat the oven. "What temperature do you



need?”

Grabbing the box, I turn it over and read the directions. “Three-fifty.” I grab the two tubs of icing. I’m heavy-handed when I add the sugary sweetness to my cupcakes. “Can you look in the bottom drawer next to the stove and see if there are cupcake holders in there?”

“How many do you need?” Sterling bends over, and yes, I look at his ass because I can, and it’s a nice ass. Trust me on this. He stands and holds up a pack of cupcake wrappers. “This says there are fifty, and it’s unopened.”

“That’s perfect. This will make a couple of dozen at best.”

He tosses the wrappers on the island. “Boss me around, Tink. Tell me what you need.”

*You.* “Right. Let’s do this.”

Sterling is right next to me every step of the process. He also finds every excuse to touch me. Leans over me when I’m standing at the counter using the mixer. His hand brushes mine, his hand on the small of my back when he steps around me. By the time the cupcakes are out of the oven and cooling, I’m a heated mess. Not from the warmth of the oven. My body is on fire for him. I make the excuse that I’m tired and ready for bed and that I’ll ice and decorate the cupcakes in the morning.

“You want me to stay tonight so that I can help you?” he offers.

There’s hope in his eyes, but I need him to go. I need to spend some time with my battery-operated friend wishing it was him. “Thank you.” I smile, hoping it doesn’t look as forced as it feels. “I’ll take care of it. It won’t take long.”

“You sure?” he asks, taking a step toward me.

I want to hold my hands up to keep him from advancing, but I also want to reach out and pull him close and tell him to have his wicked way with me. I have to stop this. I have to learn to deal with this attraction, but now that this box has been opened, I don’t know how to close it.

Sterling isn't one to hold back. If he wanted me, he'd tell me. "I'll be fine."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow."

"I can drive," I counter.

"Why? We always ride together."

Not always, but more often than not. I nod. "Yes, driver, you can pick me up," I tease.

"Come here." Before I can stop it, he has me in his arms, giving me one of his epic hugs. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

*No.* "Yes, I'm sure. Thank you for your help."

"Anytime, Tink." He relaxes his hold on me, and I take the opportunity to step out of his arms. "Lock up behind me."

"I always do. Text me when you make it home."

"Always do." He winks.

I'm shocked when he reaches out and takes my hand in his, and starts walking toward the door. His lips press to my temple. "Lock up." He pulls open the door and walks out. It feels like he doesn't want to leave, and I don't want him to leave, but it's better if he does. Turning the lock, I make my way back to the kitchen to cover the cupcakes before switching out the lights and rushing down the hall, already feeling guilty for what I'm about to do while I'm thinking about my best friend.

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A finger taps my shoulder, and I jump at least two feet in the air. I pull my earbuds out and turn to find Sterling standing behind me. His hands are shoved into his khaki shorts, and he's grinning at me. "I knocked and called out for you. What are you listening to?"

My face flames. "A book."

He cocks his head to the side. “What kind of book causes this?” He lifts his hand and gently traces my cheek with his index finger.

“Just a book.” Lies. All lies. I was in the middle of a really steamy scene in this one.

“Hmm.”

“Cupcakes!” I blurt. “I’ll get the cupcakes.”

Sterling chuckles and steps back. “Are you ready? Do you need help with anything?”

“No. Yes. I mean, no, I don’t need anything, and yes, I’m ready.” I turn back to the counter, where I was just finishing washing dishes when he scared the hell out of me. I leave everything as is. I can deal with it when I get home. Instead, I reach for the cupcake carrier at the same time that Sterling does.

With his hand over mine, he places the other on the small of my back and leans in close. “I got it, Tink.”

Damn. Why does he have to say it all sexy-like? Doesn’t he realize what that does to me? “Thanks,” I manage to say.

He smiles and offers me his hand. I stare at him for a few heartbeats before sliding my hand into his. We move through my house, and he stops next to the small table near the entryway where I keep my purse and keys. “You have everything?” he asks once I pick them both up.

“Yep.” My reply is overly chipper, but I can’t help it. I’m trying to hide my body’s reaction to him. He leads us outside, once again stopping and waiting for me to lock the door.

One-handed.

He doesn’t let go of me as he leads me to his truck. “How’s this going to work?” I ask once we get to his truck, and he just stops and stares at the door.

“Do you mind opening the back door?” he asks, a lazy smile pulling at his lips.

“Or you could let go of my hand and do it yourself, goof.”

“Nah. I like my idea better.”

His words melt my heart. Does he not realize he’s making it impossible to remind my heart that he’s not ours? Shaking my head, I use my free hand and pull open the back door of his truck. He places the cupcake holder on the floorboard. After closing the door, he opens the passenger front door for me.

“Thanks, Tank.”

He waits until I climb inside before leaning in and squeezing my bare knee. He doesn’t utter a word, but he doesn’t need to. His eyes are talking for him. They’re speaking words that neither of us are willing to repeat. At least, I think that’s what they’re saying. I’m so confused with the battle between my heart and my head, I can’t be sure.

I want to be sure.

The drive to his parents’ place is quiet, but not uncomfortably so. He leaves his hand palm up as his arm rests on the center console. Part of me thinks he’s waiting for me to make a move to show him that this is what I want, but all I can do is stare at said hand from the corner of my eye. When we pull into his parents’ driveway, I exhale in relief. We need his brothers and the rest of his family as a buffer between us.

I rush to exit the truck. I have the back door open and am reaching for the cupcake holder when Sterling gets me. I thought this was a good plan. I was wrong. I didn’t anticipate that he would crowd me, aligning his body with mine.

“Let me get that.” His lips are next to my ear, and his hot breath causes a shiver to race down my spine.

I open my mouth to tell him that I’ve got it, but words never come. Instead, I nod and slip my hand out from under his, letting him grip the holder. Sterling lifts it from the floorboard and steps back. I duck and move away from him while he closes the door of the truck. Seeing he’s got it under control, I turn on my heel and head for the porch.

Distance.

I need distance.

No way am I giving him a chance to grab my hand again. Not only is the action confusing, but if anyone in his family were to see us, they'd run with it. Sure, they've seen us hold hands before—it's not uncommon—but my reaction isn't. I know I'm not that good of an actress.

"My girl!" Ryder pushes open the door and holds it open for me.

"She's not yours." I hear Sterling growl from behind me.

"Not yours either," Ryder quips.

I step inside with Sterling hot on my heels. Ryder tosses his arm over my shoulders as we make our way into the kitchen. "Look who I found," he announces. Everyone waves hello, and I do the same. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I'm sure it's Kennedy because she's smiling down at her phone. Her gaze rises to mine, and she nods. Just as I thought.

Sterling places the cupcake holder on the counter and, to my surprise, slides his arm around my waist just as I reach for my phone, knocking it to the floor. Not a big deal, except for the fall activates the app from the book I was listening to. The male narrator is asking the heroine to tell him she loves his cock. Of course, like the *good girl* that she is, she tells him.

"Oh my God!" I shriek, scrambling for my phone. I drop it twice as Sterling and I try to pick it up. I manage to elbow him, grab the device, and punch the Stop button.

"Fuck," someone says. My blood is whooshing in my ears from embarrassment, so I couldn't tell you who.

Knowing that I can't hide behind the kitchen island forever, I slowly stand and power off my phone, sliding it into my back pocket. It's then that I look up and find Carol watching me closely.

"Is that the new Lacey Black novel?" she asks.

"Yes." I nod as well because my words are muffled.

"I finished that one last night. It's my favorite of the series." She winks at me.

“Wait, it’s out already? I thought that was next week,” Palmer chimes in.

“Is this what you’re always reading before bed?” Brooks asks his wife.

Palmer shrugs. “Usually. Romance is my favorite genre.”

I can feel my heart rate start to settle, and the heat leaves my face as I watch Brooks reach into his back pocket. He pulls out his wallet and grabs what looks like his credit card, and hands it to Palmer.

“What’s this for?”

“You’re... um... extra attentive those nights. Go crazy. Buy all the books you want.” He smirks as the room erupts in laughter. Even me.

Sterling slides his arm around my waist and kisses my temple. “Not a bad idea,” he mumbles. I don’t ask him to repeat himself because Carol tells us it’s time to eat while she and Palmer talk about the book I was just listening to.

Keeping his hand around my waist, Sterling leads us to the dining room and pulls my chair out for me. All things he’s done before, but again it feels different.

Everything is different, and I don’t know that I can ever go back to convincing myself that I’m not in love with my best friend.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sterling

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Brooks says.

“Why not?” Palmer asks.

She’s got him on speakerphone. We’re at my parents’, and Palmer, Jade, Kennedy, and my mom all decided that we should go to movie night in the park. Willow Park has this event once a month through the summer months, and my brothers and I loved going as kids. Alyssa and I have been before, but it’s been a couple of years since the last time.

“Because I’m working, and you’re due in a week. What happens if you go into labor?” he asks her.

I can hear the frustration in his voice. My brother has been a worry wart the last week. He’s made sure to call us—his brothers—and tell us to be on standby in case he’s not home and is at work when Palmer goes into labor. It’s a request he didn’t have to make. I think it made him feel as if he was in control, but we all know, even Brooks knows, that there is no controlling when a woman goes into labor. His baby girl will make her appearance when she’s good and ready.

“Brooks.” Palmer sighs. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be in town, close to you and the hospital if something happens.”

“Son,” Dad speaks up. “I’ll stay with her. We’re all going. Your mom and me, your brothers, and your sisters.” Dad never adds the in-law to sisters. Our wives are family. End of story. “I won’t let her out of my sight.”

Palmer smiles at my dad, and he winks. “I promise I feel great. No contractions, and it’s better than sitting home alone in case something happens when all our friends and family will be at Willow Park.”

“Dad?” Brooks asks. There’s resignation in his voice and also a hint of warning. Not that he needs to warn our father. Maybe someone needs to remind Brooks that there are nine of us boys and Blakely. This isn’t my parents’ first rodeo when it comes to babies coming into the world.

“I’ll be with her until you get there.”

“I hate that I have to work late,” Brooks grumbles. “I’m trying to pick up shifts because I know I’m going to need the time off when the baby comes.”

“I know, big guy,” Palmer tells him. “I’ll be sure to save you a seat right next to mine.”

“Don’t let her carry chairs, and she shouldn’t be sitting on the ground,” Brooks says to whoever will listen.

“Brooks.” Mom says his name with that same gentle touch she’s always used with us growing up. “Relax. Palmer and your baby girl will be just fine. Finish your shift, save lives, and then come and join your family. Palmer won’t lift a finger except to eat that funnel cake she’s been talking about.”

Brooks laughs. “Wait until I get there, beautiful. I’ll make sure you get your funnel cake.”

I know there was something about them doing food truck dates in Harris when they were dating, so I assume funnel cakes were their thing.

“I promise.” Palmer wipes beneath her eyes. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Palmer taps the screen on her phone and places it on the table in front of her. “Thanks for the assist,” she tells my parents.

“Anytime, sweetheart.”

“What time are we leaving?” I ask.



“The first movie starts at seven.”

“How many are there?” I ask my mom.

“Three. The first is kid friendly. We figured, once Brooks gets there, we’ll bring Blakely home with us, so Declan and Kennedy can stay later.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Kennedy tells my mom.

Mom waves her off. “We’re too old to stay up that late.” She laughs. “We’re happy to do it. Soon you’ll have two to run after, and trust me, you’ll need these kinds of breaks.”

Kennedy places her hand over her baby bump, and she, too, has tears in her eyes. “I love you both. All of you.” Her gaze scans the room.

Palmer, Jade, Kennedy, Maverick, Merrick, Archer, and I are all here. The others have confirmed via text that they’re in. Orrin and Declan are both at work like Brooks. When you run your own business, there’s no such thing as nine-to-five hours.

“I still can’t believe you let Rush take Blake,” I grumble playfully. “Now I’m going to have to work harder to be her favorite uncle today,” I tease.

“That’s between you and my daughter,” she jokes.

“Is Alyssa coming with us tonight?” Palmer asks.

“I’m not sure. I need to call her and see. I assume so.”

“Oh, I hope she does,” Mom says.

“Me too.” Kennedy smiles, and I know she’s remembering our conversation from a few weeks ago.

Surprisingly my family has left me alone about pursuing my best friend romantically. Not that it matters. They planted the seed, and it’s all that I can think about. Not just when I’m with her, but all day long I weigh the risks and the rewards in my mind. I’ve stepped up my flirting. I touch her every fucking chance I get. And her reactions, her body’s reaction to me, tells me that she wants me. At least, I think that’s what they’re telling me. Hell, maybe I’m making it all up in my head. At this point, I don’t really know.

What I do know is that I'm in love with her. I know that she's all I think about, and there are so many pros and only one con. Losing her. Lifting my hand, I rub my chest at the ache that presents itself, just thinking of losing Alyssa.

"You better call her," Mom says.

"On it." I stand and walk out of the room. I hear everyone whispering about how I had to leave to make the call. I know the assumptions they're making, and they're not wrong. I'm not above laying on the charm to convince her to come with us. Not that I think she's going to say no, but I want her there with me. With my family. So, yeah, I'll charm her if I have to. Bribe her? Whatever it takes.

I step out onto the back porch and dial her number, placing the phone to my ear. It rings twice before her sweet voice greets me. "Hey."

She sounds out of breath. "You okay?" That's something else. I've always worried about her, but now that I've admitted to myself that she owns me, that worry is ramped up to a level I've never experienced. I used to think my brothers had lost it, but I get it. We all want to take care of and cherish our hearts, and Alyssa is mine.

"Yeah. I was in the bedroom folding laundry. I had to run to the living room to grab my phone. My ass is out of shape."

"There is not one fucking thing wrong with your ass, Tink." I speak before I think. She laughs it off, thankfully.

"What's up?" she asks.

"We're all going to the movie in the park tonight. The first movie is at seven. I'll be there around six thirty to get you. Mom and Dad are going early to get a space big enough for all of us."

"I love movie-in-the-park nights."

I know she does. "I'll bring you a chair. I bought us new ones. I forgot to tell you. They're zero gravity and so damn comfortable." Orrin was telling me he bought one for the two of them. I stopped by his place a couple of weeks ago, and he was out back sitting in them. I tried it out and got online right

then and ordered one for Alyssa and me. They'll be great for our annual camping trip.

"Do I need to bring anything?"

"Nope. Just you. There will be food trucks and vendors, so we can grab something from them. Brooks is working late, but he'll meet us there later."

"I'm sure he's freaking out about Palmer going," she says with fondness in her voice.

"Pretty much. Dad talked him down. Palmer made a good point. She's better off with all of us than sitting at home on her own."

"That's true. If Brooks wasn't so nervous for the baby to get here, he'd realize she'll be with nine guys who think the same way that he does."

"Hey." I pretend to be offended, but we both know that I'm not. I love my family fiercely and would do anything for them.

"You know I'm right, Tank."

"Yeah," I agree.

"Well, I need to get off here so I can finish this laundry and shower. I've been cleaning house all day."

"All right, I'll see you soon."

"See you soon," she says softly, ending the call.

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"How does it work?" Alyssa asks.

"It's locked, so it's safe for you to sit. When you do, there's a lever under both armrests pull both out, and you'll recline."

"You go first," she says, laughing. "I don't want to fall."

"Tink, I'd never let you fall."

She nods. "You first." Her eyes are soft as she peers up at me.

“Fine,” I concede. “I’ll show you.” I sit in the chair that I opened and set up for her and demonstrate how to recline and lay it all the way back. “See. There’s nothing to it.”

“Damn,” Dad mutters. “That looks comfortable. Is that the chair that Orrin was talking about that we all need for when we go camping?” he asks.

“Yep. I tried it at his place and had to buy one for us.” I point to my chest and then back to Alyssa. “Here, try it.” I lock the levers back in place and stand, letting Dad take my place and explain how it works.

“This chair is bad for me. I could fall asleep,” he says, placing his hands behind his head. “Carol,” he calls out to Mom. “Honey, come try this out. We need these.”

Once Mom tries it out, Alyssa takes her turn. “Wow. This is so much better than the chairs that we usually use.”

“Right?” Jade agrees. “When Orrin came home with them, I was like, those things are too bulky to pack around, but after using them, it’s so worth it.”

“We better get snacks. The movie is about to start,” Mom tells us.

“I’ll go,” I tell Alyssa. She’s all kicked back in the chair, looking sexy as hell in her cutoff jean shorts, tank top, and flip-flops.

“Nachos, please.” She grins up at me. “And lemonade if they have it. If not, just a bottle of water.”

I lean down and kiss the top of her head because her lips aren’t an option. “You got it. I’ll be right back.” I can feel the stares of my family. They’ve seen me be affectionate with her, but normally I never would have leaned in to kiss her like that. Well, the top of her head, but she looked too damn cute. I wanted to taste her lips, something I can’t stop thinking about, but that wasn’t an option, so I had to improvise.

“What was that?” Archer asks, rushing to catch up with me.

“What was what?” I keep my gaze straight ahead. I’m grabbing us nachos first.

“With Alyssa.”

“The chair? We hang out so much I thought I’d be nice and buy her one too.” I chance a look at my brother, and he rolls his eyes.

“Come on, Sterling. What’s up?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” It’s the truth, well, for the most part. I do know that I’m in love with her, but I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t feel like getting into it with him, and definitely not here with all the ears of Willow River in attendance. All I need is Maureen, Kennedy’s grandma, to hear. She’ll take the information and run with it, and I’m not ready for that yet. I’m still processing. Right now, she’s mine, in my heart, and my best friend for the world to see. Making a move could change things. Yeah, it could go in my favor, but there’s that fifty percent chance that it won’t. The fear of that other fifty percent is holding me back. That and I don’t know if I can trust my judgment because I want her to want me more than anything.

“I—” Archer starts, but I shake my head, stopping him.

“Not here. Please.”

He nods, pressing his lips together.

“Next,” the teenager working the booth calls up.

I step up to the window. “Hi, I’d like an order of nachos and a soft pretzel with cheese.”

“When have you ever passed up nachos for a soft pretzel?” Archer asks, his brow raised.

“I’m not. She’s going to find out there were pretzels and wish she would have gotten that instead. This way, she can have both.”

“You’re sunk, brother.” Archer slaps a hand on my shoulder as I shove my change into my pocket and step to the side for him to order.

I don't comment. Not that he expects me to. We both know he's right. I just need to figure out what to do about it. I've stepped up my flirting game, and I touch her every chance I get, but I still need to decide if the risk of losing her is worth it.

Once Archer has his food, we head to the lemonade stand. They also have sweet tea, so I grab one of each while Archer orders a sweet tea, and we head back to our area.

"Aww, man, I didn't know they had pretzels," Alyssa says when she stands from her chair to help me with the drinks and food.

"I know. That's why I ordered you one." I hand her the lemonade, and then the pretzel and the side order of cheese that I almost dropped three times on the way back to our seats.

"Really?" She peers up at me. Her big brown eyes are swirling with something that I can't name, but whatever it is, it makes me want to kiss her. Who am I kidding? Everything makes me want to kiss her these days.

"Thank you, Tank." She steps into me and gives me a one-armed hug.

I swallow thickly. "Anything for you, Tink."

She quickly pulls back and clears her throat. "I set your chair up for you." She points to the chair on the opposite side of hers.

"Thanks." I step behind her chair and grab mine, moving it closer to hers. It's so close our arms could touch when we're sitting. It's the closest I'll be able to get without pulling her onto my lap, and I won't do that here. Not because we've never done that in front of my family, but because now it means more, and they'll see through me.

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"Are we staying for the next one?" Alyssa asks.

"You okay with that?"

“Definitely. I just need to use the restroom.” She puts her chair back into the sitting position and leans forward to get the others’ attention. “I’m taking a restroom break. Anyone need to go?”

“Yes,” Palmer, Jade, and Kennedy all say at once.

“Piper and Heath are on their way here,” Palmer says as she takes the hand that Rushton offers her to help her stand from her chair. She smiles at him in thanks, and he nods before sitting back in his seat.

“Good. I’m glad they’re going to make it,” Jade says.

“Yeah, they should be here at the same time as Brooks.”

“How many times has he texted you?” I hear Kennedy ask as the four of them head for the row of portable restrooms, which I know they all hate to use.

“I’m going to run to my truck, then grab some more snacks. Anyone need anything?” I glance around at my remaining family.

“A candy bar,” Merrick says. “Surprise me,” he adds before I can ask him what kind.

I rush to my truck. The sun is going down, and it’s going to start to cool off. Not enough that we need a hoodie, but I know Alyssa, and she likes to be snuggled when she’s watching a movie. I tossed one of the many throw blankets I’ve bought for my place specifically for her over the years into the truck before I left. I grab it and make my way back to the concession stands. This time I order us both a pulled pork sandwich, a bucket of fries to split, and two bottles of water in addition to Merrick’s candy bar. My hands are once again filled, but I cheat by stacking the sandwiches on top of the fries and shove the bottles of water into the pockets of my cargo shorts, along with the candy bar.

Alyssa and the ladies are already back by the time I reach our seats. I stop next to Alyssa and lift my arm that the blanket is shoved under, and it falls on her head, making her laugh until she sees what it is. She looks from me to the blanket, and the smile that lights up her face also lights up my soul.

“Mer!” I call out to my brother, digging the candy bar out of my pocket and tossing it to him.

“The rest of this is ours.” I turn so that Alyssa can grab one bottle of water, then turn again so she can reach the other side. I wait for her to put them in the cupholders in our chairs before handing her the fries. I take my seat and hand her the pulled pork sandwich I got her.

“Sterling.”

Everyone is talking and laughing, standing and stretching before the next movie. Brooks arrives, as do Piper and Heath, but none of that matters. I can’t take my eyes off her.

“Did you want something different?” I ask her.

“No.” She’s quick to shake her head. “This is... the blanket, my favorite food. You spoil me.” There’s emotion in her tone.

I lean over into her space and use my free hand to tuck her hair that’s escaped from her ponytail behind her ear. “It’s my favorite thing to do.”

“Sometimes—” She stops short.

“Tell me.”

Her eyes are intense when she says, “Sometimes you make my heart race.”

Fuck me. I want to kiss her. Instead, I smile and sit back in my seat. I don’t tell her that she makes my heart skip a fucking beat every time I lay eyes on her. I don’t tell her that I’d love the opportunity to make her heart race every day for the rest of our lives.

No, I pretend as if her confession is no big deal and peel back the wrapper of my sandwich. It’s a dick move, but I know myself. If I say a single word. If I touch her, all bets are off. I don’t care where we are or that my family will have front-row seats.

I’m ready to say fuck the other fifty percent and go all in.



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alyssa

This has been the best week. Tamara was on vacation, so work was quiet and an absolute joy to be there. By Tuesday night, I knew that looking for a new job was crucial to my mental health. I applied for several positions in Harris and a couple in Atlanta. I'm not really looking forward to an hour's drive every day. However, there were only a few listings for Willow River, all of which I applied for.

To top off my great week, Sterling called me late Sunday night, letting me know that Palmer's water broke and that they were headed to the hospital. I offered to go with him, but he wasn't going until the baby was born. There are a lot of them, so they decided it was best to wait. Well, Brooks decided it was best if they went to the hospital in shifts so they wouldn't overwhelm the staff.

I woke up Monday morning to a call from Sterling telling me the baby was here and that everyone was doing wonderfully. I had another message from Ramsey. They got home from their honeymoon late Sunday, and she was already in full aunt mode, reminding us ladies of the meal train and the days we signed up for. We didn't know the dates, so we just numbered the days, starting with the day they came home from the hospital as day one.

The new family of three was released to come home on Tuesday. Palmer's mom, Mary, took that day, Carol took

Wednesday, Ramsey had Thursday, Piper had Friday, and today, Saturday, is my day.

I got up early this morning to go to the grocery store, and I got a few different options. I decided to make baked spaghetti. It's something that's easy to heat up. I'm just putting the pan into the oven when Sterling walks in.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" I ask him.

"I came to help."

"I just put it in the oven."

"Really?" he asks.

"Too slow, Tank," I tease. He's on the other side of the kitchen, which is where I hope that he stays. I don't need to get all hot and bothered before I get to go meet baby Remi for the first time.

"I have pictures." He grins at me.

"Gimme." I hold out my hands, but he shakes his head.

"Come sit with me, and we can look through them."

"Fine. But let me set the timer. The last thing I need is to burn their food." I set the timer for fifteen minutes. It really only needs to be in there long enough to melt the cheese. When I reach the couch, I start to walk by him, but he pulls me onto his lap. I don't bother arguing with him because it's no use. Besides, I like being close to him. Hopefully, we can keep this moment about his new baby niece, and I can keep my body's reaction to him under control. While I'd hoped he would keep his distance, there's a part of me that's thrilled that he didn't.

I turn sideways and put my feet up on the couch, resting my back against the arm to get a little separation between our bodies. Sterling slides his arm around my back and pulls me close with one hand while the other taps at the screen of his phone.

The plan is shot all to hell.

“Here we go,” he says. I don’t have to look at him to hear the smile in his voice.

He hands me his phone, and I take my time looking at all of the pictures. “Aww, look at you holding her. She looks so tiny in your arms.”

“I know. I remember Blake being that small once too. She’s cute as hell, huh?” he says, not really needing an answer, but I give him one anyway.

“Very. I can’t wait to snuggle her.”

I’m zooming in on one of the baby, Remi, with a pink hat with her name on it when I feel his hand slide beneath my T-shirt. I thought I wasn’t that good of an actress, but I deserve an Emmy for ignoring the feel of the rough pad of his thumb as it rubs circles against my skin. My plan is to act like it’s not happening.

Pretending is the lesser evil. What if he’s just being casual, and I turn to kiss him, and he pushes me away? Yeah, avoidance is my plan.

He’s driving me wild with his touch, and I don’t know how much longer I can pretend he’s not. Thankfully, the timer sounds on the oven, and I drop his phone like it’s on fire and scramble off his lap, rushing to the kitchen to pull the baked spaghetti out of the oven.

Carefully, I pull back the foil, and the cheese is nice and gooey and melted. I should have made two pans. It’s making me hungry.

“Damn, that smells good. We should have that for dinner,” Sterling says from behind me.

“Are we hanging out tonight?” I ask him.

“Don’t we always?” he asks. I’m not looking at him, so I can’t really know for sure, but he sounds offended that I’d think otherwise.

“We do. We just hadn’t made any definite plans.”

“How about this? Always assume that whatever is going on, you’re going to be doing it with me.” There’s something in

his tone. He sounds hurt and something else I can't name.

I glance over at him. "I can do that," I say gently. From the look on his face, that something else is anger. However, my words seem to soothe the bear inside him, and he gives me a slight nod and a hint of a smile at my acceptance.

"What can I do?"

"I just need to pack everything up. I'm not making garlic bread. I grabbed a box of garlic toast. They can just pop what they need in the toaster while they're heating up their food." I reach into the freezer, grab the box, and place it on the counter.

I'm on my way to the pantry to gather everything else I bought to go with it when he says, "This is really nice of you, Tink. Let me know what I owe you, and I'll pay you back."

I stop, turning to look at him. "You don't owe me anything. I signed up for this. I wanted to help them. I can only imagine how tired they are with a new baby and adjusting to being parents."

He nods. "I'm damn lucky to have you in my life, Alyssa," he says.

I feel a lump start to form in my throat. "I'm the lucky one, Sterling. Your family has always treated me like I belong. As an only child, I never would have been able to witness what a big, loud, boisterous family is like otherwise. They've accepted that I'm one of you."

"You are family." His voice is thick.

I nod and turn back to the task at hand. I need to change the conversation, or I'm going to do something we both might regret. That's the issue. I don't know if he would regret it or not. I know everything there is to know about Sterling Kincaid. Our lives are so intertwined it's hard to tell what's my memory and what's his. However, for the first time in my life, I can't read him. I can't anticipate his actions or response, and that has my stomach in knots.

I grab everything else I need and head back to the small island in my kitchen with my arms full.

“What’s all of that?” Sterling asks, rushing to help me unload.

“Hot sauce, parmesan cheese, soft batch cookies, Milano cookies, Twizzlers, and Skittles.”

He chuckles. “You went overboard, Tink. Please let me pay you for all of this.”

“Nope. I wanted to do this. The extras are just in case they need a sugar rush to stay up. I know they have to be sleep-deprived.”

“You’ve thought of everything,” he says.

“I tried to.” Grabbing a reusable grocery bag, I load all the items inside. “I used one of those disposable pans for the spaghetti. That way, they don’t have to worry about getting a dish back to me. That’s the last thing they need to worry about right now.”

“You’re good at this meal train stuff,” he praises.

“Not really.” I laugh. “I’m just trying to make their lives easier during this transitional phase.” I look in the bag and go over my mental checklist. “That’s it. I just need to run out to my car to grab something. I’ll be right back.” I don’t give him time to ask questions before I rush out of the house.

I brought the top of a paper box from work to transport the spaghetti. Well, at the time, I didn’t know it would be spaghetti, but I knew that the lid would come in handy, so I snagged it instead of taking it to the dumpster.

“What’s that for?” Sterling asks when I come back into the kitchen.

“Just watch and see.” I grab the bath towel that I had already laid out from the island and place it in the bottom of the box. I make the middle flat and let it bunch up on both sides for a better fit for the pan.

Then, I grab the pot holders and carefully lift the pan from the stove, and place it in the center of the box.

“Huh.” Sterling nods, looking impressed. “What gave you that idea?” he asks.

“My mom used to do this. Well, I’m sure she still does if she’s taking something that doesn’t have an easy transport carrier.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.” I pretend to bow, and his laughter fills the kitchen. It’s deep and rich, and familiar.

He picks up the grocery bag and the box lid. “I’m driving. You have what you need?” he asks.

“Phone.” I turn around and survey the kitchen and find it sitting next to the stove.

“Make sure no books are playing. You can listen to that when we get home.”

I ignore the way he says home as if we live together. “Stop.” I place my hands over my face. “I can’t believe that happened.”

“It’s nothing. The worst part is that I know my mom reads that shit.” He shudders.

“Hey.” I smack at his arm lightly. “It’s not shit. It’s literary genius with lots of heart and steam.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m not calling your book shit, but damn, Tink. I do not need to be thinking about my parents doing any of... that.”

“Come on, Tank. You have eight brothers. How do you think you all got here?” I tease.

“Come on, trouble.” He turns and walks out of the house. By the time I catch up with him, he has everything loaded, and he’s holding the passenger door open for me.

On impulse, I rise on my tiptoes and kiss beneath his jaw. “Thanks, Sterling.”

His arms wrap around me, and he pulls me into a hug. “Alyssa—” he starts, but I ease away.

“We better get going. It’s still warm, and it’s lunchtime.” Breathless, I climb into the truck on my own and buckle in. Once he’s satisfied that I’m secure, he closes the door. I gulp

in the air and watch as he saunters around the front of the truck, making his way to his side. Something in his voice said he wanted to talk, and I know that we need to. There's this charge between us that we've been ignoring, and then there's the kiss that I'll never forget. We just can't talk about that now. We have food to deliver, and I have a baby to snuggle.

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"Alyssa, this is too much," Palmer says, peering into the bag that Sterling just placed on the counter.

"It's nothing," I tell her. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired, a little sore, but my heart is so full." Tears well in her eyes. "Sorry, hormones," she says, wiping at her eyes.

"Look, baby girl. Someone came to meet you." Brooks walks into the kitchen bare-chested with a tiny bundle of pink resting against his chest. Sterling meets him halfway and bends to kiss Remi on the top of her head. The two chat, and it's a whole lot of hotness standing before us.

"Damn," I mutter.

"Right?" Palmer laughs.

"Sorry," I say sheepishly.

Palmer waves her hand in the air. "I get it. You should see it through my eyes. The man I love is holding the baby girl we created out of that love. It's—" She waves her hands in front of her face as if that will stop the emotions. "—intense," she finally says.

"I'm so happy for both of you." I pull her into a hug, and we break apart, smiling. "Is there anything I can do for you while I'm here?" I look around the kitchen, but it's spotless.

"I think we're good. We've been keeping up with it. It helps that we're not cooking and just warming up food. Carol brought paper plates and all that to cut down on dishes," she says, covering a yawn. "Sorry, she was up most of the night."

“Good idea.” Then one of my own hits me. “Why don’t you and Brooks go grab a nap? I’ll stay with Remi.”

“What about me?” Sterling asks. I look up to find him holding his niece in a similar fashion. She’s resting on his chest, and his large hand spans almost her entire body. I’ve heard the term ovary explosion many times. I’ve read it in multiple books, but I’ve never experienced it.

Until now.

Holy. Shit.

I pull in a calming breath and hope like hell the others can’t see what he does to me. “I’ll be locking you out of the house if you don’t give me that baby.” I hold my arms out, and Sterling grins.

He moves toward me and places her in my arms. “Remi, I’d like you to meet your aunt Alyssa.”

My eyes snap to his, and he’s smiling down at me. With Blakely, I was just Alyssa. My heart is dancing in my chest, but I don’t have time to process his words because there’s a beautiful baby girl in my arms.

“Hi, Remi,” I say softly. “Guys, she’s precious.”

“Just like her momma,” Brooks says, wrapping his arms around Palmer.

“I can see a little of both of you in her,” I tell them.

“Thank you,” Palmer replies.

“Now go. Nap, eat, or shower... do all three. I have no plans for today. I’ve got this one covered.”

“She just ate,” Palmer tells me. “I’m pumping but not breastfeeding. She had trouble latching. There are more bottles.” She goes on to not only tell me but show me where everything that we might possibly need, and most we won’t, is.

“You’re just going to be just down the hall,” I remind her.

“You sure you’re good with her?” Brooks asks. “If she gets fussy, she likes for me to hold her against my chest.” He looks



over at his brother. “You might have to step in.”

“We’ve got it. You’re going to be in the same house. If we need you, we’ll come and get you.”

“Daddy loves you.” Brooks comes over and kisses his fingers, and places them on Remi’s forehead. He then kisses my cheek. “Thanks for this.”

“Mommy loves you too.” Palmer leans down and kisses her tiny hand. “Don’t hesitate to wake us if you need us.”

“We’ve got it,” I assure them. Brooks leads Palmer down the hall, and they disappear into their bedroom, softly closing the door.

I move into the living room and manage to sit without jostling her too much. When I adjust her position, her eyes open. “Hey, sweet girl. It’s nice to meet you,” I say. Remi smiles like Elvis, one lip ticking up, and I laugh.

“Aww, she loves her aunt Alyssa,” Sterling coos as he takes a seat next to me. He’s sitting so close our thighs are touching, and the heat of his body warms mine.

“Just think, in a few months, there will be two more babies to love on.”

“You want kids?” Sterling asks me.

“Yes. Have we never talked about that?”

“Not that I can recall.” He slides his arm around my shoulders and cradles me and baby Remi to him.

“What about you?” I ask.

He laughs softly. “Definitely. Maybe not nine,” he says. “Dad was an overachiever.”

“Your mom was also involved,” I remind him.

“Yeah,” he says, reaching out and offering Remi his finger. She latches on right away. I feel his lips press to my temple, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

I shouldn’t let my mind go there, but it’s easy to imagine that this is our life, and this little girl is ours. Somehow, I need

to find the courage to tell this incredible, amazing man, who has always been by my side, that things have changed for me. I need to tell him that when I think of my future, he's there. Not just as my best friend but as the man I choose to live life with.

One day soon. Just not today.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sterling

“Where’s Alyssa?” Kennedy asks.

“She’s having lunch with her parents.” She raises her eyebrows at my tone, and even I can hear the irritation in my voice.

“Why didn’t you go with her?” Declan asks.

“I’d already promised Dad I’d help him pick up a cedar chest he’s made for Mom. We did that early this morning, but Alyssa was already gone.” I sound like a pouting child, but I can’t find the will inside me to stop.

“You should have just met her there,” Declan tells me.

“Yeah.” What I don’t tell him is that I called her and was on my way to do just that, but she suggested she just meet me here. Apparently, she was out with her mom doing some visiting with her aunt or something. I don’t know why it bothers me so much. She’ll be here. I know that she will, but I wanted to see her. Fuck, this is out of hand. I take a sip of my water, wishing it was a beer. However, I chose not to drink in case something happens, and I need to go to her. If she breaks down or something, I want to be the one to take care of her.

Lifting my phone from my lap, I check my messages for what feels like the hundredth time since I got here. “Waiting on a booty call?” I hear her voice, and my head snaps up. Instantly my mood changes. The tightness and the invisible weight on my shoulders lift.

“Tink.” There’s reverence in the way that I say her name.

She tilts her head to the side, and I wish she wasn’t wearing sunglasses so I could see her eyes. They’re always so expressive. “What’s up?” she asks. She nods toward my phone.

“Nothing. Just checking to see if you’d texted me,” I admit.

“Was I supposed to and forgot?” she asks.

Declan coughs from his chair next to me. “I’m going to go wrangle my daughter and make her go down the slide with me,” he says, standing and offering his wife his hand. Kennedy waves at Alyssa, and they walk away.

“No,” I finally reply. “You weren’t supposed to text me. I was just... anxious for you to get here, I guess.”

“Aww, did you miss me, Tank?” she teases.

Grabbing her hand, I pull her onto my lap. She laughs as I wrap my arms around her and bury my face in her neck. I have no doubt that we’re putting on a show, and my entire family is watching us, but I have zero fucks to give.

“I always miss you,” I whisper in her ear. When her body shudders, my mood gets even brighter. She’s not as unaffected by me as she’d like for me to believe.

She smiles at me over her shoulder.

“Can I see your phone?” Rushton asks as he approaches us. He holds his hand out to Alyssa.

She shifts on my lap, my hard cock making itself known. She freezes, then continues to dig it out of her back pocket, unlocks the screen, and hands it to my brother.

“Thanks.” Rushton bends over and places it on the ground. The next thing I know, he’s lifting my girl from my arms and running toward the pool, yelling, “Cannonball,” as they jump in. I should be pissed at him, but the laughter and the smile coming from Alyssa keep me from bitching.

“He saved you, you know?”

I turn to look at Archer sitting next to me. “How so?”

“It’s written all over your face, bro. You’re gone for her.”

“What if I am?” I ask instead of denying it. I’m so damn tired of hiding how I feel about her.

Archer shrugs. “I’m not the one you need to ask that to.” He nods to where Rushton, Alyssa, Ramsey, and Deacon are playing a game of chicken. The girls are laughing so hard they can hardly stay on the guys’ shoulders.

“Have you ever been in love, Archer?” I ask.

“No, but I know what it looks like. We had good examples, and our older brothers are doing a pretty good job of making that known.” He chuckles.

“She’s my best friend.”

“I’m sure that Dad, Orrin, Brooks, Declan, and even Deacon would all say the same thing about their wives. She’s supposed to be your best friend.”

“It’s a big deal, changing over twenty years of friendship. It could backfire.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “You’ll never know unless you take your shot.”

“Losing her—” I swallow hard. “—is not something I’m willing to do.”

“I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes, brother.” With those sage words, he stands and walks away.

“Remi!” Blakely cheers and scrambles to climb out of the pool.

“Easy, squirt,” Declan calls after her.

Brooks takes the chair next to mine and lifts a sleeping Remi from her car seat.

“How’s fatherhood?” I ask him.

“Fucking fantastic. Exhausting, but fucking fantastic.” He kisses his daughter and lays her on his chest.

“Looks good on you,” I say as Blakely climbs onto my lap. Her eyes are glued to her new baby cousin.

“Thanks.” He grins.

“How’s Palmer feeling?” I look across the pool to where she’s talking to Piper.

“She’s good. She’s getting her energy back, and she insisted we come today. I tried like hell to talk her out of it, yet here we are. The deal was we come for a short time to see everyone and then head home.”

“Want me to take her?” I ask him. “Go visit.”

“I’m good.”

“Let me rephrase that. Give me my niece before Mom or one of our sisters comes over and steals her away from me. I need to start her young, letting her know who her favorite uncle is.”

Brooks laughs. “You hear that, baby girl? Uncle Sterling wants the top spot.”

“Hand her over, baby hog,” I tease.

“Yeah, baby hog,” Blakely repeats.

“I can’t be a baby hog when she’s my daughter,” Brooks counters.

“Gimme.” I lift Blakely to sit on one knee, making room for Remi before I hold out my arms, and he relents, passing his daughter to me. “Now go.” I rest Remi on my chest, just as Brooks had her. “Visit. Let me have some time with my girls.”

He parts his lips to say something and then thinks better of it. He snaps his mouth closed and nods before standing and heading straight for his wife. Not that I thought he would do something different. I watch as he stops to stand next to her, pulls her into his arms, and kisses her cheek. Palmer doesn’t seem to miss a beat as she continues her conversation with her sister.

“Uncle Sterling, call for me when she wakes up. She’s no fun when she’s sleeping.” Blakely climbs off my lap and

rushes off to swim.

Brooks stands there for a few more minutes before he kisses his wife one more time and leaves her to visit with her sister. He makes eye contact with me, and I give him a thumbs-up, letting him know I'm set. He nods and moves to sit at the table with Orrin and Deacon.

"You know, you and your brothers should come with warning labels," Alyssa says. She reaches into her bag, that I'm just now noticing, and pulls out a towel.

"At least he warned you and didn't ruin your phone."

"Oh, he remembers the last time. What was that, three years ago when he had to buy Ramsey a new one?" she asks.

"Yeah." I chuckle. "He learned his lesson. And don't lump the rest of us in with him. We didn't toss you into the pool."

"No. You didn't this time." She gives me a pointed look. "But then there's this." She nods to Remi sleeping peacefully on my chest, where I sit beneath the canopy avoiding the sun. This is a prime baby-holding location, and it will be my excuse not to give her up to anyone who tries to steal her from me. Knowing my brother, he's going to agree. I grin. I win, and they don't even know it.

"What's that smile for?" Alyssa asks.

I look up and see that she's stripped out of her shorts and tank top, and she's in nothing but her white bikini. Her tanned skin glistens in the sun. I have to pull in a deep breath because the sight of her knocks the breath from my lungs.

"This is the best spot to hold her. As long as I don't move, I get dibs on sweet Remi."

"That's another thing." Alyssa shakes her head. "Do you and your brothers realize how sexy it is to see you all shirtless and holding a baby? Hell, even fully clothed? If you're looking to find a woman, babysit this sweet thing, and carry her around. You'll have every single woman in Willow River falling at your feet. Hell, probably a few of the married ones too." She laughs as if her words don't faze her, but I can see

the strain in her expression, and that laugh doesn't reach her eyes.

“What about you?”

“It's a hot package, Tank,” she confesses.

“You calling me hot, Tink?”

“Come on.” She rolls those beautiful brown eyes. “You know you're hot.”

“Maybe, but I like when you say it.”

“Put those away.” She points at my face.

“What?”

“That smile. The naked chest, the muscles, the baby girl. It's too much.” She shakes her head, and my smile grows.

“Come sit with me.”

She moves to the chair next to mine. “Here.” I pat my lap.

“Nope. You're going to give me that baby, so I can snuggle her.”

“Sit here and I'll snuggle both of you.” She freezes and stares down at me.

“Alyssa!” Kennedy calls out. “Ramsey needs your help. My husband won't let me intervene.” Kennedy points toward the pool where Rushton has Ramsey in his arms, running toward the water. They crash into the crystal blue, and both come up, spluttering and laughing.

“Oh, it's on, Kincaid.” Alyssa tosses her towel onto the fence behind me and takes off toward the pool.

“No running!” Blakely calls out, making us all laugh.

I watch as Alyssa dives into the pool. She swims over to Rushton and jumps on his back, trying to dunk him. Ramsey tries to help her, but they're no match for him.

“Piper!” Alyssa calls out. “Get your pregnant ass in here. We need backup.” Heath tosses his head back in laughter as Piper strips off her shorts and hands them to him before she leisurely steps into the pool. Piper stays back and laughs as



Ramsey and Alyssa manage to take him down. And so it goes. They all play and goof off in the pool, and I'm content to sit here holding my baby niece and watch them.

No one tries to steal Remi from me, and part of me thinks they know I need her in my arms. If I wasn't cradling her, my hands would be holding Alyssa, and we're not there. Fuck me, I want us to be there, but we're just not. That's on me. I need to work this shit out in my head. With each passing day, it's harder and harder to hide how I'm feeling. I thought the "take things slow" advice was a good angle, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe going all in and not wasting any more time is the better option.

"Hell yes!" Ryder shouts. He lifts Jordyn into the air and spins her around. When they stop spinning, he kisses her hard.

"Remi? Is Uncle Ryder proposing, and no one told me?" I ask my niece.

"What's going on?" Maverick calls out. "Should I give Jordyn a hug and a kiss too?" he jokes.

"We do everything together," Merrick pipes up. "So count me in for a hug and a kiss too." He winks at Jordyn.

I can't hear Ryder, but I imagine he's telling her to ignore his idiot brothers. "Jordyn just got the call she's been waiting for. We might be here celebrating the Fourth of July, but my girl has something else to celebrate." His smile is bright and infectious. I find myself leaning forward a little to make sure I don't miss the announcement. "She got it! Jordyn got the Paris internship."

Everyone cheers and calls out their congratulations. Maverick and Merrick both pick her up, spin her around, and kiss her cheek. Ryder just smiles. He knows they're not trying to take his girl. They're accepting her into our family. Besides, we all like to give each other shit.

Jade and Kennedy pull Jordyn to them. I can only imagine they're asking her about her internship. I don't know much about it, just what Alyssa told me. It's in Paris, and if I remember right, she's going to be gone for a while. Ryder is a

lineman. He works for the local power company. I assume they need linemen in Paris too. I don't know if that's something that he's considered or not. They're going to have a lot to talk about, that's for sure.

Selfishly, I don't want my little brother to move to Paris, but if that were Alyssa, I would follow her there. Hell, I was a moody asshole when she was spending time with her parents and told me she'd just meet me here. I can't imagine her living in a different country.

*There's your answer, asshole.*

"Hand her over," Orrin says, taking the seat next to mine. "I need practice."

"We got plenty of practice with Blakely," I remind him.

"Yeah, but that was forever ago. Come on, let me hold her."

"Nope. Brooks said I was the only one allowed to hold her."

"Right," he scoffs. "Palmer! Sterling won't let me hold the baby," he calls out. My family cracks up laughing, because we may be adults, some of us married with kids, but we will always be the little boys who grew up together. We will never grow out of that, no matter how old we are.

"Sterling," Palmer calls back. "Play nice."

"Yeah, Sterling," Ramsey chimes in.

"Mom taught you better," Declan tells me.

"Stop fighting over my daughter," Brooks says, heading toward us.

"Oh no, you don't," Palmer manages to cut him off, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Let them have some time with her. Relax, pappa bear." I hear her tell him.

"Sterling, I need you," Alyssa calls out.

My head snaps to where she's sitting on the edge of the pool next to Piper. "Unless you want me to let one of the twins help me?" she asks.

I stand, hand Remi to Orrin, and make my way toward her. I sit next to her on the side of the pool, placing my hand on her thigh. “What’s up, Tink?”

“Payback on Rush.” She nods to where Rushton is floating on a raft. He has sunglasses on, but you can tell from how relaxed his body is, he’s asleep or well on his way. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough to dump him off on my own.”

“I see how it is. Using me for all of your dirty work.” I tap the end of her nose with my index finger.

“She’s tiny,” Piper defends. “She calls you Tank for a reason.”

“What she said.” Alyssa points at Piper.

“I’m just giving you shit, Tink. You know if it’s in my power, I’ll give you anything you ask for.” I don’t stick around to give her a chance to reply, but I do hear her quick intake of breath as I drop down into the pool.

The water is warm. I hold my finger up to Blakely, telling her to be quiet where she sits on the steps. She giggles and covers her mouth with her hand, and nods.

As quietly as possible, I walk to the back of the raft that Rushton is floating on. His chest rises and falls with ease, and I know he’s out. Moving to the side, I gently guide the raft away from the steps and tip him. He comes up, sputtering and shaking his head. Everyone laughs, but the only laughter I hear is hers. Alyssa has her head tilted back, and her happiness has my heart tripping over in my chest.

“You.” Rushton points at me, and I shrug.

“My girl wanted you dunked.” I realize what I said as soon as the words are out of my mouth. Rushton smirks and moves toward Alyssa. “Tink!” I call out, and she turns to see my brother headed her way.

Archer is walking by and offers her his hand, helping her stand. She thinks that she’s safe, but I know better. Archer says something to her, and then he lifts her into his arms, running, and jumping into the deep end.

I swim to her, and just as she comes up for air, I pull her into my arms. “I got you,” I tell her. She manages to wrap her legs around my waist and climb on my back.

“Now try and get me,” she taunts my brothers.

“You can’t stay glued to him all day and night.” Rushton points at her. His smile tells me he’s not angry. It’s all in good fun.

“Wanna bet? Tank, I’m your huckleberry.”

*Fine by me.* I move my hands to grip the back of her thighs, making sure she’s securely wrapped around me. “I can live with that,” I tell her.

“You two...” Rushton points at his eyes with his index and middle fingers and then at us. “I’m watching you. Be on guard, Lys,” he tells her.

She giggles. The sound is right next to my ear as her body shakes. I can feel her tits pressed to my back, and I’m thankful we’re in the water because my cock also notices.

“You can’t let me out of your sight,” she says once she stops laughing. “He means business.”

“I’ve got you.” And I do. I’ve got her.

No matter what life tosses our way, I’m her man. That’s what you do for the woman who owns your heart. I just need to find the right time to tell her that.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Alyssa

“This pile of record requests needs to be completed before any of you go home.” Tamara drops a stack of papers on the desk between us before turning on her heel and stomping back to her office.

“She’s been extra bitchy this week,” my coworker Cassie whispers.

“My question is, where in the hell have these been hiding all week? We were all caught up.” I thumb through the requests. “Most of these are dated before this week. It’s like she’s been holding them to dump on us all at once.”

“If you have plans tonight, I can stay and do them.”

“No way. I’m not letting you sit and do all of these by yourself. I was just doing the usual. I’ll call Sterling and let him know to go ahead and eat without me.” Instead of calling him, not willing to risk Tamara’s wrath if she walks by and sees me talking on my phone, I text him. I can keep my phone in the pocket of my scrubs. Texting is much easier to hide.

“I’ll be your lookout,” Cassie says.

“Thanks.” I move to the other side of the front office, out of view. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I fire off a text. We can have our phones on our person on vibrate but if we get caught using them, we get in trouble.

**Me:** I have to work late. Cruella brought up a ton of record requests just now that she says have to be done today.

**Sterling:** It's Friday. At four.

**Me:** She's cool like that.

I don't have to worry about Sterling getting my sarcasm. He knows me.

**Sterling:** Want me to bring you dinner?

**Me:** No. Cassie is here too. We're going to get this done. I'll text you when I'm out of here.

**Sterling:** I'll wait on you.

**Me:** You don't have to wait.

**Sterling:** Come on, Tink. I'll wait. Text me when you're on your way home. I'll meet you there.

**Me:** You're the best, Tank.

**Sterling:** Oh, go on.

I smile down at my phone. Sterling never fails to make me smile. I don't reply. Instead, I slide my phone back into my

scrubs and join Cassie at the desk. “You need to make a call?” I ask.

“Nah, I didn’t have any plans. I guess at least we’ll get overtime, but we both know when payday comes next week, she’ll bitch at both of us for having too many hours when she’s the reason we have them.” Cassie rolls her eyes.

This is what we deal with every single day. The search for a new job has been unsuccessful so far. I didn’t have any leads from the few jobs that I’d already applied for. I should make some follow-up calls as well as apply for more jobs. Maybe it’s time I switch careers altogether. At this point, I’m just ready to leave this environment. Short of taking my clothes off and selling pictures of my feet, I think I’d be all in.

“At least it’s all done electronically now. If we had to print or copy all of these records, we’d be here all weekend.”

“Glass half full. I like it.” I smile at my coworker.

“Here’s half for you and half for me. Let’s do this.” Cassie raises her hand for a high-five, and I slap my hand against hers before we hunker down and get to work. It takes us just over three hours to get through both stacks. Of course, the network was running slow, which made the process take even longer.

Once I’m in my car, I call Sterling. “Hi,” I say when he answers.

“Are you still at work?”

“I’m leaving now. The network was slow, which took forever, and then there were a quarter of the forms not filled out correctly, so we had to call the patient and let them know.”

“We need to get you out of there.”

“I know.” I sigh into the phone. “Anyway, I’m heading home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I made dinner, and it’s already packed up. I’ll meet you at your place.”

“Really?” Tears well in my eyes. He’s so incredibly thoughtful.

“Yes, really. Drive safe. I’m on my way.”

“Thanks, Sterling.”

“Anything for you.”

I’m tired, but there seems to be more behind his words. I shake out of my exhaustion. “I’ll see you soon.” I wait for him to say goodbye and end the call, placing my phone in my cupholder and heading home.

When I pull into my driveway, Sterling is sitting on the front porch. His elbows are resting on his knees as he scrolls through his phone. When he looks up, the smile that lights up his face also lights the fire in my heart. He is exactly what I need after the day I had. Time with Sterling makes everything better.

Parking my car, I take my time gathering my purse, phone, and keys before climbing out. By the time I reach him, he’s on his feet with his arms wide open. I don’t hesitate to walk into his embrace. The feel of his arms around me changes my mood instantly.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

“Yes. What are we having?” I ask, pulling back.

“I made cheesy chicken and rice with broccoli. Come on. I’ll make you a plate.” He laces his fingers with mine and leads me into the house. It smells amazing, and I give myself a mental pat on the back for giving him a key to my place.

“It smells so good,” I say, dropping my purse to the table, along with my phone and my keys. I kick off my shoes. “I need a quick shower. I’ll be five minutes tops.”

“Take your time. I transferred this to the Crock-Pot so it would stay warm.”

“Remind me to thank your mom for teaching you how to cook.” His laughter follows me down the hall to my room. I quickly strip out of my scrubs, toss them in the hamper, grab some comfy clothes, and take the world’s fastest shower.

Pulling on shorts, a sports bra, and a tank top, I don’t bother with my hair—choosing to pull it into a ponytail and



calling it good. When I reach the kitchen, Sterling has two plates of food ready at the table.

“Thought you could use one.” He nods to the beer that’s set in front of one of the plates on my small island.

“Definitely. Thank you for this.”

He takes the seat next to me, and we dig into our food. “I have plans for us tomorrow,” he tells me, taking another bite of his dinner.

“What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Good surprise or bad surprise?”

“Are there bad surprises?” He raises his brow, his lips lifting in a smile.

I shrug. “I’m sure there are.”

“Well, this is a good surprise.”

“What do I wear?”

“Anything is fine. It’s not fancy. Something comfortable.”

“Do I get a hint?” I ask, forking up my final bite. “This was so good.” I nod toward my now cleared plate.

“The hint is that you’re going to love it, and thank you.” He stands and grabs our empty plates. “I’m going to clean this up and put the leftovers in the fridge. Go pick out a movie. Do you want another beer?”

“No. I’ll grab a bottle of water. Want another?”

“Sure. I’ll be right there.”

I move to the fridge, snagging two bottles of water, and run one of the bottles over the back of his neck as I pass him. He turns faster than I thought he would or could and grips me by the hips, lifting me in the air over his head as if I weigh nothing. I’m half tempted to dive forward and pretend like I’m Baby in *Dirty Dancing*.

“Now I’ve got you.” His voice is husky.

“What are you going to do with me, Tank?” I ask. His eyes heat, and he starts to lower me. I lick my lips, a move he doesn’t miss. Just when our mouths are close to meeting, finally, after all of these weeks, his phone rings. He sighs heavily and lowers me to my feet. Instead of my lips, his press a kiss to my forehead.

“I’ll be right there.”

I scurry off to the living room as he answers his phone. I’m too distracted to hear who messed up our kiss. I search the room for the remote. I remember turning off the TV and tossing it somewhere last night before bed. Lifting one of my throw pillows, I find it. I plop down on the couch and pull up the series we’ve been watching. We’re on season two. I cue up the episode and hit Pause to wait for Sterling. He appears a few minutes later.

“That was Maverick. He needs something welded. I told him I could help him tomorrow morning or Sunday. We’re going to do Sunday.” He smiles, holds his hand out for me, and I place mine in his, letting him tug me to my feet.

I don’t know what I expected, but I was hoping for a repeat of the kitchen. Instead, Sterling lies down on the couch and pats the spot in front of him. His large frame takes up most of the space, but I’m small, and I know from experience that I fit just right in front of him.

I hesitate even though we’ve done this exact thing hundreds if not thousands of times. It feels different now.

“Come here, baby,” he says softly.

My heart stalls and I’m not sure that I’m breathing. The term of endearment slipped off his tongue as if it’s what he’s always called me. He doesn’t. He never has. I can’t speak, but I can see his eyes. They’re soft and, if I’m not mistaken, willing me to lie with him. I nod and take my spot in front of him.

He immediately wraps his arms around me. There is barely any part of us that’s not touching as he pulls me close. He kisses my neck before settling in to watch the movie. I’m

staring at the paused screen and realize that's my job. The remote is still in my hand, so I press Play, lay it on the floor, and settle in.

I don't focus on a single thing about any of the episodes we watch. All I can think about is how much I want this with him. I'm going to tell him. I have to. I can't go on like this any longer.

It's going to change us, and I can only hope it's for the better. I don't want to do life without him.

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“Sterling!” I lean forward in my seat, only to be stopped by the seat belt. “Is this where we're going?” I can't peel my eyes off the brick building in front of us.

“Yep.”

“I didn't even know this place existed. How did you find it?”

“I ran out for lunch on this side of town earlier this week. I saw the grand opening sign.”

“And this is where you're taking me?” I turn to meet his gaze.

“Yes.” He reaches out and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “This is where we're going to spend the day.”

“This can't be fun for you.”

His palm rests against my cheek. “I'm with you. That's what matters. Consider me your personal assistant. I'll carry all the books you're going to buy while you shop for more.”

“We're really spending the afternoon at a bookstore?”

“We really are, and guess what?”

“What?” I ask, feeling my excitement quivering inside me.

“It's two stories.”

“Seriously?” I squeal.

His smile widens. “Seriously. And the entire top floor is dedicated to romance.”

“You’re making that up.”

He laughs lightly. “I’m not. I promise you. I stopped in and checked it out to see if it was something I thought you might like. I didn’t know if it was all kids’ books or whatever, but the lady behind the desk told me the top level is all romance.”

“I love this place.” I sigh, reaching for my seat belt to release the latch.

“You haven’t even gone in yet,” he reminds me.

“I already know I’ll love it.” Leaning over the console, I move to kiss his cheek. He moves at the same time, and my lips end up at the corner of his mouth. I’m tempted to just lay one on him, but I can’t unpack that right now. Not while I’m sitting in front of a bookstore with an entire second story devoted to my favorite genre.

“Ready?” I ask brightly, ignoring the ache between my thighs and the heated look that he’s giving me.

“Are you ready?” he counters with a wide grin.

“Let’s do this.” I reach for my handle and climb out of the truck. I hear Sterling grumble about not waiting for him to open my door, but I’m too damn excited to wait. Sterling meets me on the sidewalk, holding his hand out for me. I take it without hesitation and let him lead me into the bookstore.

“Hi, welcome to the Story Keeper. What can we help you with today?” a young girl greets us.

“We’re just browsing,” Sterling tells her.

“Welcome. Upstairs is our romance section. We have couches spread throughout to relax, and there is a coffee bar on both levels. Look for the Story Keeper logo”—she points at the logo on her polo shirt—“if you need assistance.” She turns to walk away but stops. “Oh, and we have these cool carts.” She takes a few steps, and there are carts that look like crates that you pull behind you. “There’s an elevator you can use to take this upstairs with you. Happy shopping.”

I wait until she's walked away before I turn to look at Sterling. "This is the best bookstore I've ever been in."

"You've barely stepped through the door." He grins.

"I don't care. They're set up perfectly. It's so difficult to juggle all the books you want to buy and still shop. These crates are perfect for not bending the pages."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Sterling grabs a crate thingy and points to the elevators. "To the second floor, we go."

I clap because I'm that fucking excited and lead us to the elevators. As soon as the doors open on the second floor, I'm like a kid in a candy store. I don't know where to look first.

"Pick a side, Tink. We'll work our way through them all."

"That's going to take forever," I tell him.

"Good thing we've got all day then." He winks, and I want to kiss him again. Instead, I settle for a tight hug before skipping off to the right side to do just as he said. I'm barely down the first aisle, books on both sides, and I have three books in my crate.

"I really need to redo my spare bedroom," I tell Sterling. "My poor bookcase is going to be screaming from these new additions."

"Let me know when you're ready, and we'll make it happen."

I stop to look at him. "Soon. I need to start looking for the shelves. I want them open. I saw some online. Oh, let me show you." I pull out my phone and pull up the screenshots of the shelves I want. "Something like this."

"Nice." He nods. "I remember you showing me these."

I slide my phone back into my purse and keep shopping. I stop and point out books I've loved, ones I already have signed copies of from my favorite authors, and those that have been on my list to read forever. I'm selective about what I buy because I don't want to break the bank, and I want this library

idea to become a reality. Once it's done, I can go wild, filling the shelves with my favorites.

We stop midway to grab coffee from the coffee bar, and by the time I make it to the last aisle, there's a pretty significant stack in my crate. "Yikes," I say, looking down at it. "I went a little overboard. I'm going to have to find some temporary places to keep these until my library in the spare bedroom's ready."

"Keep a few at my place if you need to. You have a shelf in your room there that's pretty much empty except for a few you keep there for a just-in-case read."

"Yeah, I usually have my Kindle, but I do love a good paperback read." We check out, and almost two hundred dollars later, Sterling is toting two large bags of books and placing them in the back seat of his truck.

Once he's behind the wheel, he turns to look at me. "I love that smile," he says softly.

"It's all you," I admit. "Thank you so much for this. I'm sorry we were in there for—" I look at the clock on the dash. "—over three hours. Yikes!"

He chuckles. "This was the extent of our plans other than dinner, what sounds good? This is your day, so you get to pick."

"Mexican." My answer is automatic. He loves the Mexican restaurant here in Harris.

"Pick for you, Tink, not for me."

"I'm craving a burrito California and some chips and queso."

"You sure?" he asks.

"Positive."

Sterling nods, pulls out of the parking spot, and heads to the other side of town to the restaurant. I watch his large hands grip the wheel, the corded veins in his arms. He could have anyone he wanted. He could have spent the day doing anything but this, something he enjoyed, or took time goofing

off with one of his brothers, but he did this for me. He knew I would love it, and after the week I've had, it was everything I needed. Then again, I think the company did more for my spirit than the bookstore.

“Thank you for this.” I lean over and rest my hand on his arm. “Today has been the best day. Last night, and today, you turned my week around.”

Sterling reaches over and lifts my hand to his lips. “Good.” He rests my palm back on his arm as he navigates into the restaurant parking lot. Just as he always does, he opens the door for me and ushers me into the building with his hand on the small of my back. I look up to thank him and find him already looking at me. He leans down and kisses my temple.

I'm going to finish this perfect weekend with him as my best friend, and then I'm telling him that I'm in love with him. I just pray that I'm interpreting his actions and looks correctly and he loves me too. Not just loves me, but is in love with me.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sterling

It's Saturday afternoon, and I'm on my way to Alyssa's house. She had plans with her friend Kristy last night, a girls' night, so I didn't get to see her. I stayed up until I knew she was home safe. When she called, she said she had something she wanted to talk to me about. She sounded serious, and I slept like shit worried about her.

I'm pulling into her driveway when my cell phone rings. Maverick's name flashes across the dash. I don't answer; instead, I let it go to voice mail. I need to see Alyssa and set eyes on her. Grabbing my phone, I climb out of the truck and make my way to the front door. Alyssa pushes it open and smiles. She seems hesitant, but when she wraps her arms around me and I return her hug, her body relaxes into mine.

"You good?" I ask her, not letting her go just yet.

Tilting her head back, she keeps her arms locked around my waist. "I'm good. How are you? Is something wrong?"

"No. You said you needed to talk to me about something, and I didn't sleep well. I was worried about you."

"I'm sorry." Regret crosses her features. "I didn't mean to worry you. I just had something I wanted to run by you." She smiles, and every muscle in my body relaxes seeing that smile.

My phone rings again, and she steps back, letting me check it. "It's Maverick. He's called me once already when I



pulled in, and I didn't answer because I needed to see you. I better make sure everything is okay."

Keeping one arm around her, because I'm not ready to let her go, I tap the Answer button and raise the phone to my ear. "Hey, man."

"Where are you?"

My body stiffens at his tone of voice. Alyssa senses it and begins to run her hands up and down my back. Her touch instantly calms me so that I can reply to my little brother. "At Alyssa's. What's going on?"

"Ryder's not doing so hot."

"Explain that, Mav. What do you mean he's not doing so hot?"

"Jordyn's gone."

"Maverick," I snap. "Details, brother. What the fuck is going on?" Worry for my little brother and his girl wash over me.

"Sorry." He takes a deep breath. "Ryder went to see Jordyn, and her roommate, Gianna, told him that she was gone. Her flight left early this morning. She's headed to Paris."

"He knew she was going to Paris for the internship."

"He knew she was going. Not when she was going."

"Oh, shit," I breathe, pulling Alyssa a little tighter.

"Exactly. He's breaking down. He called me on his way home. Told me that if I wanted to get trashed tonight, to head to his place."

"Where are you now?"

"Merrick just got home from work. As soon as he's out of the shower, we're heading over."

"Have you called the others?"

"Archer is on his way there too."

"I'll call the others," I tell him. I look down at Alyssa with apology in my eyes. "I'll be there."

“Thanks, man. See you soon.”

“See ya.” I end the call, slide my phone back into my pocket, and hug Alyssa tightly with both arms. “I’m sorry,” I tell her. Regret washes over me. “I know there’s something that you wanted to talk about or run by me. Want to tell me now, and I can run to check on Ryder and then come back, and we can talk it out?” I offer.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

I quickly explain my conversation with Maverick. “I have to go check on him.”

“Of course you do. He needs his brothers.”

“You need me too.”

Her smile is soft. “I promise what I have to talk about can wait. Ryder needs you. He really cared about her. And for what it’s worth, I think she really cared about him too.”

I nod. “I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“Sterling, don’t worry about me. I’m sure you’ll all be there. I think I’ll call Palmer and see if she needs a nap or help with the baby or anything. Kristy is with her parents tonight.”

“I— Thank you, Tink. You’re the best.” I hug her one more time, kiss her temple, and release her. “I’ll call as soon as I can.” I just about told her that I loved her.

Fuck this. I’m not doing this anymore. I’m telling her.

I’m going to plan a night for us. I’m going to make it special, as it should be the first time you tell a woman that she’s the love of your life. I’m going to tell her, and I’m going to do whatever I have to do to convince her that us together makes sense.

“You don’t have to spend every minute of your life with me, Sterling. Go be with your brothers. I’ll be fine.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.” I want every day of forever with her.

Her entire body relaxes. I see her shoulders fall, and there is something in her eyes that I’d like to think is a hell of a lot

more than friendship when she peers up at me. “Be safe. Call me if you need me.”

“I always need you.”

Her smile grows. “You know what I mean. Go. Be safe.”

I want to kiss the hell out of her and tell her that I love her and that I’ll be back home to her soon, but I can do none of those things. Instead, I settle for a soft press of my lips to her cheek, a wave, and then I’m back in my truck, headed to see my little brother who’s nursing a broken heart, and I’m sure is raging mad that Jordyn left without a goodbye.

As soon as I’m on the road, I start calling more of my brothers. Time to rally the troops.

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By the time I get to Ryder’s, the twins are already there. Merrick meets me at the door, a somber look on his face.

“Well?” I ask, even though I can already guess how he’s feeling. I’d be fucking wrecked if Alyssa left me without a goodbye, even if I did know she was going. Hell, I struggled with leaving her on her front porch to come here.

“He’s already drinking.”

I nod. “The others are on their way.”

“Intervention?” Merrick asks.

“Nah, we’re going to let him scream and yell and get it out of his system and see what we can do to help him work through this.”

“How in the fuck do we do that?” Merrick asks.

“Just be here. There is nothing that we can say or do that’s going to make this easier on him. He just needs to know we’re here. He needs to know that his brothers have his back, always.”

Merrick nods. “Done.” He steps back, and I follow him inside.

In the living room, we find Ryder sitting with a bottle of Jack Daniel's in his hands. Maverick's sitting next to him. There's not more than a couple of shots missing from the looks of the bottle. He looks up when we walk in and nods. No words are spoken as Merrick takes the empty space on the opposite side of Ryder. No one says a word as I take the recliner.

We sit in silence until the sound of a knock at the door echoes through the house. We don't rush to answer it. We all know it's one of our brothers. Within fifteen minutes, we're all here. Chairs are brought in from the kitchen, and Orrin brought his own. He has his zero-gravity lawn chair set up next to the couch. I shake my head at him, but I'm cursing myself that I don't have mine with me. Those fucking things are legit.

"Tell me how we're doing this," Orrin speaks up. "Are we hating on her? Getting drunk to temporarily forget? Are we taking you to the airport? Tell us what you need, Ryder."

"Whatever you need," Brooks reiterates.

"I'm in love with her." Ryder's voice is low and laced with so much pain I feel it deep inside my chest.

We remain quiet. He needs to do this his way, and we're just here for moral support.

"We had plans to talk about it today. We were going to spend the day working out the details. I got there to pick her up, and Gianna said she was gone. Her flight left at six this morning." He tells us this while staring at the floor. He lifts his head and starts on his right with Maverick. He lets his gaze fall on each of us, ending with Merrick on his left.

"She never intended to have that talk. She just left as if I meant nothing to her."

"Maybe she was scared?" I think about my own situation, and fear is a huge factor in me dragging my feet with Alyssa. Sure, I've already decided I'm going all in. I need a plan, but it's been weeks. I've been pussyfooting around, worried that if

I tell her how I feel, she won't feel the same, and I'll lose her. That fear has kept me silently loving my best friend.

"I can't fix it if she doesn't tell me," he says as there's a knock on the door. "Come in," he calls out.

"Are we taking bets that it's Dad?" Archer jokes.

"I love Raymond, but he's got a good twenty years on me," Deacon says, stepping into the living room. He surveys the situation, smirks at his best friend sitting in his lawn chair, and moves to sit on the floor next to me, propping his back up against the side of the recliner.

"Do you pack that thing with you everywhere you go?" Deacon asks Orrin, laughing.

"It was still in the back of Jade's SUV from the movie in the park. She was parked behind my truck, and I didn't want to wait once I got the call."

"They can't be that nice," Ryder speaks up.

Orrin stands. "Try it."

Ryder stands, the bottle of Jack still in his hand, and trades places with Orrin. He sits in the chair, pushes back, and it reclines. "Damn," he mutters.

"Told you." Orrin grins, taking a seat between Maverick and Merrick on the couch.

The room falls silent, and Rushton looks like he's about to say something to break the silence, but it's Ryder's voice that fills the room. "I told her that I loved her. I told her that we could figure it out. It's eighteen months. Sure, it's not the ideal situation, but I know we could do it. Fuck, I even told her I'd go with her."

"What's the plan?" Declan asks.

"I don't have a fucking plan. My plan was to get this settled with Jordyn before she left. Gianna won't tell me where she's staying. I don't even know the name of the company that she's working for. I don't know how to reach her. I can call her. I can text or send her an email, but if she doesn't reply, that's it. I'm at her mercy."

“Why not hire a private investigator?” Merrick asks.

“Mer, I’m a fucking lineman, not a billionaire.”

“It can’t be that much,” Maverick chimes in.

“I’m not doing it. Even if money was no object, I’m not tracking her down like a fucking animal. She made her choice.”

“But you still love her,” I say, not thinking.

His eyes find mine, and he nods stiffly. “I still love her.”

“Eighteen months,” Rushton says. “A year and a half to form a plan.”

“What are you thinking?” Brooks asks.

“If she’s the one, you don’t let the fact that she’s in another country stop you. She has ties here. Her family, her best friend, and you.” Rushton shrugs. “This is a huge opportunity for her, and I’m sure it was a hard choice for her to make. She was into you, man. We could all see it.”

“He’s right. Alyssa said she thought so too,” I tell them.

“She’s coming home, Ryder. She robbed you of a goodbye. Maybe she’ll answer when you call her. Maybe she won’t. But you still have connections to her. So what if the best friend won’t tell you where she’s staying. I bet she’ll tell you she’s okay. That she’s safe and how she’s enjoying her time there. Use what you have here to your advantage, and when she steps back on American soil, you fight for her.” Rushton sits back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, clearly proud of himself.

“Not a bad idea,” Deacon speaks up. “If you still feel this way, if your heart still only knows her, then this is your best option. Use what you know about her, what you know about what she wants for her future, and yours, and combine them. Have you met the parents?” Deacon asks.

“Yeah, we’ve met each other’s families. Her parents remind me a lot of Mom and Dad.”

“Capitalize on that,” Orrin jumps in. “Go visit them. Let them know you’re waiting for her. Let her best friend know that you’re waiting for her. Word will get back to her. She might not be willing to talk to you because it hurts too much, but she will talk to them.”

“So, immerse myself in her life without her being here?” Ryder asks, a little bit of a spark in his eyes at the idea.

“Exactly.” We all sound off at once, and he laughs, shaking his head. He looks down at the bottle of Jack Daniel’s. “In the meantime, we’re getting drunk.” He takes the lid off the bottle, takes a big swig, and passes it to Archer, who does the same.

The bottle makes its way to each of us before we start talking about our camping trip that’s coming up with Dad in a couple of weeks. It’s a Kincaid tradition, and we all look forward to it every year.

“I hate leaving Palmer and Remi for the weekend,” Brooks tells us.

“Have Piper come and stay with her,” Declan suggests.

“Yeah, if my stubborn wife lets her.”

“She’s doing great, right?” I ask him. “She’s a big girl. She knows that she has support even with us out of town if she needs it. She has Piper, Mom, Kennedy, Jade, Alyssa, and let’s not forget Blake.” I smile, thinking about my niece.

“Let’s be honest here,” Deacon speaks up. “It’s not leaving them alone that’s eating at you. It’s leaving them, period. Trust me, and I know the feeling. We don’t have kids yet, but I feel the same thing about my wife.”

This is Deacon’s first year for the annual Kincaid camping trip. Since he’s married to Ramsey, he’s now included on the guys’ trip weekend.

“Agreed,” Orrin and Declan say.

“But it’s three days. It’s good to get a break. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that,” Maverick says.

“We really should consider a trip with the ladies too. Two trips a year, one just the guys, and one with the women and

kids too,” Orrin says.

“Yes.” Brooks is quick to agree. “Let’s plan that while we’re on our trip. Dad can help,” Brooks says. “He’s going to want input on this.”

“Good plan.” Orrin holds out his hand. “Now pass me the bottle.”

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I’m drunk.

We’re all drunk. We finished off the bottle of Jack and started on a bottle of Crown. We’re all cutting up and laughing and just being noisy drunk guys when Jade walks into the living room.

“Hey, babe.” Orrin’s eyes light up at the sight of his wife.

“Hi.” Jade laughs. “Looks like you all had a good night.” She moves into the room and bends to give Ryder a hug. He holds onto her as she whispers something into his ear.

“I think I need to call in reinforcements.” She laughs lightly as she walks to Orrin and kisses him quickly before placing her phone to her ear and stepping out of the room.

“Are we in trouble?” Deacon asks.

“Nah, they love us.” Brooks grins sloppily.

“Yeah,” Deacon agrees. “They love us.”

I don’t know how much time passes, but the next thing I know, all the ladies are here, and when I see mine, I stand on wobbly legs and make my way over to her. “Missed you, Tink,” I say, hugging her close. I bury my face in her neck, letting her scent wash over me.

“You ready to go home?” she asks.

“With you? Yes.” I nod. At least, I think I do.

“Who else am I taking?” She looks over at Jade for further instruction.



“The twins are staying here,” Jade tells her. “I’ve got Orrin and Archer. Ramsey has Deacon and Rushton, Kennedy has Declan and Brooks, and Alyssa has Sterling.”

“Is my wife mad at me?” Brooks asks.

“No.” Kennedy laughs. “She was on her way, but I called and told her not to bring Remi out and that I would just drop you off on my way home.”

“Thank you, sister,” Brooks slurs.

“Come on, Tank. Let’s get you home.” With her arm around my waist, Alyssa leads me toward the door.

“I’m not that drunk,” I tell her, my words only a little slurred.

“Okay.” She laughs.

“I can carry you.” I lift her into my arms bridal style and sway a little.

“Sterling Kincaid, put me back on my feet right now. You’re going to drop me.”

“No, baby,” I say. “I would never drop you. You’re too important, Tink.” Rushton opens the door for me, and I step out into the night air and walk slowly, making sure my steps are sure, well, as sure as they can be as I carry her to her car. She demands that I stop and put her down the entire way, but she’s still and not fighting me. In fact, her arms are locked around my neck. I set her on her feet, and she slaps at my chest.

“Not cool, Sterling. You’re drunk and could have dropped me. What if you would have dropped me down the stairs, huh?”

My hands cradle her cheeks, and I bend so that we’re at eye level. I’m drunk, but I know what I’m doing. I know what I’m saying, and I’m tired of holding it all in, so I say what’s on my mind. “I love you too much to ever hurt you, Alyssa.”

Her eyes bore into mine, and okay, I’m too drunk to determine her look. I stand up and stumble back.

“Shit,” Alyssa curses. “Let’s get you in the car and get you home.” With her arm around my waist, she guides me to the passenger side and helps me into her car.

Once we’re on the road, I lean over and rest my head on her shoulder. I’m big, and this car is tiny, so even with my seat belt on, it’s easy. My hand rests on her thigh. “Thanks for taking care of me.”

“I always will.”

“One of the reasons I fell in love with you,” I say before my eyes fall closed.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Alyssa

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Sterling offers.

“I’m sure. It’s just Mom and me today. We’re going to grab lunch and do some shopping.”

I’m lying, and I feel like he knows that I’m lying. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him the truth, but I know my best friend, and he’s going to talk me out of it. I’ve been avoiding him all week. Drinks with Cassie one night, dinner with Kristy, and her parents another. He worked late three nights, so I haven’t seen him all week. After last weekend, I’ve felt charged. He told me he loved me, and they say that alcohol is a truth serum. It wasn’t just a friendly “I love you.” It was a “that’s one of the reasons I fell *in* love with you.”

He loves me.

I’m smiling as I talk to him. “Sunday dinner tomorrow, right?” I ask.

“Tomorrow? You’re going to be gone that long?” he grumbles. “I don’t care what time it is when you get home. Call me, and I’ll be there. Or just pack a bag and stay here, or don’t... and wear something you already have here. It’s been too long since I’ve laid eyes on you, Alyssa.”

Alyssa, not Tink. He’s serious Sterling today. “I don’t know how long we’ll be.” That’s the truth. I have two interviews lined up for today. Luckily for me, the hiring

managers understood that I was unable to miss a day's work to come and interview, so they scheduled me for Saturday morning.

Sterling would be happy for me. The issue is that they're both in Atlanta. An hour's drive one way. He's not going to like that, and I know how his mind works. He's going to assume that I'll move to Atlanta if I get one of the positions.

I don't want to move... unless my gut is off, and when I tell him that I'm in love with him too, his drunken confession turns out to have been just words. Then I might be moving. It will be easier to put that distance between us after humiliating myself, but my heart tells me that's not going to happen.

We're going to need some time for this conversation. I wanted to have it last weekend, and I was ready, but then when he showed up, he got the call that Ryder needed him, so he left.

The next day he was hungover, and that's not a conversation for someone who's battling a headache and a queasy stomach. I didn't want to talk about it any day after work either. I just feel like we're going to want some time. In my mind, I tell him how I feel, and he kisses the breath from my lungs, and we make love for hours. I need my confession to come on a day when we have hours for that to happen.

Then there's the possibility that he's not feeling the way that I am, and I'll need some time to get my emotions in order before going back to work the following week. I know I'm overthinking this, and when he hears about why I waited, he'll tell me so, but that's how I see it playing out. It's the plan that's been in my head for a couple of weeks now, and it's stuck. So, yeah, I'm avoiding him today because of my interview, and I want more time when we finally sit down and talk. I can't hold it in any longer.

The next time I see him when it's just us, I'm going to spill my guts, so it's a busy schedule of avoidance until then. Even as I think it, I know it's silly, but I'm rolling with it.

"We'll see how late it is."

“Alyssa.” There’s a warning in his tone. Not a mean warning, but a “don’t be stubborn” warning.

“Sterling.” I toss his tone right back at him.

“I miss you.”

His words hit me in the chest. “I miss you too. I’ll for sure be there for Sunday dinner at your parents’ place.”

“Fine,” he grumbles.

“I need to go so I can finish getting ready.”

“What time are you leaving?”

“In about twenty minutes.”

“All right. Text me when you get there.”

“Will do.” I end the call and head back to the bathroom to finish getting ready. I barely make it ten steps before there’s a knock at the door. “Coming,” I call out. I have no idea who it could be, but I don’t have time for this. I need to get dressed. I’m in pajama shorts and a tank. I didn’t want to get makeup on my clothes. When I open the door, my mouth hangs open when I see Sterling standing there. “What are you doing here?”

“I was already in the truck on my way to pick up Blake for our breakfast date when you told me I wasn’t going to get to see you.”

I shake my head at this man. I love him with all that I am. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Keep me?” he asks, and there’s so much hope in his voice that I almost cave and tell him that’s exactly my plan. “Come here.” He hauls me into a hug.

“I’ll get makeup on you.” I try to push him away, but his strength outpowers me.

“Don’t give a fuck, baby.”

*Baby.*

His arms wrap around me, and I melt into his embrace. I part my lips to tell him everything when he pulls back. He

leans down and kisses my cheek. “Be safe, and don’t forget to text me when you get there and when you’re on your way home.” He steps back. “You’re beautiful, Alyssa.”

I smile. “Thank you. Have fun with Blakely.”

He nods. “Have fun with your mom.” Guilt presses on my chest, but I maintain my smile and wave as if it’s not crushing me. Once he’s in his truck, I close the door and lock it. Why, I don’t know as he has a key, but I do it anyway.

Once I hear him pull out of the driveway, I rush to finish getting ready. On my way out the door, I call Kristy.

“Some of us get to sleep in on Saturdays,” she grumps.

“It’s eight thirty. That is sleeping in.”

“Ugh,” she groans, and I laugh. “Are you there yet?”

“No. I just left the house. But Sterling stopped by.”

“Did your man give you a quickie before your big interview to take care of your nerves?” She giggles.

“No. I almost caved and told him.”

“Good. You’ve been dancing around this for weeks.”

“I know. I have a plan, remember?”

“Meh, plans are like rules. They’re meant to be broken.”

“Not this one. It’s better this way.”

“If you say so. So did you at least tell him that you were interviewing?”

“No.”

“Alyssa!”

“I know. I will. I just... didn’t want him to talk me out of it.”

“Regardless, you’re lying to him. That’s not like you.”

“I know, all right. Fine. I’ll call him now and confess. It’ll be easier since I’m already on my way.”

“Coming clean is the right thing to do. Maybe you should go ahead and tell him you’re in love with him while you’re at it.”

“No. I’ll tell him about the interviews, but the other stuff, I’m sticking to the plan.”

“Fine. Can I go back to sleep?”

“Yes. Thanks for listening.”

“Always a friend. Kick ass and call me after.”

“Okay.” I laugh as she hangs up the phone, probably already halfway back to sleep.

I think about Sterling and how he stopped just to see me for a few minutes and to hug me. Lying to him about the interview is wrong. Tapping my steering wheel, I say, “Call Sterling.”

“Tink?”

“Hey. How’s breakfast?” I ask him.

“Didn’t go. Blakely woke up not feeling well, so we’re going to try another time. Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I’m on the road. Listen, there’s something that I need to tell you, and you’re probably going to be mad.”

“Babe, I just saw you. What could have happened between now and then that could piss me off?”

“I’m not going to be with my mom all day. Just part of the day.”

“Okay?”

“I have two job interviews today.”

“Hell yes. Why would I be mad about that?” he asks.

“They’re both in Atlanta.”

Silence greets me.

“I’ve been applying for anything and everything that I’m qualified for, and I got two calls yesterday. They were both

willing to meet with me today. I'm meeting my mom after for lunch and some shopping."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to talk me out of going."

"Do you really think I would do that?"

"I know you won't like me making an hour trip there and an hour back every day. I know that you'll worry that I'll leave Willow River and move to Atlanta to be closer to work."

He's quiet, and I bite down on my lip. I hear what sounds like a door closing. "I want you to be happy, Alyssa. I know how much your job weighs on you. I'm your person, baby. I want you to talk to me about these things. I'd never hold you back. I just want to be there for you."

I love you. "Thank you." I sniff, fighting back the tears.

"Tell me about these jobs?"

"Really?"

He chuckles. "Yes, really. I want to hear everything."

"Okay. Well, one is for a salon that needs a receptionist. It's huge. They have, I think she said, thirty stylists. They have two receptionists who take turns at the desk, swapping days, evenings, and every other Saturday. I don't love the hours, but the lady on the phone was so nice I couldn't say no, even if it's just a stepping stone until I figure out my next step. The pay is the same, but with the drive, it would be a pay cut, but it would get me out of the environment that I'm in."

"That's true. Money isn't everything. I know you need to make your bills, but being happy in your career is important. Do you think you'd like working in a salon?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I'm hoping being there today will give me a chance to get the vibe of the place."

"Definitely survey your surroundings and see how nice the stylists seem to be. I'm sure you'll get introduced to whoever is working today."



“Yeah, I’d say you’re probably right. That’s a good idea. I don’t want to trade one bad situation only to get into another one.”

“Exactly. What about the other one?”

“The other one is at a bank. I’d be a teller. To be honest, I’m not crazy about it, and the pay is something I’m concerned about. The woman who called me for an interview said we could discuss it during the interview. So it could be a waste of time, but at least I’ll know, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Sterling?”

“Mmm?”

“I’m sorry. I should have been honest with you from the beginning. I didn’t lie, and really, I just omitted the interviews. I am spending the day with my mom,” I remind him.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“No. I’m not mad at you.”

I exhale loudly. “That’s a huge weight off my shoulders.”

“What are you doing with your mom?” he asks.

“Lunch, pedicures, and some shopping. My dad’s on a golfing trip with some buddies, so she’s home alone this weekend.”

“It’s good that you’re spending time with her.”

“Even though you don’t get to see me?”

“I saw you. I held you. It’s not enough, but it will hold me over. Enjoy your day with your mom, and the offer stands for me to come to you, or you can come to my place. Just let me know.”

“Don’t you have plans tonight?”

“Nah. I’m sure I’ll end up with one or more of my brothers, but I’d rather be with you.”

Be still my heart.

“Sterling?”

“Alyssa?”

“I miss you too.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “I needed to hear that. Let me know how it goes.”

“I will. Talk soon.”

“Talk soon,” he repeats, and ends the call.

I feel so much better that he knows the truth. Now I just have one confession hanging over my head.

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“Well?” Mom asks once I’m seated across from her at the restaurant.

“The bank is a no-go. It’s a pay cut by a couple of dollars, and I just didn’t get a good vibe. The salon has potential. Everyone that I met was really nice. The pay is the same as what I’m at now. It means more gas, time, and wear and tear on my car to consider.” My phone vibrates, and I know it’s Sterling. “Sorry. It’s Sterling. I texted him an update when I got here.”

“Go ahead.” Mom smiles. “I’m going to run to the restroom. Order me a lemonade.”

I nod and pull up Sterling’s message.

**Sterling:** At least one of them has potential. What can I do to help you with this?

This man and his huge heart. Every single day it’s something he says or does that makes me fall even more in love with him, something I wouldn’t have thought possible.

**Me:** You're sweet. Honestly, I don't think anything. I just need to decide.

**Me:** Besides, neither one of them officially offered me a position.

**Sterling:** We both know you nailed both interviews. They're going to call.

**Me:** Maybe. I'm pretty sure that even if the bank calls, I'm going to pass.

**Sterling:** ???

**Me:** Pay cut, the extra drive, time, wear and tear on my car, and I just didn't get a good vibe.

**Sterling:** Go with your gut, Tink.

**Me:** Yeah, the bank is a no.

**Sterling:** Are you still looking at other options? Maybe something will open up in Willow River or Harris?

I can hear the hope through his words. He's trying to be supportive, but I know him. He's hoping, like hell, another option presents itself.

**Me:** Definitely. I'd love to find something closer to home.

**Sterling:** I'd love that too.

**Me:** What are you doing?

He sends back a picture of Remi sleeping on his chest, and my heart melts, seeing the smile on his face. He's so good with his nieces.

**Sterling:** Brooks and Palmer went to the grocery store to grab lunch. He called asking how breakfast was and was giving me shit about also taking his daughter for breakfast dates when she was older. We all know I will. Anyway, I stopped and sent them packing so I could have some Remi and Uncle Sterling time.

His message is followed by three more pictures. All three of Remi smiling. I can only imagine the faces he was making at her to make that happen.

**Me:** You're good with her.

**Sterling:** Good practice for when I have my own.

If I'm lucky, it'll be with me. Mom slides back into her seat, so I wrap up my text.

**Me:** At lunch with Mom. Text later.

**Sterling:** Tell her I said hello. Be safe and have fun.

**Me:** Will do.

I slide my phone back into my purse just as the waiter approaches. We order our drinks and an appetizer while we study the menu.

“What does Sterling think?” Mom asks.

“He’s still hoping something closer to home will come up. Harris or Willow River.”

“Atlanta is only forty minutes from Dad and me now that we’re living in Harris.”

“Yeah, but still, something not in Atlanta would be ideal.”

“It will all work out,” she says.

“It will. They might not even offer me the jobs, so I’m not going to worry or think about it until the time comes.”

“Good plan,” Mom says as the waiter approaches with our drinks. We both order grilled chicken salads. “Now, tell me when you’re going to admit that you’re in love with your best friend.” she states, taking a sip of her lemonade.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to deny it, but she’s my mom. She knows when I’m lying. “I do love him. I’m going to tell him. I have a plan. We have just been friends,” I tell her. “The last couple of months, things have been different. There has been this... connection that’s even deeper than we’ve shared before. And the chemistry... it’s there.”

“Finally.”

“What?”

“Sweetheart, I’ve seen it for years. Your dad told me to mind my own business and let the two of you work it out. I’ve been waiting for this moment. We love Sterling.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. He could tell me he doesn’t feel the same way.”

My mom's head falls back in laughter. Heads turn to look at her, but she doesn't seem to care. When she finally lifts her gaze, she's wiping happy tears from beneath her eyes. "Sweetheart, that's not going to happen. That man is in love with you too. Has been for years."

"Let's just... not get our hopes up."

"Too late." She grins. "I've been hoping for this for years." She winks, and it's my turn to laugh.

Soon, I tell myself. Soon I'll know for sure. He's going camping with his brothers next weekend, so the weekend after, I'm spilling my heart out to the man I love.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sterling

It's the final night of our annual Kincaid boys' family camping trip. We got here on Thursday, and even though it's been a blast like always, I'm ready to be home. I miss Alyssa. In the past, I missed her, but not like I do this time. I'm carrying my phone around like I need it to live, and I'm checking to see if I have messages from her multiple times per day. Thankfully my truck charges my phone when it's not running. Something that Declan's Tahoe doesn't do. Basically, we're all taking turns charging our phones in my truck.

There are eleven of us, including Dad and Deacon. We're all sitting around the fire nursing beers. Archer made campfire chili, and Deacon grilled some burgers too. It might not be the best combo, but there are no rules when it comes to camping.

Thursday, we didn't do a lot. We set up camp and just had a chill night. We got up early Friday and fished all day, and today, we hiked the trails. The weather has been perfect, and it's been nice to catch up with just us guys. I look forward to this every year.

"Dad." Brooks leans forward in his chair. "We were talking." He motions to the group of us. "Remember when we discussed doing another camp weekend but bringing the women and, well, now the kids along with us?"

"I do." Dad nods. There's a small smile playing on his lips.

“I’d like for my kids, both boys and girls, to experience this,” Orrin says.

“Wait.” Ryder holds his hand up. “Is Jade having twins?” he asks.

Orrin laughs. “No, but we want more kids.”

“Boys.” He shakes his head. Yes, he still calls us boys, and to him, that’s what we will always be, his rowdy boys. “I’ve been doing this trip with you all for going on thirty years. Orrin was five, Declan was three, and we left Brooks home with your mamma that year.” He smiles fondly as if he can still remember, and he probably can. “Anyway, I’ve left the love of my life and, at times, my younger children at home for almost thirty years to make this trip with you.”

“We don’t want to stop this one,” Brooks is quick to explain.

“We just want to add another one,” Orrin chimes in. “Bring them along. Mom would love it.” He’s speaking to Dad’s softer side. He’d do anything for our mother. Not that he’s not going to agree to this. He has no reason not to. We’re not changing our tradition. We’re adding another one.

“Can we make that happen?” Declan asks. “I know that Blakely would love it, and when he’s older, my son too.”

“You keep saying my son. Does he have a name yet?” Merrick asks.

“The suspense is killing us,” Maverick adds.

“What about you?” Rushton asks Orrin. “Have you named my other nephew yet?”

“Not yet. We have a list. We’re going to wait until we meet him to decide,” Orrin tells us.

“We have a list too,” Declan admits. “We’re still trying to narrow it down.”

“We already know Archer Kincaid has a good ring to it,” Archer jokes.



“Your mother and I went through the same thing with each of you. In fact, Maverick and Merrick were the two we struggled with the most. We wanted the names to start with the same letter but not rhyme. It was important to us that we let you boys have your own individual identities,” Dad explains.

“And here they are twinning regardless.” Rushton laughs. “The two of them have always been thick as thieves and copied one another, and their personalities are as identical as their DNA.”

“We’re overachievers like that,” Maverick quips, making us all laugh.

“Can we get back to bringing our wives and kids with us?” Orrin asks.

“What are we thinking?” Dad asks.

“I think there should be rules,” Brooks speaks up. “We don’t get to bring just anyone with us. They need to be a wife, fiancée, or serious girlfriend. Our kids will be here, and I, for one, don’t want to explain to my daughter when she’s older why one of her uncles has so many girlfriends.”

“I can get behind that,” Archer speaks up. “Family time is important. I know for me, she would have to be special to even think about inviting her to something like that.”

“Me too,” Rushton adds.

I make eye contact with Ryder, and he nods. I nod back. That simple gesture is his way of saying that Jordyn would most definitely make the cut. He and I talked for a long time last night. He’s been in contact with her family, and her best friend is texting him updates. They all know he loves her, and he’s willing to wait. He’s not sure if they believe him, but Ryder is like the rest of us. Stubborn as hell. When we make up our minds about something or someone, it’s hard to change it.

I want to be pissed at Jordyn for walking away without talking to him like she promised, but I know the fear of loving someone and being worried that if and when things change,

you'll lose them. I've been living it for the past couple of months, but that's all about to end.

I've been working on something for her. A grand gesture of sorts. Something that shows her that I listen when she talks and I want to make her dreams come true. My phone vibrates where it's resting on my thigh. Flipping it over, I smile when I see her name on my screen.

**Alyssa:** I'm getting all the baby snuggles while you're away.

The text is followed by a picture of my girl holding a sleeping Remi. My niece sleeps soundly and looks cute as hell, and Alyssa? Her hair is down, and her face is void of any makeup. She's smiling, her brown eyes sparkling with happiness. My thumb traces the screen wishing with everything inside me that she was here with me right now.

I snap a picture of the fire and send it to her with a text.

**Me:** Wish you were here.

**Alyssa:** How's the last night been?

**Me:** Good. Just relaxing. We packed up a good bit, so we just have to take down our tents in the morning. We're all eager to get home.

**Alyssa:** Well, we miss you here.

**Me:** I miss you too.

**Alyssa:** I told Kristy that I would go shopping with her tomorrow in Atlanta. Her grandparents are renewing their vows after 65 years of marriage.

**Me:** Damn, congrats to them.

**Me:** Does that mean I won't get to see you tomorrow?

**Alyssa:** Not sure how long we will be gone. I'll keep you posted.

**Me:** Have fun with Kristy.

**Alyssa:** Be safe coming home. Enjoy your last night.

“Sterling?”

I lift my head to look at my dad. “What’s up?” It’s then I realize that Archer, Rushton, Maverick, and Merrick are missing from our group. “Where did they go?”

“If you wouldn’t have had your nose in your phone, you would know your brothers went for a night swim.” Dad smirks. He’s not pissed. He’s just calling me out. That only means one thing. He’s onto me and about to break out his advice hat.

“Right.” I smile sheepishly. “Sorry about that.”

“Alyssa?”

“Yeah. She sent me a picture of her holding Remi.”

“I miss my baby girl,” Brooks says.

“How much longer are you going to wait for someone to take that girl away from you?” Dad asks.

*And there it is.*

“What?” I turn to look at him.

“Come on, Sterling. I raised you better than that. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

I nod and take a long pull from my beer. “When we get home,” I confess. “I just— I don’t know how to convince her to give me a chance.”

“Do you really think you’re going to have to do any convincing?” Ryder asks. “You’ve got this great girl who would do anything for you, and she’s just within reach. You can touch her, hold her, see her smile, and hear her laugh anytime that you want. She’s crazy about you, bro. Take your shot.”

You can hear the heartbreak in his voice, but his words resonate with me. He’s right. She’s right there where I can reach out and grab her and hold onto her forever. There’s a chance she might be getting a job that’s an hour away, and it could potentially have her moving too. Her parents no longer live in Willow River, so I need to make sure that she knows she has a reason to stay.

Me. I’m her reason.

“I don’t even know where to start. I’m in love with her. I’ve been battling with this for the last couple of months.”

“You ask her to stay, son. Stay with you, in your heart, in your life. You tell her what she means to you. Make sure she knows that she’s still your best friend, but you also want her to be your partner in life.”

“She already is,” Orrin speaks up. “You two act like a married couple already. You plan dinner together most nights of the week. You mow her lawn while she does your laundry. Every weekend she’s in your plans, no matter what you’re doing. The only thing you’re missing is sleeping together and the title.”

“I don’t want to lose her. I was of the mindset that I’d rather be her friend and have her with me than risk telling her and losing her, but it’s getting harder and harder to pretend that my heart doesn’t belong to her.” I stare into the fire. “I’ve made up my mind that I’m telling her when we get back, as soon as I can find a time when it’s just the two of us. I’m going to tell her.”

“Good.” Dad nods. “Work hard, and love harder.” He winks.

“It worked for me,” Brooks tells me.

“Me too.” Orrin grins.

“Me three,” Declan adds.

“Me four,” Ryder speaks up. “Jordyn just doesn’t know it yet.”

“I’m proud of you, boys. You’ve found great women to live the rest of your days with. The road will be rocky at times, and having the love of your life walking next to you makes all the difference.”

“She texted me,” Ryder speaks up.

“What?” Orrin, Brooks, Declan, and I all say at once.

“When?” Orrin asks.

Ryder holds up his phone. “Just now.”

“Open it,” Brooks encourages him.

Ryder nods as he stares down at his phone. “What if she tells me to stop texting and calling? What if she tells me to leave her best friend and parents alone?” He looks at our dad. “What if she tells me to stop loving her so hard?”

“Ryder, love isn’t something you can turn off. You can hold it close to your chest, but look at Sterling. It’s eating him up inside, not telling Alyssa what she means to him. You have to be true to yourself, son. She can ask you to do that, but that doesn’t mean you have to listen. She’s overwhelmed, and I’m sure regretting leaving like she did. Open the message, Ry.”

Ryder nods. His fingers tap the screen, and we're all watching him closely as he reads the message. Once he's done, he closes his eyes and tilts his head back to the sky. We're all quiet, giving him time to process. When he finally looks at us, there's fire and determination in his eyes.

"Well?" Dad asks.

Ryder lifts his phone and begins to read. "I'm so sorry for leaving the way that I did. I didn't know how to say goodbye to you. You're in my heart, Ryder Kincaid. I was afraid I wouldn't get on that plane if we made plans for our future. There are two sides to me. The me who wants a career in fashion and the me that's given myself to you. They're the same person, but I had to do this. I had to take this internship for my career. It's always been my only dream until the night I met you. I know me. I know how I feel about you, and I had to just go, Ryder. I knew I wouldn't if we had that talk. The plans we would make, I want them too. You are also my dream. I didn't know how to have both. I'm sorry for hurting you." He sets his phone back on his lap, and when he looks up, the emotion in his voice is showing as his eyes shimmer.

"She would never let me talk about it. She always said we had time. She didn't know I was willing to wait for her. She never let me tell her. I shouldn't have listened. I should have made her sit and talk to me."

"Nah," Dad says. "It worked out the way it was supposed to. Your love is being tested by distance. It's one of those rocky roads of life. It sounds like whatever it is you're doing, she's responding. If you love her, if Jordyn is who your heart craves, keep it up. It's going to be hard, but you go all in. Regardless of the outcome, you'll have no regrets. You'll never have to wonder about if you'd have fought harder for her, things would have been different."

"That's what work hard and love harder means," he adds. "Love is work, and working to provide for yourself and your family is equally as important. Both are intertwined and make you who you are. Man or woman." His eyes flash to Deacon. I'm sure they're both thinking about how hard Ramsey used to work to ensure she made a life of her own before she met

Deacon. Dad stands and walks to where Ryder is sitting. He places his hand on his shoulder. “We’re behind you, son.” He looks at each of us. “I’m heading to bed,” he says, just as the others come walking back to our site.

“I love swimming in the lake at night,” Maverick says. He and the others are oblivious to the heavy conversation they missed.

“I’m calling it a night.” Ryder nods at each of us before disappearing inside his tent.

“Me too.” It’s not terribly late. I’m hoping I can call Alyssa and say goodnight to her. After tonight’s conversation, there is no going back. I’m going to tell her, and then I’m going to love her hard until she gives me a chance.

I don’t wait to see what the others are doing. I climb into my tent, lie back on my air mattress, and pull up her name.

“Hey.” Her voice is soft.

“Hi.”

“Everything okay?”

“I wanted to hear your voice.” It’s not something I would have said to her as my best friend, but she’s more than that.

“Aww, camping brings out sweet Sterling,” she teases.

“Nah, I just miss you.” More honesty. I’ve been going on these trips our entire friendship, and I’ve never made a call like this or said these words to her.

“I miss you too.”

“It’s different this time.” Words keep rolling off my tongue like a runaway train. I can’t stop them.

“How so?”

“I always miss you, but never like this.”

“Sterling, I—” She starts, but I don’t let her finish.

“I should get some sleep.” I don’t want her to tell me this can’t happen. Not over the phone. Not when I can’t see her eyes to know her truth. Not when I can’t pull her into my arms

and hold her. “I’ll call you when I get home. See if you’re back yet.”

“Okay. Be safe.”

“You too, baby.” I rush to hit End Call. “Baby” is something I’ve never called her until recently. I’ve had a few slips of the tongue, as if my heart is overruling everything when it comes to her. Tossing my phone to the side, I close my eyes and will sleep to come.



# CHAPTER TWENTY

Alyssa

“I can’t believe we’re finally doing this,” Kristy says to me.

“Right? We’ve only talked about it for years now,” I reply as I open the bag of tortilla chips and dump them into a bowl. This was the weekend I was supposed to confess to Sterling how I really feel about him, but one thing led to another, and I ended up hosting our first ever book club at my place. I’m not stalling; it just happened, and it’s something we’ve been wanting to do forever. When I mentioned it to Ramsey, she ran with the idea, and well, here we are.

“You think everyone will show up?” she asks.

“Who did you invite?”

“I don’t know many people who read like we do. I knew you were inviting the Kincaid ladies. I did run into Mindy and her mom at the store earlier this week, and she was holding the new romance novel we’ve been dying to read, so I mentioned it to her.”

“Ugh,” I groan. “And yes, Ramsey, Palmer, Piper, Jade, and Kennedy will all be there. They’ve been blowing up my phone since Sunday dinner last week.”

“I’m sorry. It just slipped. I know she’s a total pain in the ass. Besides, I doubt she’ll even show.”

“Oh, she’ll be here. She’s been hitting on Sterling since high school. She’s not going to miss a chance to sink her claws

in him.” The thought of her being successful has bile rising in my throat.

“Did you invite Sterling to the book club?” she asks, amused.

“No, but his sisters-in-law will be here, and she knows that Sterling and I are best friends. She’s an opportunist, and she’s not going to miss this one. I’m certain of it.”

“So don’t give her one. Tell Sterling to stay away and tell his family not to bring him up.” Kristy shrugs as if the decision is easy.

“How very adult of me,” I say. The sarcasm is oozing from my words. “Whatever will be, will be. Besides, Sterling can see right through her. He’s yet to give her the time of day, and he’s not going to start now. I just want today to be a success.” And he’s mine, but I don’t say that. Kristy already knows how I feel. She can read between the lines.

“Right? We’ll have to choose a book and decide when to meet next.”

“We should have already picked a book so we could talk about it today.”

“Maybe, but this way, we get to chat about our favorites and maybe find some new favorites at the same time.”

“I’m so down with that,” I tell her as there’s a knock at the door. “Come in!” I call out.

“I’m here!” a sweet voice announces.

“Who is that?” Kristy asks.

I smile. “Blakely. She’s Declan and Kennedy’s daughter.” I hear footsteps and Kennedy asking her not to run in the house.

“Alyssa!” Blakely cheers, rushing forward and wrapping her arms around my legs.

“Hey, sweetie. Are you getting taller?” I ask.

She bobs her head up and down. “I’m five and a big sister,” she tells me.

“I know. Are you so excited for your baby brother?”

“Yes!”

“Sorry, she was excited to see you. Declan’s working. Sterling is coming to pick her up. I hope that’s okay. Sterling said it would be fine.”

“Of course,” I tell Kennedy before looking down at Blakely. “Are you excited to spend the day with Uncle Sterling?”

“Yep. We got jobs to do,” she tells me.

“What kind of jobs?” I’m expecting her to tell me about some project she’s doing. I know Sterling has a few that he likes to do with her.

“A wife,” she tells me. “Member? The wedding. Oh, you need me too,” she tells me. “I found Daddy and me a wife. I’m good at it.”

Kristy cracks up laughing, and even I crack a smile at that. “You’re very smart. You know that?”

“I know.”

“And modest.” Kennedy laughs.

“What’s that?” Blakely asks.

“A discussion for another day, kiddo. Why don’t you take your backpack and set up your dolls until Uncle Sterling gets here? I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, Mommy.” She skips off to my living room.

“Sorry about that,” Kennedy says. “She’s convinced all of her uncles need wives. There have been so many weddings in the family recently, she’s obsessed. And Sterling is her next victim because he caught the garter.”

“She’s fine,” I assure her. “It’s going to be entertaining to watch her tell Sterling he needs a wife. I’m sure he thinks that she’s forgotten about catching the garter at the wedding.”

“It will be funny until she decides that you’re the wife he needs.” Kristy laughs as if it’s the funniest thing she’s ever

heard, but Kennedy and I remain silent, sharing a look. Kennedy smirks at me, and I playfully roll my eyes.

“Oh, so it’s not just me?” Kristy asks, reading the situation.

“The girls and I think Alyssa and Sterling would make a good couple,” Kennedy explains.

“Of course we would,” a deep voice comes from the hallway. We all look up to see Sterling walking into the kitchen. “I mean, have you seen us?” He points at me and then at himself. “We’re hot AF.”

“AF?” Kristy asks.

“My niece is here. I’m working on cleaning up my potty mouth. We’re about to have two more Kincaid babies, and I don’t need their mommas mad at me for teaching my nieces and nephews bad words. Remi is too young to catch on, but Palmer will be pissed if a curse word is her first, and I don’t want her wrath pointed at me.”

He stops next to Kennedy and pulls her into a hug, he does the same with Kristy, and then he’s next to me. “Hey, Tink.” He pulls me into a hug as well.

Is it just me, or is his tone softer with me? “Hey. I hear you’re here to rescue Blakely.”

“Yep. I just need to unload the extra chairs out of the back of my truck. Where do you want them?”

“Seriously? You brought chairs?” He nods. “Bestest. Friend. Ever.” I give him another hug. This one is just as quick as the first but no less potent to my libido.

“Hey!” Kristy pretends to be offended.

She knows that I love her, but Sterling has been my ride-or-die since we were kids.

“Sorry, Kristy.” Sterling smirks. “It’s the guns.” He flexes his arms, and collectively the three of us roll our eyes.

“Backyard,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Tink.” He turns and walks out of the kitchen.

“Can we—” Kristy starts.

“No. No, we cannot.” I can’t be sure of what she was going to say, but my guess is it’s about Sterling, and I don’t want to get into that today.

“Yoo-hoo,” a voice calls out, and I roll my eyes.

“Um, that expression tells me we don’t like the owner of that greeting,” Kennedy whispers.

“Not a huge fan,” I confess. “We all went to school together.”

“You’re going to have to fill me in,” she replies with a whisper as Mindy comes strolling into the kitchen.

“Thanks for the invite, Alyssa,” Mindy says, even though we both know I didn’t invite her. “I just wanted to come in and say hi, but I’m going to head out back and see if Sterling needs help.” She waves and scurries past us out the back door. “Sterling, hi!” I hear her say loudly.

“She’s got a thing for our boy?” Kennedy asks.

“She always has, and she’s not selective. She’d take any of them. That’s how she is.”

“A chaser?”

“Opportunist.” I repeat my earlier words to Kristy.

“Why did you invite her?” Kennedy inquires.

“I didn’t.” I glare at Kristy.

“I’m sorry, okay. I was just excited, and she had a book in her hands at the store, and the words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.”

“It’s fine.” I sigh.

“We’ll make sure none of the guys are anywhere near us the next time we meet. She’ll give up eventually.”

“Wow. Is she that bad?” Kennedy asks.

“Worse,” Kristy and I say in unison.

“I really shouldn’t have invited her.” Kristy winces as Mindy’s fake laughter reaches us inside the house.

Kennedy’s phone beeps. She pulls it out of her purse. “The gang’s all here,” she tells me.

“Great, just tell them to meet us in the backyard.”

“On it.” She walks out of the room, her fingers flying across the screen of her phone. “Blakely, your aunts are here,” she tells her daughter.

“Yay!” Blakely cheers, and I hear her little feet pound against the floor before the front door opens and closes.

“Ready?” I ask Kristy.

“Yep. Book club, here we come.” She grabs the bowl of chips and the matching bowl of dip, while I grab the tray of brownies, which is the last of the food that we need to carry outside. I might have gone overboard with the snacks, but I knew two of the ladies in attendance were pregnant, and their cravings are all over the place to hear them tell it. I want to have something for everyone.

Sterling sees me and heads my way. “Thank you for the extra chairs,” I tell him.

“You’re welcome. What time is this thing over?” He holds my gaze, not once looking away.

I shrug. I have no idea how long this is going to take. “I don’t know, a couple of hours? Why?”

“Dinner.” He rubs what I know are ripples of abs beneath his T-shirt. “What are we having?”

“Do you want to go out?” I ask.

“Nah, let’s just toss something on the grill. Text me, and I’ll head back over with everything that we need. That way, I’ll be here to help you clean up. I’d also like to talk to you about something, and we still have yet to talk about whatever it was you wanted to run by me the night I went to be with Ryder and my brothers.”

“Thank you.” I smile up at him. His blue eyes are watching me intently, and there’s a look there that I can’t quite decipher. “Yeah, dinner and we can talk.” I nod, letting him know I like the idea.

He leans in, and my breath hitches. Is he going to kiss me? Here? In front of everyone? I close my eyes, waiting for his lips to press mine, but instead, his hot breath brushes against my cheek. “Have fun, Tink,” he says. His voice is thick and husky, and the heat of him is gone far too soon. I open my eyes and watch him walk back into my house.

“Oh, before we start, I need to tinkle.” Mindy giggles at herself and moves past me inside the house.

I stand frozen. How could I have thought that he was going to kiss me? Did anyone notice that I was positioned and ready? My fucking eyes were closed and everything. Tonight. I’m going to tell him tonight. I can’t handle this anymore. To hell with the plan. To hell with needing time. It’s happening tonight.

I fiddle with the food to look busy until I get my raging hormones under control. I can only hope that no one is paying too close attention to me. I mean, how many times do I need to rearrange the three different dips?

“Hey,” Kristy calls out. “Are we ready?”

“Yes. Let me check on Mindy.” It’s just an excuse to buy myself some more time, but I guess it’s my duty as book club host that I check on Mindy. “Mindy?” I call out once I’m inside. No answer, so I head down the hall to knock on the bathroom door, but what I find stops me in my tracks. Sterling is standing just inside the spare bedroom with his phone out, and Mindy is telling him she can’t wait to hear from him. Her hand is on his arm, and she’s standing way too close to him. Sterling smiles at her, and that’s when his eyes find mine. Is that guilt I see on his face? I can’t be sure. The blood is rushing, and I can’t focus. What I do know is that I heard her tell him she can’t wait to hear from him. I know that she was touching him, and he was typing something into his phone.

“Tink?” Sterling calls out to me, and I realize I’ve been frozen, staring at the two of them.

“W-We’re ready to start.” I start backing away. I can’t stand here and watch the two of them together. How could he just give in to her? After all these years, he chooses her over me? No. Not over me. He’s my best friend. Nothing less, nothing more. I’m the one who needs to remember that. I can’t just change the rules as I go. I thought the extra touches and the heated looks meant something. I thought his drunken confession was his truth.

That’s what I get for thinking.

Sterling Kincaid is and will only ever be my best friend. I’m glad I found out now, before I embarrassed myself later tonight.

“Alyssa? Are you feeling all right?” Sterling asks. He takes a step toward me, but I take another step back.

“Fine. I’ll be outside.” I turn on my heel and rush back outside. The door is barely closed behind me when Blakely comes rushing over.

“Alyssa, have you seen my uncle Sterling? He didn’t leave me, did he?” Blakely asks, her hands on her hips. “That’s very naughty.”

“No, sweetie. He’s still here.” I don’t know how, but I manage to reply to her even with the wild train of emotions wreaking havoc in my chest.

“Good. He and I are having a special day.” I smile at her. At least, I hope it’s a smile. I can’t be sure with the hurricane of feelings brewing inside me.

“Right here, Blake.” Sterling stops to stand next to me. He places his hand on the small of my back. “You good?” I can feel his eyes on me, but I don’t dare turn to look at him, fearing I might burst into tears. There’s a time for that, and it’s not while I have a house full of his family to witness it.

I nod. “Yep, just anxious to get started. Thanks for your help. Bye, Blake.” I wave awkwardly and rush down the steps



and take a seat in the circle of chairs, ready to start my very first book club meeting with my heart crumbling in my chest.

He took her number.

She was touching him.

She can't wait to hear from him.

I'm too late.

Mindy takes the last open chair, and a huge smile lights up her face. "Alyssa, what are Sterling's favorite foods? He agreed to let me fix him dinner one night this week, and I need to make sure that I'm prepared."

I try to swallow, but there's a lump in my throat. I try again, but still no success. He's having dinner with her. I want to curse Kennedy and the girls for putting this silly idea in my head as I knew better. I knew we were just friends. I changed the rules. Well, I blame my heart, but it's still on me. I'm just glad I found out before I made a fool of myself. And what were they doing in my spare bedroom? Did he kiss her too? In my house?

"Not today, Mindy," Kristy says, with annoyance in her tone. "We're here for book club."

"Yeah, but why talk about fictional men when I have a real live sex god to talk about?" Mindy asks.

I hear a choking sound and look around to see who it is, only to find all eyes on me. It was me making the sound. "Sorry." I sit up straighter in my chair. "What book should be our first read?" I manage to ask the question without throwing up. I call that a success because my stomach is churning with hurt and regret. I've been holding on to what's really in my heart for weeks now. Waiting for the right moment that never came, and now it's too late.

I pushed these feelings down deep, but I've fallen off the Sterling Kincaid wagon, and I don't know that I'll ever recover from the pain that fills my chest, knowing that he chose Mindy.

The next couple of hours drag by and are pretty much a blur for me. I almost shout in celebration when Mindy stands to leave.

“Thanks for the invite. Never dreamed I’d come here and land me one of them Kincaid boys.” She giggles, and I want to slap her to make her stop.

*Just.*

*Stop.*

*Talking.*

“Alyssa?” I blink to find Kennedy kneeling in front of me. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. Yeah. Fine.” I give her a bright smile that we both know is fake.

“What was she talking about?” Jade asks.

“Yeah, we need to know what’s up,” Palmer comments.

“I should never have invited her,” Kristy adds.

“I was wondering about that,” Piper says.

“That”—Ramsey points at me—“is not my idea of fine.”

“It’s all good. I let myself believe there might be something, and it was my mistake. I’m good. Promise.” Even I can hear the lie in my voice.

“That’s not true,” Palmer counters.

“It is true. It’s real life. Not fantasy.” I close my eyes and pull in a deep breath. “Look, I’m happy for all of you. You all have incredible men in your lives. Men who love you to the moon and back, and you all deserve that.”

“You do too,” Kennedy tells me.

“I know.” I nod. “Sterling deserves to find his person. That’s just not me.” I rush to get the words out. “No more. I know you all mean well, but I can’t do this. I can’t have these crazy ideas that we can be more than what we are. My heart is already breaking and we’re not even together.” I rub at my chest, hoping it will mask some of the ache.

“I’m sorry,” Kennedy says. “I thought there was something.”

“We all did,” Palmer agrees. “I’m sorry too. I never meant for you to get hurt.”

“I know.” I stand and start packing up chairs. “I just need to not talk about it. Please, just drop it. For me? It’s done. No more. Sterling is my best friend, and I want the world for him. End of discussion.”

I get a mumbled acceptance from each of them as they help me clean up the chairs and pack away the food. I send it all home with them. I don’t have an appetite. Speaking of appetite, as soon as the door closes, I text Sterling.

**Me:** Not feeling well. I’m just going to bed. Talk tomorrow?

**Sterling:** Can I bring you anything?

**Me:** No. I’m good, just need to rest. Thank you.

**Sterling:** Call me if you change your mind. I’m here for whatever you need.

**Me:** Thanks.

I don’t have it in me to say more. Locking the door, I shut off the lights and head to my room. I manage to get changed, pull my hair up, and slide beneath the covers before the tears flood my cheeks.

Here in the darkness of my bedroom, I let my heartbreak free. Not all dreams come true.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sterling

“Daddy!” As soon as I lift her from my truck and place her feet on the ground, Blakely takes off running toward the front porch.

“Hey, squirt.” Declan takes her into his arms and kisses her cheek.

“I thought we were coming to pick her up?” Declan asks me.

“Well, Alyssa canceled. She said she wasn’t feeling well, so I was hoping to ask Kennedy how she seemed when she left. She told me she was going to bed, so I don’t want to bother her.”

“They’ll never understand how we worry about them,” my brother says.

“Daddy, can I play on my swing set?” Blakely asks.

“Stay where I can see you.” Declan places her on her feet, and she bolts off like lightning. She goes straight for the slide, quickly climbing and sliding down with her arms in the air. “That one too.” Declan sighs. “I’d like to think a little boy will be less worry, but I know better. We were hellions.”

“Come on.” I chuckle. “We weren’t that bad.”

“We’re all doomed.”

“You’ll be all right, Daddy. Your wife is a rock star. She’s got you.” Speaking of Kennedy, the sound of her car pulling

into the driveway has us both turning to look. We watch her as she gathers her purse and what looks like a grocery bag. I rush over, being closer to her, and take it from her.

“I swear your parents raised you boys right. Thank you, Sterling.”

“What’s in here?”

“Leftovers from book club. Alyssa said there was no way she would eat it all, so she sent us all home with bags.”

“How is she?” I ask.

Kennedy studies me. “Why did you do it?” Her entire demeanor has changed.

“What? What did I do? Alyssa said that she wasn’t feeling well and canceled our plans tonight. I was just wondering how she seemed. I want to go check on her, but I know she’ll tell me that I’m hovering.”

“She’s heartbroken,” Kennedy says.

My gut twists with worry for her, and the thought of her hurting. “What? What happened?”

“You happened.” Kennedy gives me a look that makes me feel sorry for Blakely and my baby nephew when he’s born.

*What the hell is going on?*

“Come inside.” Kennedy sighs.

I follow her inside while Declan stays outside with Blakely. “Tell me what I’m missing.”

Kennedy sits in the recliner, props her feet up, and nods for me to sit. I don’t want to sit. I want to know what the hell is going on, but I do as she asks. “She loves you, Sterling. She’s in love with you,” she amends. “Mindy announced proudly how the two of you were having dinner this week. She even went as far as asking Alyssa what your favorite foods were. I watched as her heart shattered.”

“What? No. That’s not what happened.” My panic starts to rise, and there’s a churning of unease in my gut. Fucking Mindy.

“Enlighten me then.”

“Mindy said her dad needed something welded. I took his number and told her I would reach out to him and see if I could help. We never once talked about dinner.”

Kennedy’s mouth falls open. “That bitch,” she hisses.

“Alyssa thinks that I want Mindy?”

“Yes.”

“No. No fucking way.” I stand and start pacing. How could she think that? I’ve been dropping signs all over the fucking place like a trail to my heart. I have to see her. “I gotta go,” I mutter. I bend down and kiss her cheek. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Where are you going?”

“To my girl. This shit stops now. I’ve been waiting to get her alone, and there hasn’t been an opportunity. I’ve worked what feels like a million hours this week, and then she had book club today. I told her I needed to talk to her. I was going to tell her, but she texted and said she wasn’t feeling well. Fuck, she probably thinks I want to tell her about Mindy.” I shudder at the thought. That bitch has been trying to sink her claws into my brothers and me for years.

“Thank you,” I tell Kennedy as I rush out the door.

“Where are you going?” Declan calls out to me.

“To get my girl,” I call back. It feels damn good to shout out the truth for once. I press my foot against the gas just a little harder than I should, hoping like hell I don’t get behind a tractor on the way.

When I pull into her driveway, all the lights are off, but her car is here. Grabbing my keys and my phone, I make my way up the porch. I knock lightly and wait but get no answer. Pulling my keys out of my pocket, I unlock the door and slip inside. Closing the door softly, I engage the lock and blindly make my way down the hall to her room.

When I reach her door, I can hear her cries, and my heart breaks. How could she think that I would choose Mindy over

her? I push open the door, and she jumps, sitting up. From the glow of the small bedside lamp, streaks of tears are visible.

“Sterling.” She swallows hard. “What are you doing here?”

“I came for you.” I take one step closer and stop. My heart is raging like a lion that’s been caged far too long.

“I told you I wasn’t feeling well.”

“Bullshit.” The word is soft, barely audible, but I know she hears me. “Bullshit,” I say again, this time louder.

“W-What?”

“I love you.” I take another step and then another until I drop to my knees so that we’re eye to eye from her place on the edge of the bed. I cradle her face and wipe at her tears with my thumbs. “I’m in love with you. You’re my best friend and the love of my life.”

Her lips part to say something, but instead, a sob breaks free. More tears coat her cheeks as her big brown eyes take me in. In them, I see hope, fear, and love. So much fucking love, my breath hitches in my chest.

“Kennedy told me what Mindy said, but, baby, she led you on. I know what you saw, and it’s not at all what you think.”

“What were you doing in my spare bedroom with her?”

“I was in there for me, and she found me there.”

“She was touching you.”

I nod. “I didn’t want her to touch me. I only want your touch on my skin.” My thumbs continue to swipe at her cheeks.

“She said you were having dinner together.” Her voice is small, but there’s also a hint of hope in her tone.

“She lied, Tink. She cornered me, telling me her dad needed something welded. I took his number because I didn’t want to give her mine and told her that I would reach out to him. Now that I know what she said, I’m sure she was lying about her dad as well. We’re not having dinner. We’re not

going out. There is nothing going on. Nothing.” I stare deep into her eyes, willing her to believe me.

“I thought you chose her.”

“Never. There is no one I would ever choose over you.”

“We’re different.”

I nod. “We have been for a while now.”

“I don’t want to lose you, Sterling.”

“Never.” I stand and sit on the bed, pulling her onto my lap. She rests her cheek on my shoulder as more tears fall. She’s in a soft-pink, silky nightgown that has my cock straining against my zipper. I have to get us out of this room before I devour her.

Standing, I adjust my hold on her and make my way out of the room. “What are you doing?”

“It’s a nice night. I want to look at the stars with you.” She doesn’t comment or resist. Once we reach the door, I have to place her on her feet to unlock it and step outside. Taking her by the hand, I guide her to one of the chairs and sit, pulling her onto my lap.

“I got your shirt all wet,” she says, pointing to the tear-stained spot on my shoulder.

“Not worried about my shirt, baby.” To prove that to her, I grip the hem, pull it up over my head, and toss it to the ground. “Come here.”

She turns to me and places one hand on my cheek and the other slides behind my neck. She stares into my eyes, looking for what I’m not sure about. But when she speaks, I know we’re going to be okay.

“Say it again.”

Immediately, I know what she’s referring to. “I’m in love with you.” I don’t just say “I love you” because I’ve said that to her before, as my best friend. This is different, and it’s important that I make sure that’s clear.



Tears shimmer in her eyes, and a beautiful smile pulls at her lips. "I'm in love with you too."

"Yeah?" I ask her. My heart does this flipping thing inside my chest. She moves in close so that we're nose to nose.

"Yes."

"Thank fuck," I say, kissing her.

I take my time savoring every brush of her lips. She opens for me, and my tongue slides against hers with ease. It's as if we've been practicing this very thing for years. There is no fumbling or learning. We just know.

I lose track of time. Not that it matters. I have nowhere to be. The night sky is growing darker, and my girl is in my arms. When she pulls back and rests her head on my chest, I tighten my hold on her as we stare up at the stars.

"How does this work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Us? How do we do this?"

"We just are, baby."

"I mean, are we telling people? Are we together? What do I call you? My mind is going a thousand miles an hour," she confesses.

"We've got all the time in the world to talk this out. I'm not going anywhere. First question. Yes, I want to tell people. I don't want to hide you. I don't want to hide what you mean to me a minute longer. I've been fighting this for months, and I want the world to know that you are the owner of my heart."

She kisses my cheek before resting her head back on my shoulder. Fuck, I love this woman.

"Question two. We are together. You are mine, and I am yours. That means no secrets, no other women or men. Just us. I'm committed to you for a lifetime, Alyssa. This is it for me. *You* are it for me."

"Am I dreaming?" she asks. "I've wanted to have this conversation with you for so long. After our kiss at the rental

house at the beginning of the summer, I knew I was in love with you. I knew that you were who I wanted for a lifetime, but I also didn't know for sure how you felt, and I was afraid to lose you. I'd rather love you in silence than lose you from my life."

"So much wasted time," I whisper. "I felt the same. I was scared out of my mind that I'd tell you, and you'd tell me to get fucked."

"Never."

"Last weekend, when we were camping, I heard Ryder talking about Jordyn, and he said some things that resonated with me. He reminded me that you were here. I could hold you, see you, hear your laugh. I decided then that I was taking the risk as soon as I got you alone. This week was crazy, and then there was book club today. I should have just come over after work one night and told you. Hell, I should have said something weeks ago."

"I was going to tell you the night you got called to go be with Ryder after Jordyn left."

"Damn," I mutter.

"From now on, we will talk about it. Doesn't matter what it is or how we think the other one will take it. We have to talk it out. We lost so much time."

"I promise. You'd have thought I'd have learned from watching Brooks with Palmer." I chuckle.

"It's different when you're living it and your heart is invested," she says.

"My heart is definitely invested."

"Mine too."

"Question three," I say, not forgetting her list. "You call me your boyfriend for now. Eventually, I'll be promoted to fiancé and husband. Or you just call me yours." She sits up on my lap, and the light of the moon gives her skin an iridescent glow.

"You're mine."

“You’re mine,” I parrot.

“Sterling?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Does that mean you’ll make love to me?” She bites down on her bottom lip as if she’s worried I’ll say no.

My body ignites, and my cock thickens. “Every fucking day, baby.” I stand and toss her over my shoulder. She giggles and smacks at my ass. I step into the house and turn carefully not to whack her head against the door and make sure I lock it back before carrying her down the hall to her room. I toss her on the bed, and she bounces. Her laughter fills the room and my chest. Her happiness is my happiness.

Reaching for the waistband of my jeans, I don’t take my eyes off her as I unbutton them. I hook my fingers into my boxer briefs and remove both in one quick succession, kicking them to the side.

Her eyes widen when they land on my cock. “You can’t do that,” I say, fisting myself. I stroke base to tip a few times, trying to maintain my composure. It’s a wasted effort. Alyssa climbs to her knees and moves to the edge of the bed. Big brown eyes peer up at me under long lashes, and I know what she’s about to do. She leans in and places her hand over mine before her pink tongue peeks out, and she tastes me. Just the tip, but it’s enough to have my legs quivering.

The next thing I know, she’s moving my hand, replacing it with her own. I spread my legs, bracing myself for what’s about to happen. She gives me no warning. No timid tastes or passes before she takes me all the way to the back of her throat. My hands tangle in her hair, but I don’t push her. I let her set the pace. I just need to be touching her. She gags on her third pass, and I step back.

“What?” she asks, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I’m not coming down your throat the first time, baby.”

She smiles. “Is that a challenge?”

“No. There is nothing to challenge. If I didn’t stop you, I was going to, and that’s not what I want. Not this time.”

“What do you want, Sterling?”

“I want to taste you. It’s only fair since you got your turn.” I take a step toward her. “Then I want to make love to you. That’s how I want to come.”

“I mean, I guess,” she sasses.

“We need to get rid of this,” I say, stepping closer and lifting her nightgown and pulling it over her head. “Fuck, you’ve been naked under there this entire time?” Bending over, I pull a pebbled peak into my mouth. She moans as I gently suck while I tweak the other with my thumb and forefinger. “I could do this all night,” I tell her as my mouth switches sides.

“I could let you,” she says, breathless.

With her hands in my hair, she gently tugs me closer to her. She makes this sound. It’s a mewling of sorts, and my cock throbs wanting in on the action. I want my mouth on every inch of her silky, soft skin. It’s time to explore.

“Lie back.” She does as I ask, moving to rest her head on the pillow. I walk to the foot of the bed and stare at her. The woman I love. She’s been in my life for so long that I don’t have a memory that she’s not a part of, and now I get to love her for the rest of my days on this earth. We’ll have so many stories to tell our children.

“Sterling?”

I break out of my thoughts and smile at her. Placing one knee and then the other on the bed, I crawl up to her. She opens her legs, making room for me, but I stop and drop to my belly. I give her no warning, just as she did with me before my tongue traces her pussy.

“Oh my God,” she moans as her back arches off the bed.

I smile against her as I suck on her clit. Her legs lift off the bed, so I move them over my shoulders, settling in for the

duration. My eyes find hers. “I’m not leaving this spot until you come all over my face.”

“That’s not how I want to come our first time,” she pants as she tosses my words back at me.

“Don’t worry, baby. You’ll come again.”

“No, Sterling, I’ve never—”

“You will.” With that, I lower my mouth and devour her. I add one finger, and when she’s ready, another. Her entire body is shaking with need, and my cock is painfully hard as it presses into the mattress. I don’t let that stop me. Right now, my biggest need is to make her come with my mouth.

“Ohhhh,” she moans. It’s deep, and she drags out the sound as I pump two fingers into her, sucking on her clit. “Yes!” she screams. Her pussy squeezes the hell out of my fingers as my face floods with her desire. I don’t stop until I feel her body fall lax against the mattress.

This time I look up and wipe my face with the back of my hand. I kiss my way up her body, holding my weight on my elbows as I wait patiently for her to open her eyes.

“There she is.” I smile down at her.

“That mouth...” She shakes her head, a sated, satisfied smile pulling at her lips.

“Is yours,” I reply, leaning in and kissing her softly. She doesn’t shy away from the taste of her on my lips.

“Is your cock mine too?” she asks boldly.

“Only yours,” I assure her.

“Then can I have him? Preferably inside me sooner rather than later.”

I chuckle. “Let me grab a condom.” I start to pull away, but her arms and legs wrap around me as if she’s capturing me in her web. “We don’t need them.”

“Explain that.” My brows furrow.

“I’m on the pill. It’s been... a long time for me. I got tested a couple of months ago at my annual exam.”

“Over two years for me.” Her eyes widen at my admission. “They weren’t you. I can see that now.” This gains me a beautiful, heart-stopping smile. “We’re in this, right? You and me. This is long term?”

“This is forever.”

“So that means you’re going to stay tonight?” She grins.

“Yeah, baby. I’m going to stay tonight and every night going forward.”

“I don’t want anything between us ever again. Not our fears, and not a barrier of latex that will keep us from feeling each other deep inside.”

My cock is leaking. I’m so fucking turned on. “Never again,” I assure her. She rewards me with another smile as I reach between us and align my cock at her entrance. “I love you, Tink.”

“I love you too, Tank,” she says as I push inside her.

My home.

My forever.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Alyssa

My breath seizes in my lungs as he pushes inside me. He stills, dropping to kiss me tenderly, giving my body time to adjust to his size. His kiss is lazy as his tongue seeks entrance, and I open for him. Of course I do. This is Sterling. The man who owns my heart and soul.

“So tight,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I’m good now,” I assure him as my body relaxes and accepts him as a part of me.

“You sure?” He studies me, looking for a hint of unease. He won’t find any. “I can’t believe I’m here.” He pulls out and slowly pushes back in. “Making love to my love.” He grins.

“I’m charmed,” I tease.

“And I’m smitten,” he replies. “Nothing has ever felt this incredible. This might as well be my first time. I’ve never felt this connection. I have this overwhelming need to stay buried inside you and never leave.”

“You’re forgetting something,” I tell him, smoothing his hair out of his eyes.

“What’s that, baby?”

“You can have me whenever you want me. This isn’t a one-time thing, Sterling. This is who we are now.”

“Lovers.” He kisses the corner of my mouth.

“We’re everything.” It’s the only thing I can think of to describe how I’m feeling. He’s lazily pumping in and out of me while staring deep into my eyes, and it’s making it hard for me to think clearly. “My love, my best friend. My Tank.”

“Yours,” he says, sliding out and pushing back in faster this time.

“Is this how you want to come our first time?” I challenge.

He growls and buries his face in my neck. He quickens his pace. Over and over, his hips thrust toward mine as we chase the high we’re both craving. The high that only we can provide for one another. Sure, we can get off, but not like this. The fire that’s building inside is more than just a climax. It’s a full-body experience. I feel like there’s electricity coursing through my veins as the tension builds.

“There, oh...,” I moan as it hits just where I need him to be.

“I need you to come, baby. I can’t hold off much longer. Your pussy is gripping me so damn tight. I— Fuck, I can’t hold it much longer.” He rocks out and pushes back in quick succession. “Play with your pussy, baby. I’m not coming until you do.”

“I already did.”

“Not with my cock.” His voice is gritty, strained, and I know he’s teetering on the edge as well. What he doesn’t realize is that I’m there. Ready to fall over with him. His words are all that I need to tumble into the abyss of pleasure. Who knew dirty talk was what would do it for me? Not me. Not until Sterling.

“Sterling!” Heat rolls through me like a roaring fire as my orgasm crashes through me.

“Your pussy’s going crazy,” he tells me. “Fuck! Alyssa!” He roars as he slams into me and stills. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” he chants softly. When he opens his eyes, they’re like liquid pools of blue. “That was... life-changing. I’ve never felt anything like it.”



I squeeze him where he's still inside me, and he groans. "Fuck, baby. Your pussy is going crazy."

"I know."

"Wait? You did that?"

I do it again and grin. "Don't tell me you've never had that?"

He shrugs. "Never gone bare and never stuck around for the aftershocks." He smirks.

"Now you have me."

"Now I have you. I want to live inside your pussy. And your heart. I just want to live inside of you."

I nod because, as crazy as it sounds, I understand exactly what he means. "We should clean up." I scrunch up my nose. We've definitely made a mess of things.

"Don't rush me, woman. I'm basking in orgasmic bliss."

When I lift my head, my lips meet his. "I was hoping you'd help me shower."

"You're right. We should clean up." Slowly, he pulls out, taking his heat with him. He climbs off the bed and offers me his hand, helping me do the same. He leads us to the small ensuite bathroom and turns on the shower. Once the water is the right temperature, he lifts me, and, on instinct, I wrap my arms and legs around him. Stepping into the tub, he pulls the curtain and reaches between us, and guides himself inside me.

"Already? Don't you have some kind of recovery time?" I ask him. My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's all breathy, and my nails dig into his skin. I want him again too, but I truly thought guys needed some recovery time.

"Not with you." He kisses me deeply before pulling back. "Hold onto me." That's the only warning I get before he bounces me on his cock. I'm small, hence the name Tink, and he's, well, not. He handles me with ease as we both call out our release at the same time.

“Time for me to clean you up.” Carefully, he places my feet on the floor but doesn’t let go of me. With one arm holding me steady until I get my legs beneath me, the other reaches for my body wash. He pours a glob on my shoulder, making us both laugh. Once my legs are steady, I grab my loofah and clean us both.

When we’re finally dried off, I lace my fingers with his and haul him back to bed. I slide under the covers, and he follows after me, pulling me into his arms. “This is where I want you when we wake up tomorrow.” I feel his lips press against the top of my head.

“You’ll be here, right? When I wake up?”

“Yeah, baby. I’ll be here. I’ll never sleep another night without being wrapped around you just like this.”

My body melts into his at his words. “Sterling?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

It’s not long before sleep claims us both.

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The sun blares through the window. I groan and burrow into his chest. He’s still here, something I knew would happen, but it still makes me giddy.

“Morning, Tink,” his husky, sleep-laced voice greets me.

Blinking a few times to adjust to the light, I lift my head and smile. “Morning.”

“You’re beautiful.” He runs the back of his index finger down my cheek.

“I’m a sure thing, Tank,” I tease. “After I brush my teeth.” I scramble out of bed and run to the bathroom to handle my business and brush my teeth. When I walk out, naked as the

day I was born, Sterling is sitting on the edge of the bed, his hard cock sitting tall and proud.

“Hold that thought.” He laughs as he stands and passes me. I dive back under the covers and wait for him. A few minutes later, he opens the door and comes back to bed. “Found the toothbrush. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” I tilt my head up for my good morning kiss, which he gives me without hesitation. It feels natural to wake up next to him. I wasn’t sure how this morning would look for either of us, but it’s everything I ever could have imagined.

“What are your plans today?” he asks.

“Are we going to dinner at your parents’?” I ask him.

“Definitely. We have to tell everyone the good news.”

“Today?”

“Are you backing out on me?”

“Never. I just... wasn’t sure. Can we call my parents?”

“Sure, I have something at my place that I want to show you. How about you get ready, we’ll go to my place, and I can do the same and show you what I have to show you, and then just hang out until it’s time to go to my parents’. We can call yours in there too. And breakfast. We need breakfast.”

“Done.” I kiss him and climb back out of bed, gather some clothes, and head to the shower.

“I think I should shower with you. You know, save water and all that,” he calls after me.

I stick my head out of the bathroom. “You’d be putting on dirty clothes.”

“Worth it.” He tosses the covers off and rushes me. He lifts me off my feet, and together we step into the small shower, and my handsy boyfriend uses all the hot water running his hands and mouth over every inch of me, which has me rinsing the shampoo and conditioner out of my hair with cold water.

“Not cool, Tank.” I point at him as I shiver.

He wraps a towel around me and gathers me into his arms. “I’ll warm you up.” I relax into him, and in no time, his body heat does exactly that.

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“What did you have to show me?” I ask.

“It’s not finished, but I want to show it to you now.” He takes my hand in his and leads me outside.

“Where are we going?” I ask him as we make our way off the back deck and head toward his detached garage.

“To the shop.”

“Oh, is this the new project you’ve been working on?”

“It is.” His smile is radiant as he unlocks the door and ushers me inside. “Close your eyes.”

“Really?”

“Humor me, Tink.”

“Fine.” I close my eyes. I feel him step behind me and rest his hands on my hips. His body is aligned with mine.

“Small steps,” he says, his lips next to my ear. “You’re doing great,” he assures me, helping to guide me where he wants me. “Okay. Stay here. No peeking.” He kisses my cheek, and then his body heat is gone, and all that remains are the sounds of his footsteps and something scraping across the floor.

“Open.”

I blink, open my eyes, and take in my surroundings. “Wait. Are those what I think they are?” I ask.

“If you’re thinking that they’re bookshelves for your own library, then yes.”

“Sterling!” I rush him, and he’s ready for me, catching me with ease and lifting me into his arms. I wrap myself around

him and fuse my lips to his. I put everything that I am into this kiss. All my love for him, hoping he can feel it.

“Do you like them?”

“I love them!”

He smiles. “That’s why I was in your spare bedroom that day. I stepped in to get a few measurements. Mindy found me there. That’s what you saw.”

“You were making sure the shelves that you were making me would fit?”

“Yes, and no.”

“Now I’m confused.” I laugh as I blink away my happy tears.

“That’s why I was there, but Mindy interrupted me, and I didn’t get a final measurement.”

“Oh, well, do you think they’ll fit?”

“I’m sure that they will, but on our way back to my place this morning, something else came to mind.”

“These are perfect. I don’t know how you could make these any better. I love them. You welded them, right?”

“Yeah. The frames, then cut and stained the wood for the shelves.”

“I love them. I love you. Day. Made. I got my guy and my library.”

“Hold that thought. Come back to the house with me. I have something else to show you.”

“It’s not going to top this, Tank.”

He chuckles. “Come on.” Again, with my hand locked in his, he leads me back into the house, this time to the basement. “So, this area is unfinished.”

“I know you’ve been meaning to do that for a while now. Did you finally decide what you want to put down here?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to clue me in?” I ask, laughing.

“I think a storage area here.” He points to where a box holding his Christmas tree is sitting. There are a few totes that I know are ornaments and decorations because I picked them out when he bought this place.

“That’s a good idea, for sure. Hide it all away.”

“Yeah, and then over here, I was thinking a pool table, a bar, a big-ass sectional and a big screen, or maybe a projector for when my brothers come over to watch games.”

“I like it.” I nod, picturing the layout in my mind. “All good choices.”

“Then, over here, I thought we could build you your library. Wall-to-wall bookshelves, a comfy chair, or one of those big-ass bean bag chairs you showed me not long ago. We can paint the area and hang lights on the shelves, and well, it can be anything you want it to be.”

“You want to build a library for me at your house?” I ask, my love for this man overwhelming me.

“Our house.”

“What?”

“Move in with me. Before you say no, let me get this out. We eat dinner together every night. The last couple of months, we’ve both had some long nights apart, but if we hadn’t been in the avoidance stage, we would have still had dinner together. No matter what plans I make, I consider you, and if you’d want to go, before I make them. We spend all our time together, and now our nights too. I want you in my arms every night, Alyssa. I want this. I want us.” He pulls me close, locking his arms around my waist. “Build a life with me.”

I nod because I can’t speak through my tears. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He kisses me softly. “I know it’s fast, but my love for you has been building for years, and I know you are who I want forever with.”

“So, you want me to stay tonight?” I ask. My mind is racing. We’d have to put my place on the market, but we can

use the money from the sale to redo the basement. I can see it, the life we'll build here together.

“Every night from now until forever.”

“Let's do it.” I smile.

“Fuck yeah!” He lifts me off my feet, and we spin around, both laughing. Our hearts are full, and our love is strong.

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“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad.” I wave at the screen of my camera on my phone.

“Hi, sweetie. Where are you?”

“Home.”

“Really?” Mom squints. “Did you and Sterling trade couches? I swear that looks like his.”

“You're good, Nancy,” Sterling says, leaning in so my parents can see him. He waves.

“How are you, son?” my dad asks.

“Never been better,” he replies, smiling at them.

“What are you two up to?” Mom asks. “Something's going on.”

“I told you, I was just sitting at home.”

“You're at Sterling's?” she asks, no doubt working it out in her head. I see the moment it hits her. “You're moving in with him?” she asks cautiously.

“Yes.”

“Does this mean what I think it means?” Mom asks.

“If you think it means that I'm madly in love with your daughter and asked her to move in with me, then yes, that's what it means.” Sterling just tosses it out there as if we're discussing the weather.

“It’s about damn time.” My dad laughs. “I told you,” he tells my mom. “I knew they would work it out on their own.”

Sterling tugs me into his arms and places me on his lap so that we’re both in the frame without either of us needing to lean. He takes my phone from my hand and holds it up since his arms are longer than mine.

“So, you’re together?” Mom asks. Like me, she needs me to spell it out for her.

“Yes,” Sterling and I answer at the same time.

“And you’re moving in together?”

“Yes,” I tell her.

“What can we do?” Dad asks. “Do you want us to come and help with the move?”

“Nah, I’ve got nine brothers for that,” Sterling reminds him.

“Wait. I thought there were only nine of you?” Dad asks.

“My cousin Ramsey who you know is like a sister to me, and I count her husband. Just because he’s a fancy lawyer doesn’t mean he gets out of the hard work,” Sterling jokes.

“When is this happening?” Mom asks.

“We’re going to have dinner at my parents’, and I’ll line up my brothers. Sooner rather than later,” Sterling answers.

“We’re good, Mom,” I tell her. “How about we get settled, merge our lives, and you can come for dinner?”

“Perfect. We’re here if you need us. And we can go shopping for anything you need once you’re settled.”

“Let the young folk handle it, Nance.” My dad grins. “Call us when you’re settled, baby girl, and we’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you both. Mom, you’re on for shopping.”

“We love you both,” Mom says.

Sterling’s hold on me tightens at her words. I know they mean as much to him as they do to me. He’s like a son to them



and has been a constant in all our lives since I was five years old.

“Talk soon.” I wave at the camera and blow them a kiss. Mom does the same before we end the call.

“So, we have about two hours before we have to be at my parents’ place,” Sterling tells me.

“You’re insatiable,” I tease him.

“True.” He grins. “But I thought we should go to your place and get what you need for the week. Clothes for work, your bathroom stuff, and whatever else we can pack in two hours and get loaded into my truck.”

“Today?”

“Today.”

I look into the eyes of the man I love. My best friend. “Let’s do it.” His grin wraps its way around my heart, and I can’t ever remember a time when I’ve been this happy.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sterling

We're on the way to my parents' place for Sunday dinner. We spent the last two hours packing up as much of her stuff as we could put into my truck. We managed to grab all her clothes and clear out the entire en suite bathroom. She grabbed her lunchbox she uses to take her lunch to work, and the travel mugs that she uses for her coffee.

I reach over and rest my hand on her thigh. "Nervous?"

She turns to look at me. "No. Should I be?"

"Not a bit. They're going to be thrilled for us."

"I'm thrilled for us." She chuckles. "It's a big deal moving in together, and we've been dating less than twenty-four hours, but we're rolling with it."

"Is this too fast for you?" I glance at her out of the corner of my eye and see her shaking her head.

"No. It's not too fast. I feel like it's been a long time coming. You're not just some guy I just met. You're Tank. My best friend. The man who knows me better than I know myself. I think this is exactly right for us. It's our timeline, our life, right?" she asks.

"Exactly. You're happy?"

"Deliriously so. Are you happy?"

"I'm fucking bursting with it, baby." We talk about which of her belongings she wants to donate and what of mine we

will replace with hers for the rest of the drive. It feels damn fucking good to be combining our lives. Our hearts have been tangled together for years.

Pulling into my parents' driveway, I see the gang's all here. "Perfect. Everyone's here. We can tell them all at once."

"How are we doing this?"

"I have no plan." I laugh. "Let's just play it by ear."

She shrugs. "I'm in."

We reach for our doors, and I meet her at the front of my truck. I offer her my hand, and she doesn't hesitate for a single second to intertwine her fingers with mine and allow me to lead her into the house.

I can hear my family talking loudly in the kitchen. The familiarity of it washes over me. I'm pumped to have Alyssa at my side. I lead us into the kitchen and pull her in front of me, wrapping my arms around her chest. She rests her head back against me, and I place a kiss on her forehead.

"Whoa," Merrick says. "What's this?" He points at us.

"Damn," Rushton jokes. "And to think I thought I had a chance." He winks at my girl, making her laugh.

"Meh, we've seen them like this a million times." Brooks smirks. "They're playing us."

I just grin at my brothers.

"I don't know, B. Look at those smiles," Orrin comments.

"I think this is legit," Declan tosses in his opinion.

"Prove it," Maverick challenges.

"How?" Ryder asks.

My parents' and sisters-in-law's heads are going back and forth between my brothers as Alyssa and I stay silent.

"Kiss her," Archer tells me.

"Lame," Rushton calls out. "He just kissed her."

"That was on the forehead," Archer counters.

“It’s going to have to be one of us.” This comes from Ramsey. She’s the first outside of my brothers to speak up.

“Fine.” Rushton stands up taller. “I’ll take one for the team.” He moves toward us, and my arms tighten around my girlfriend. He stops in front of Alyssa and smirks. He leans in close, and I growl.

“Ready, Lys?” Rushton asks.

“Rush.” My tone is a warning, and he knows it. I know that he’s fucking around, but he needs to know I’m not.

“Oh, he’s extra growly.” Rushton turns to look at my brothers over his shoulder.

“You’re not doing it right,” Maverick tells him. “You just lean in and get it done.” He shakes his head. “It’s a wonder we have any game at all,” he tells Merrick, who just grins at his twin’s antics.

“Why don’t we let them tell us what this is?” comes from my mom. I can see the look in her eyes. She knows. Of course she does. Mom knows everything without saying a word.

“I love him,” Alyssa blurts, and my fucking heart does a somersault in my chest. She turns in my arms and peers up at me. “He asked me to move in with him.”

“Tell all our secrets, baby,” I say, bending to kiss the corner of her mouth while my arms hold her close.

“That shit is not faked,” Ryder says. “Congrats, you two.” The words are barely out of his mouth before we’re getting group hugs, kisses, and slaps on the back. The entire time I hold her next to me.

“You’re really moving in?” Palmer asks.

“I am. We’ve been fighting this for far longer than we should have. We’re just ready to start the next chapter.”

“I love it.” Palmer grins.

“I have one question?” comes from Orrin.

“What’s that?” I ask.

A grin tilts his lips. “Who’s next?”

Dad’s laughter is boisterous as it fills the room. “Whoever it is, I’m here for it,” Dad says. He reaches over and takes Remi from Brooks. “We need more of these. Lots more of these.”

“I hear ya, old man,” I tell him. “Let me get a ring on her finger and change her last name, and it’s game on.”

“When is that happening?” Ramsey asks.

“Soon,” I say, smiling down at Alyssa. “Very soon.” I seal my lips over hers, and even though we’re surrounded by my family, it feels like it’s just the two of us as everything fades away.

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“Alyssa, what happened with your job interviews?” Jade asks.

“They both called me this week and offered me the jobs.” Alyssa’s sitting on my lap outside on the back deck. We’ve just finished eating dinner. She feels me stiffen, places her hand on my arm, and begins to make a soothing circling motion with her thumb.

“And?” Ramsey asks.

“I turned them both down. I knew as soon as I left the interview that I didn’t want the bank. I spent some time thinking about the salon, and honestly, I never should have applied. I don’t want to make that commute every day to Atlanta.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Mom asks her.

“Just stick it out where I am for now. I’m going to keep my eyes and ears open for something here in Willow River or in Harris.”

“What are you looking for?” Declan asks. “You plan on staying in healthcare?”

“No. Not necessarily.”

“You have more options now,” I tell her. “You’re moving in with me.”

“Not so you can support me.”

“I know that, Tink. I’m just saying that if you take a pay cut, it’s not going to mean you have to live on Ramen.”

“How do you feel about a mechanic shop?” Declan asks.

“Of course!” Kennedy says excitedly. “Why didn’t we think of this sooner?” she asks her husband.

“I’m lost.” Alyssa laughs.

“I’ve been meaning to hire someone to run the office. Answer the phone, schedule service, take money, those kinds of things. I’ve been burning the candle at both ends for far too long, and with the baby coming, I want to spend more time at home with my wife and kids. I don’t want to stay over to answer voice mails I didn’t get to during the day and balance out the drawer.”

“The best decision I ever made,” Orrin chimes in. “I tried to do it all on my own too. I’d be lost without Sarah.”

“You’d really consider me?” Alyssa asks.

I can see her wheels turning. While she’d said she didn’t want a job offer from one of my brothers, that was before we admitted our feelings for one another. She’s not just my best friend anymore. She’s going to be my wife, and Declan’s sister-in-law.

Declan laughs. “Alyssa, the job is yours if you want it. You’re family. I trust you, and that’s a key component for that position.”

“Yes.” Alyssa nods. “I don’t even care what it pays. My boyfriend made an excellent point earlier. I don’t have to stress as much because we share that now.”

“I love you.” My voice is loud and clear. The ladies are in awe, and my brothers, those who are not ass over heels in love, tell me I’m pussy-whipped.

I could challenge them. Letting them know that I was head over heels for her before I made love to her for the first time, which also happened to be last night. They won't get it, though. I'd just be wasting my breath. It doesn't resonate with you until you've felt that kind of love. A connection so deep that it lights your soul. One day, they're all going to find it, and then they'll understand. Sex and love go hand in hand when you're in a committed relationship, but that's not all there is. You don't know it until you live it.

I'm living it.

I feel the connection.

My soul is on fire, her face shining within the flames.

If they want to refer to that as pussy-whipped, I'll gladly take that title. I know it's her. It's Alyssa. Her kind heart, her big brown eyes, her smile, and her laugh. It's everything that makes her the woman I love that has me speaking my heart to her. Not giving a single fuck who hears me.

I love her.

She loves me.

We are forever.

"Why don't you come by the shop any night this week that works for you?" Declan asks her. "I can show you where you'd be working and walk through what you'd be doing. We can talk about pay, and if you want it, all I need from you is a start date. I'm sure you'll have to give what, two weeks?" he asks.

"How's tomorrow?" Alyssa asks. "I get off at four, so you wouldn't have to stay late."

"Works for me."

"And me," Kennedy tells her. "I don't have to worry about the Mindys of the world applying and trying to make a play for my husband."

"I'm all yours," Declan tells her.

“They don’t care,” all the ladies, even my mom, say at the same time.

“All right then.” Declan leans over and kisses his wife.

“What are your plans this weekend?” I ask my brothers.

“I have to work,” Brooks says. “What’s up?”

“We need trucks and muscles,” Alyssa tells him.

“When and where?” Orrin asks. The rest of my brothers follow suit, letting me know that they’re in for helping us move Alyssa into my place.

“Are you getting rid of furniture?” Maverick asks.

“Yeah, my couch and kitchen table. Not sure about the bedroom suite.” She looks over her shoulder at me.

“Both of the spare bedrooms have beds and a dresser in each of them. It’s up to you. We can keep it and get rid of one of them, or we can get rid of it.”

“It was secondhand. The mattress is new, but other than that. I bought it at a garage sale.”

“I remember that,” Archer tells her. “I helped Sterling move it into your place.”

“That’s right.” Alyssa nods.

“You all are welcome to do anything you want. I’m even getting rid of some kitchen stuff too.”

“What are you doing with your house?” Merrick asks.

“We didn’t discuss it, but I assumed we’d sell it.” She shrugs.

“We can sell it, or you can rent it and supplement your income that way. I don’t care what you do with it as long as you’re sleeping next to me every night.”

“How much would the rent be?” Maverick asks.

“Hold up. Are my babies thinking about leaving the nest?” Mom asks.

“We haven’t talked about it,” Maverick tells her.



Mom nods. “It’s the twin thing. Even after twenty years, I still forget you are one and the same.” She smiles at my younger brothers.

“You can live there for my monthly payment,” Alyssa tells them. “I don’t want to make money off the family. But if anything breaks, you fix it, keep it maintained, things like that.”

“Let us talk about it,” Merrick tells her. However, I can see the look in his eyes. It matches the one in Maverick’s. My little brothers are taking the leap and moving out on their own.

By the time we get home—yes, home, I love the sound of that—we’re both exhausted. I should feel bad that I kept her up so late last night, but it was a night neither one of us will ever forget. We strip out of our clothes, brush our teeth, and slide beneath the covers. Alyssa’s naked body rests next to mine, with her head lying on my chest. I feel her lips press against my skin, and I smile into the dark of the room.

She’s here.

She’s mine.

I hope she’s ready for a lifetime of love. Kincaids, we work hard and love even harder. I can’t wait to show her every single day.

# EPILOGUE ALYSSA

TWO WEEKS later

Alyssa

“You look so pretty!” Blakely tells me.

“Thank you. So do you.” I tap the end of her nose with my index finger. We’re having a girls’ day at Declan and Kennedy’s house.

“I know.” She shrugs, and I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Blake!” Kennedy scolds her.

“What?” The look of confusion that crosses her face is priceless.

“You two are going to have your hands full with that one,” I tell Kennedy.

“Don’t I know it. She’s going to corrupt her brother. I can see it clearly.” Kennedy chuckles.

“Daddy says I have to teach my baby brother everything I know,” Blakely says proudly.

“You know who she reminds me of?” Piper asks.

“Who?” Kennedy and I ask.

“My sister.”

“Yes.” Jade nods furiously. “She is a mini Palmer.”

“The world can only handle one Palmer Kincaid,” Ramsey jokes.

“What about me?” Palmer asks, stepping into the room. She has Remi strapped to her chest.

“This one”—Kennedy points to her daughter—“acts just like you.”

“High-five, Blake.” Palmer holds up her hand, and Blakely smacks it with a grin. We all laugh, and she preens under our attention.

“Guess what?” Blakely says excitedly.

“What?” we all reply.

“I have a secret.”

“Oh, a secret? Is it a good one?” Piper asks her.

She tilts her head to the side. “How do I know if it’s a good one?” She taps her index finger to her chin. This little girl is five going on fifteen.

“Well, is it something that makes you happy? Or someone else happy?” Ramsey asks her.

“Oh, yes, and it’s really pretty.” Blakely’s head bounces up and down.

Kennedy smiles and raises her eyebrows in confusion. “Whose secret is it?” she asks her daughter.

“Mommy.” Blakely sighs. “If I tell you it’s Uncle Sterling’s secret, then that’s telling the secret,” she explains.

We all smile, holding back our laughter at her explanation. “So, you know Uncle Sterling’s secret?” I ask her.

“Yep.” She picks through the kid’s makeup kit that she uses for girls’ night.

“Is it wrong that I want to coerce my daughter to tell me what she knows?” Kennedy whispers, so Blakely can’t hear her.

“Nope,” Palmer says, popping the *p*. “You can bet your ass if Remi ever lays something like that on me, I’m going to try

to get the details out of her.” She grins. “We ladies have to stick together.”

“What about you?” Ramsey asks me. “Are you curious?”

“Of course I am, but this is Sterling we’re talking about. He could be making her something for her room or taking her for ice cream.”

“She’s right,” Kennedy speaks up. “They all dote on her. And they continue to try to one-up each other for favorite uncle, especially with all the new babies,” she says, rubbing her hand over her baby bump.

“Mommy?” Blakely asks.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Do you like your ring?” She points to Kennedy’s engagement ring and wedding band.

“I love it. Daddy gave this to me as a symbol of his love. Where did that question come from?”

“Uncle Sterling bought a sparkly ring like that, and he said he hopes it’s the right kind.”

All the air whooshes from my lungs. My eyes are wide as I seek out the other ladies to see if I just heard things or if Blakely really said what I think she did.

“Breathe.” Ramsey rubs her hand on my back.

As if I need her words to do so, I pull in a deep breath and slowly exhale. “Did she?” I finally ask.

“She did.” Palmer grins.

“Blake? Is that the secret?” Kennedy asks her.

“No. The secret is that Uncle Sterling found a wife. He said that I have to start calling Alyssa Aunt Alyssa and that I should have been doing that already.” Her concerned eyes find mine. “I’m sorry, Aunt Alyssa. I didn’t know I was supposed to.”

My heart is thrashing in my chest, from her admission and from the secret that she let out of the bag. “Come here.” She

stands, and I pull her into my arms. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Technically, I am not your aunt.” I swallow hard. “However, if your uncle Sterling and I get married, I will be.”

“Will you get to be a mommy too?” she asks, her eyes wide.

I nod, fighting back the tears. “I hope so.”

“Would that baby be mine?”

“No, sweetie. That baby would be your little cousin, just like Remi and Uncle Orrin’s baby is going to be.”

“I’m the oldest, and I know all the things,” she tells me.

I hug her to my chest. “Yes, you are, and you definitely know all the things.”

“Can I curl your hair now?” she asks.

“Sure.” I nod, swallowing the lump of emotion blocking my throat. “Make me beautiful like you.”

“Oh, you’re already beautiful, Aunt Alyssa.” She moves to get her sponge rollers because we don’t let her have an actual curling iron. “I have to get the curlers from my room.” She points at me. “Don’t move.” She climbs to her feet and races down the hall.

“Holy shit,” Palmer says.

“Right?” Piper agrees.

“Are we surprised?” Jade asks. “We all knew this was coming.”

“Did you?” Ramsey asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “We said we were in this forever but never talked about marriage. Not seriously, anyway. A comment here or there with me moving in, but... no.”

“Welcome to the family.” Kennedy smiles.

I return the gesture. These amazing ladies will be my sisters-in-law. Blakely, Remi, my nieces, and the two baby boys who I’ve yet to meet will be my nephews. And best of

all, Sterling Kincaid will be my husband. I get to marry my best friend.

I'm engulfed in hugs, and that's how Blakely finds us. She joins in, and even though I know it's coming, she didn't ruin it for me. I know Sterling, and he's going to make it special.

# EPILOGUE STERLING

## Sterling

Everything is set up. I've triple-checked every detail. The one wild card I'm not sure about is Blakely. She and I had a breakfast date this morning. Alyssa opted not to go because she had things she wanted to get done before girls' night. When we got to the restaurant, I told Blakely I had a secret and showed her the ring. Partly because she's cool as hell, and I wanted to see her ooh and ahh over it. The other part was so that she would tell Alyssa.

I know my girl. She's going to be so preoccupied with the knowledge that I bought a ring that she'll never suspect that when she gets home tonight, I plan to ask her to be my wife. She's been living here for two weeks, and I've never been happier. I love her things spread out all over the house.

I love her.

We're going at this like we're being chased by wild bears, but I don't care. I want her tied to me in every possible way. I want to start the next phase of our lives. I'm ready for our forever, and I know she is too. We haven't really talked about marriage outside of saying that we're both in this. Sure, I've mentioned our future and kids a time or two in the last couple of weeks, and she always smiles. No arguments, which means she's ready for this.

My phone rings, and I pull it out of my pocket. Glancing at the screen, I see that it's Rushton. "Hey," I greet him as I pace the floor.

“How are you holding up?”

“Good. I’ve checked everything, and it’s good. Thanks for your help today, even though you were late,” I tease.

“That’s what brothers are for. And I was late for a good reason. I was doing my civic duty helping a damsel in distress.” He chuckles. “Is everyone gone?”

“Yeah. Everyone pretty much left the same time you did.”

“I figured the married few would stick around and offer some advice,” he jokes.

“We’re solid,” I tell him.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I really think you are. Nervous?”

“Anxious, but not nervous. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that she’s not going to say yes.”

“I’m happy for you, Sterling.”

“I’m happy for me too.” I laugh. “Sorry, but fuck me, I just want my ring on her finger, and a wedding date set, and babies. I want this house full of them.”

“Too bad she doesn’t have a sister,” he says with humor in his voice.

“You looking to settle down, little brother?” I tease. He’s always joking about taking Alyssa away from me; at least he did before I pulled my head out of my ass and told her how I feel.

“Looking? No. Not really. Would I if the right woman came along? Most definitely.”

“You’ll find her when you least expect it. Just be careful when you do. Don’t let Blake find out. She’s ruthless. She told me at breakfast this morning that I needed to smile more to find a wife. That her dad smiled a lot when he found Kennedy. I ended up showing her the ring to convince her I was all set on the finding a wife front.”

“That girl. I’m telling you, she’s a handful and so damn smart for her age. I feel sorry for her first boyfriend when we’re all there sitting on her front porch.”



“She’s—” I stop when I hear another car. “Tink’s home,” I tell him.

“Good luck, brother. We’ll all be waiting to hear from you.”

“Thanks.” I end the call and toss my phone on the couch. I don’t need it for what I’m about to do. I head toward the door and open it for her. “How was girls’ night?”

“Eventful, but it always is when we get together. Especially if Blake is there.” She smiles and tilts her head back for a kiss, and I deliver.

“I was just talking to Rush about her. She’s a handful.”

“Right? But she’s so damn sweet.”

“Yes. Yes, she is.” I pull her into my chest, wrapping my arms around her. “Are you tired? I thought maybe we could sit out on the deck and talk.”

“Is everything all right?” She leans back to peer up at me.

“Perfect. It’s been a whirlwind the last couple of weeks. I just wanted to spend some time with you. Talk about the basement remodel and any changes you want to make to the house, that kind of thing.”

“Sure.” She steps back, and I let her, motioning for her to lead the way.

“On second thought, let’s go to the basement so we can measure it all out while we’re down there. Get a plan together.”

“Are you sure you’re all right with me building a library down here?” she asks, pulling open the door, and starts to descend the stairs.

“This is your home too, Alyssa. I want this for you.” She steps off the bottom steps and gasps. She looks up at where I’m still standing, with a few steps left to go to reach her. “What is all of this?”

“This is us,” I say. I look around the room and try to see it from her eyes. My brothers and I spent all day hanging up

twinkle lights and blown-up images that cost me a small fortune of our life together, but the smile on her face makes it all worth it.

“This was our kindergarten graduation.” I point to the picture hanging from the fishing wire from the ceiling.

“We were so little.” She grins. “And what is up with my hair? My mom and I need to have a talk. Remind me never to do that to our kids.”

My heart hammers in my chest at the comment. Maybe she’s figured out what’s about to happen. Telling Blakely might not have been my best plan, but she was hounding me about needing a wife, and the ring was in my pocket, and I just went for it. Afterward, I told myself it would throw Alyssa off, not expecting it tonight. Either way, she’s here in our home, and after we take this trip down memory lane, this ring in my pocket will be on her finger.

“Was this our fourth-grade field trip?” she asks as we move through the photos.

“Yep.”

“I remember sitting in bird poop, and you gave me your jacket to tie around my waist.”

“It was hot as hell that day. I don’t know why I even had a jacket. I guess it was fate.”

“My hero,” she coos. She keeps walking, stopping to study each picture. She comments about the memory as we look at our life together. When she makes it to the other side of the basement, there’s a picture of us that Ramsey snapped. The same weekend everyone helped us move Alyssa in.

This one is the biggest of all of them. We’re standing on the front porch, her back to my front, my arms around her, and we’re not smiling at the camera. We’re smiling at each other. The love between us is clear as day.

“We’re framing this one,” she says, turning to look at me, but she has to look down. “What are you doing?” she asks, tears already welling in her eyes as the reality of what’s happening hits her.

I have her ring in one hand, so I take her palm with the other. “I love you. You are a part of me. These pictures are just a snapshot of the life we’ve lived together. And they’re barely a chapter in the book we’re about to write.”

“I love this story,” she says, smiling through her tears.

“Me too, baby. I want to make more memories. Add more chapters to a story that will never end. My love for you is endless.” I swallow hard. Letting go of her hand, I open the ring box and present it to her. Her hands fly to cover her mouth, and I can see a slight tremble. “I don’t want to wait another minute to start the rest of our story. Will you do me the incredible honor of being my wife? Will you marry me, Tink?” She blinks back tears and offers me a wobbly smile.

She’s nodding before I get the question out. “Yes. Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes.” I slide the ring onto her finger, and she bends to kiss me. I fall back onto the mound of pillows and blankets that my brothers help me set up earlier and kiss her with all the love inside my heart.

“You’re my dream come true, Tank.”

“You’re my dream, my past, my present, and my future. You’re my everything.” I press my lips to hers, savoring how this woman will be right here in my arms for the rest of my life. We need to call our families, but that’s going to have to wait. This is where we’re going to stay tonight.

# THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to read Stay Tonight.

Want more from the Kincaid Brothers? Look for Rushton's story, Stay Together releasing March 14, 2023. Grab your copy [here](#).

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Boy Trouble

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Tell Me A Story

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Kaylee Ryan