

sweet
addiction

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HOPE FORD

SWEET ADDICTION

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CHAPTER 1

ABBY

I'M SITTING in the driver's seat looking up at apartment 1C, debating on whether I should get out of my car or not. I can see the front door clearly from my spot on the side of the road. There are no flowerpots or rocking chairs on the porch. There's not a welcome mat in front of the door, and the window shades are drawn closed, not allowing the sun to shine in or anyone to see out. There's nothing that says I should be walking up there and knocking on the closed door.

But that's exactly what I need to do.

I grip the steering wheel until my fingers turn white, and I force myself to loosen my grip. This is not a big deal. Davis Jones is my older brother's best friend. They served in the Army together for years until they went to a private organization. Davis has come to my family's house when he was on leave plenty of times. Well, he did until two years ago. He hasn't been there since he was hurt.

When my brother called me from some unknown location in the Middle East to tell me that Davis was in Whiskey Run, I didn't believe him. He's often teased me about the tiny crush I had on his best friend, and I thought it was all a joke. At least until he told me that Davis really is living just a few miles down the road from me and is working at the Heroes Rehab Center. Two years ago, Davis lost his leg in an explosion, and I haven't seen him since. Not because I didn't want to see him. Damn, I wanted to see him more than anything, but I also knew that I was just Zach's little sister, and Davis didn't need—or want—me around.

He was across the U.S. then, but now, with him in my hometown, I don't have an excuse. He's literally five minutes from my house, and there's no way I'm going to let another day go on without at least checking in on him. I may tell myself I'm doing it for my brother, but a big part of me knows that I'm doing it for me. I need to see him.

I get out of my old but trusty SUV and stand in front of the building. "One foot in front of the other," I mutter before I slowly make my way up the sidewalk that leads to his apartment.

When I get to the small porch, I take a deep breath and knock on the door before stepping back and waiting for any kind of noise from the other side.

I'm already looking for reasons to walk away, convincing myself I can try again another day when there's a thud on the other side of the door and then suddenly it swings open. For just a second, I stand here with my mouth hanging open. My first thought is he's a lot bigger than I remember. He towers over me, and I have to lean my head back to look at him. His shoulders are broad, filling the doorway. His jaw is pulled tight, and his gaze narrows as he stares back at me. His hair is long and wavy, covering part of his face. It's nothing like the buzz cut he's worn since I first met him.

When he continues to frown at me, I'm about to apologize and leave because it's obvious he's not happy I'm here. "Hey, Davis..."

Before I can get the whole sentence out, he steps out of the door and onto the porch with me. This close, he's even bigger, and I suck in a deep breath as his fresh and clean scent fills my nose. He's still not smiling, but his face softens, and he whispers my name. "Abby."

Before I can say anything, he opens his arms wide and pulls me against his body. I'm in shock because this was not what I was expecting at all, but I'm not dumb. I'm going to take full advantage of being held by him. I let my head rest against his chest and put my hands at his waist. He has one hand at my back, and the other is at the base of my neck,

holding me to him as if he doesn't want to let me go. I'm not sure how long we stand here, just like this, but he rests his cheek on the top of my head, and I close my eyes trying to commit all of it to memory—the smell of him, the feel of his hands on me, the way his hard body is pressed against my softer one—I take it all in silently, willing him to stay right where he's at.

It's a car horn from a person driving by that finally pulls us apart. His cheeks are ruddy as he looks at me. "Sorry about that. I mean, I wasn't expecting you, that's all."

Is he making excuses for why he hugged me the way he did? Is he regretting it already? With a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes, I shrug my shoulders. "Don't apologize. I was nervous about stopping by. I thought you wouldn't have a clue who I was and it was going to be awkward, so yeah, uh, this was better than I thought it would be."

I barely contain my cringe. Geez, even now after all this time, I ramble when I'm talking to Davis.

He points to his front door. "You want to come in? Or we can sit out here if you'd rather."

I shrug, and he gestures for me to go inside. "I have a place to sit inside. Let's do that. Unless you're in a hurry to get home."

I shake my head and walk inside the apartment. "No hurry. Alexis is with Mom and Dad."

I walk past him inside and then straight to the couch and sit down, wrapping my hands together in my lap.

"Sorry about the place. It's pretty bare, but I haven't had much time to decorate or go shopping."

I shake my head as if it's not a big deal. Honestly, I hadn't even looked around the apartment because from the first moment, my eyes have been glued to him. "I'm the one that should be apologizing. I'm sorry for just dropping in on you."

He waves me off. "How's Alexis and Brenda and Rick?"

I breathe a little easier when he asks about my daughter and my mom and dad. This I can talk about easily. “Alexis is six years old and in kindergarten. She loves school and is growing up way too quick. Mom and Dad are good, but I hope you know that as soon as they find out you’re in town, they’re going to be showing up on your doorstep.”

His eyebrows lift. “You think they want to see me?”

I almost laugh, as if he’s just told a joke or something. But when he doesn’t even crack a smile, I realize he’s serious. I lean forward, wishing I was close enough to touch him, but he’s standing up across the room, with his arms crossed over his chest. “Yes, they definitely want to see you. Mom is going to be mad that I came here today without bringing her. But I wanted to check with you first... before I unleashed the whole Campbell family on you.”

He tightens his arms around himself, and finally his lips lift into a small smile. “Maybe I’ll go over there to see them tomorrow.”

I know they’d love to see him, so I nod my head. “They’d love that, Davis.”

He lets his hands fall to his sides and then takes a few steps to the chair opposite of me. For the first time, I notice his limp, and I have to bite my lip to hold back the emotions that overwhelm me. It’s like it was yesterday instead of two years ago that my brother called us to tell us that Davis had been hurt. We were going to go see him in the hospital, but he refused visitors. For the last two years, he’s avoided my family, which is why I was so nervous about coming here today. “So... Whiskey Run? Are you going to stay here long?”

He has his elbows resting on his knees as he weighs me with a look. “I’m not sure. I have a few months of rehab left, and Walker brought me here to finish it out. He offered me a job at the rehab center, and I took it on a temporary basis.”

I tilt my head to the side. Everyone who lives in Whiskey Run knows Walker. He owns a lot of businesses and apartment buildings here. He has a compound on the outskirts of town,

and he's the one that funded the new rehab center next to it.
"How do you know Walker?"

His eyes widen. "Through work."

My forehead creases as I try to make sense of things.
"Through work? You mean, you were a mercenary for him?"

He leans forward. "How do you know about that?"

I roll my eyes because obviously he doesn't know how small towns work. "Everyone knows that Walker has some sort of mercenary team that he runs out of the compound. People don't talk about it... but they talk about it." I don't want to get my brother in trouble or anything, but this is his best friend I'm talking to. "When you guys left the Army five years ago and went private, I just put two and two together. I've asked Zach plenty of times, but he would neither confirm or deny it. But it made sense."

He shrugs, and I try to hide my disappointment that he doesn't feel like he can talk to me about it. I blow out a breath. "I've heard it's nice. The rehab center, I mean."

He nods. "It's really nice. The facility and equipment is top of the line. I can already tell an improvement since I've been here."

There's something about the way he said it that has me asking. "How long have you been here?"

He winces, and I know instantly that he doesn't want to tell me, but I also know that he won't lie to me. "A month. I've been here a month."

I try not to let the hurt reflect in my voice. "You've been in Whiskey Run a month and you haven't come to see us... to see Mom and Dad?"

He shrugs. "I wasn't sure you'd want to see me."

I gasp. "Wouldn't want to see you? Davis, we understood why you didn't want to see anyone right after the accident. We weren't offended... we were worried. Zach kept telling us to give you time, but maybe we shouldn't have listened to him, maybe we should have forced you to see us. I don't know."

He looks down at his boots, and his voice is softer. “What all did Zach tell you, Abby?”

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to know, so I tell him honestly, “Zach told us you lost your leg while you were on a mission in Afghanistan. That an IED went off, and you were lucky it was just your leg. He said you were having a hard time with recovery but were getting better every day.” When he’s still not looking at me, I ask him because I have to know. “Why? Is that not true? Are you okay?”

Davis drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Yeah, I’m fine now.”

The way he says it has me asking. “What does that even mean? Fine... now.”

He lifts his eyes to mine. His brown eyes are dark and troubled, but I can’t look away. “Talk to me, Davis. What is it that Zach didn’t tell us?”

“It wasn’t just me. Every one of us—seven of my brothers—were on that mission. Six of us were injured, and one died. It was a relief that your brother was not physically hurt.”

I know I need to keep my thoughts to myself or else he’s not going to continue, but I can’t stop myself. “Zach was with you that day?”

His eyes jump to mine and widen, as he realizes he’s said more than he should have. “Yes, Zach was there. He was sent back with the package, and thank God he was because....” He stops, and I see the pain on his face, thinking about what could have happened to his best friend and my brother. He lets out a long, shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you.”

I slap my hand on my leg. “Davis, I’m not stupid. I know you and Zach think of me as a child and that I can’t handle things, but I can. I knew that he was probably with you. You guys are almost always together. And it’s obvious he’s a different man since then.”

We are both quiet, and all I can think about is when I see my brother again, I’m going to hug his neck a little tighter. When Davis continues, I can hear the pain in his voice.

“After the accident, I had to take meds for the pain.”

I nod. “Of course you did. I’m sure you had to.”

He swallows. “Well, when I did, it sort of got out of hand. The pills numbed the pain of my leg, and well, everything, really. I didn’t have to think about things or deal with anything, so I stayed, uh, medicated.”

I tilt my head to the side, waiting for him to continue. “I’m not proud of myself, Abby. I took the easy way out and let the pills take care of me and all the shit I was dealing with.”

I scoot to the edge of my seat. “Is that why you didn’t want us to come see you, even months after the accident?”

He gulps. “Yeah. I was a mess. I didn’t want you or your family to see the man I’d become. It was bad, Abby.”

I can’t sit here any longer. I shoot up from my seat and make my way over to Davis. Sitting on the arm of his chair, I put my hand on his shoulder, and even though his muscles bunch under my touch, I don’t let go. “We could have been there for you, Davis. We could have helped you.”

CHAPTER 2

DAVIS

I SMILE because it's exactly what her brother told me. "Yeah, that's what Zach said. He had to leave on another mission and he begged me to let him tell your dad, but I didn't want you all to know. I had to deal with it on my own. I had to get it under control before I could trust myself to be around anyone. I mean, heck, Abby, Alexis was four years old. She didn't need to be around me like that, and I know you. I know your mom and dad. You all would have made me come here, and I was so messed up, I would have destroyed the only family I've ever known. I couldn't do that."

"Davis..." She shudders. I tried to hide the emotion in my voice, but I know she heard it. I was twenty years old when her brother joined the Army. I've been her brother's best friend for twelve years, and when her family found out I grew up in foster homes across Texas and didn't have a family of my own, they tried to make me a part of theirs. Abby was young then—heck, I always thought of her as Zach's little sister—but as she got older, I couldn't help but appreciate the woman she was becoming. Eight years younger than me is not a big difference now, but none of that matters anymore. Absolutely nothing can come of Abby and me.

With her sitting on the arm of my chair, all my senses are heightened. She puts her arm at my back, and I lean into her. Her arm barely reaches around me to my other shoulder, but she pulls me against her until I'm resting my head against her chest. She means to comfort me, but right now, I'm feeling anything but solace. Being this close to her has me on edge, thinking things I shouldn't be thinking. Unable to resist, I

wrap an arm around her, hugging her back. Her voice is just a soft whisper against the top of my head. “We could have handled it, Davis. We could have been there for you.”

I don’t pull away, but I do stiffen. “I didn’t want you to have to handle anything. I didn’t want to bring your family my problems.”

She laughs. “We may not look it, but we’re pretty good when it comes to dealing with things. I mean, they handled me and my teenage pregnancy pretty well. We handle it when Zach goes on those long missions and we don’t hear from him for weeks at a time.” She squeezes me tighter. “We could have handled this too, Davis.”

I do pull away now. By the tone in her voice, I know exactly what she’s thinking. Pity fills her voice, and I hate it because the one thing I didn’t want her to know about me is the first thing I tell her when I see her. I regret telling her, but I know I did the right thing. If I’m going to be around her family—around her daughter—she has to know. She’ll probably never look at me the same way again, and she’ll know I was weak, but I do my best to be completely honest with her. “I’m fine now, Abby. I mean, I know I’ll always be an addict, but I celebrated one year of being clean last month.”

She nods. It’s obvious she wants to say something, but she doesn’t.

For just a second, I allow myself to sit here and take her all in. She’s so close, I could easily lean just a few inches in and be close enough to press my lips to hers. But I can’t. No matter how long I’ve thought about it, dreamed about, or imagined it in my mind, I can’t do it. It takes all the strength I have to get up from the chair and put some distance between us. When I’m safely across the room from her, I cross my arms over my chest, ready and needing to change the subject. I point at her.

“What about the ex? He still giving you trouble?”

For just a second, she looks at me unsure. “I’m sorry,” she says, pointing at the spot I just vacated. “I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

I shake my head “You didn’t. But are you avoiding the subject of your ex?” I hate to bring up her ex-boyfriend and the father of her child, but it’s been on my mind.

She blows out a breath, and finally the smile returns to her face. “That’s a funny story, really.”

My jaw tightens. “What does that mean? You didn’t take him back, did you?”

She blurts out a laugh. “Not a chance. He cheated on me. That’s never happening.”

It makes me feel better to hear her say she’ll never take him back. She definitely deserves better. “Okay, so what’s the funny story then?”

“Remember that time around three years ago when you and Zach were on leave and came to Whiskey Run?”

I don’t even blink even though I know exactly where this is going. “Yeah, I remember.”

She laughs as she looks at me curiously. “Well, it’s funny because that was about the time I was barely making it through college. Wayne hadn’t paid a lick of child support, I was stressed out, and I was this close to just quitting college because it was all so overwhelming.”

I nod, but I don’t say a word, letting her finish.

She tilts her head to look at me. “Well, I confided all that in Zach and didn’t think anything of it. Until the day after you two left and Wayne came to see me. He said he sold his Camaro and gave me a check to pay all the child support in full. He hasn’t been late since. He’s not father of the year or anything, but there was definitely a change in him. He’s more involved in Alexis’s life, and he’s good to her.”

I find myself nodding my head even though I already knew that Wayne had been toeing the line. “That’s good.”

“Do you know anything about it? I mean, it’s weird that he did a big one-eighty right after you and Zach left, don’t you think?”

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. I'm not going to lie to her, but I'm glad that Wayne has kept his side of the deal. Yes, Zach and I went to find Wayne before we left. There's no way I was leaving Whiskey Run without talking to him. Not after hearing how hard of a time Abby was having. And yes, I threatened Wayne's life. I made promises to him that day that I should probably feel guilty about, but I don't. "How's teaching?" I ask her, instead of answering her question.

She rests her hands on her knees. "Good. I'm teaching sixth grade this year, and I'm really liking it. But let's stop talking about me. How are you?"

I've never been one to talk about myself, but there's no way I'm going to just ignore her question. "I'm alive."

Her face instantly transforms, and it's then I realize that I gave away more in that statement than I meant to. Yes, obviously I have survivor's guilt. My therapist tells me that my feelings are normal, but I swear I haven't felt anything close to normal in a long, long time. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I'm good. I'm finally getting used to the prosthetic, and the pain is bearable."

The way she looks at me with sadness makes me mad at myself. I don't ever want to make her feel sad or worried, and that's exactly what I'm doing. I bring pain to others even if it's the last thing I want to do.

I clear my throat, hoping the emotion doesn't show in my voice. "I'm sorry. I'm not very fun to be around—"

She cuts me off. "Davis, don't do that."

"Do what? I'm being honest with you. I haven't been myself in a long time. Maybe seeing your folks and Alexis is a bad idea."

She bolts out of her seat and comes to stand in front of me. Her hand grips the front of my shirt, and she pulls me to her. "Forget it, Davis. Whatever you're thinking, you can forget it."

Being this close to her is like a shock to my system, and I'm not thinking clearly. "What am I thinking?"

She shakes her head with a smirk on her face. “You’re thinking that if you leave again, you’re saving us or some nonsense like that. Heck, you’ve already got one foot out the door, but it’s not happening, Davis. Not when we just got you back. You think I’m Zach’s little sister and I can’t handle things, but you’d be surprised by the shit I’ve survived.”

I tense as I listen to her. What exactly does that mean? The fact that she’s been hurt by someone is like a knife to my heart, and I literally feel ill. “Abby—”

Her hand slides up my chest, and I freeze. We’ve never had this type of relationship. We didn’t touch one another; she was always my best friend’s little sister. She was off limits. But now, when it’s just the two of us, and instead of the teenage girl I remember there’s a grown woman in her place touching me, I can barely hold myself back. When her hand cups my neck and her fingers do a gentle massage across my bare skin, all I can do is will myself to keep my hands to my sides.

She licks her lips, and I barely hold back the groan. “Davis, two years ago, you decided you didn’t need us... that we didn’t need you. You don’t get to make decisions for us anymore. I need you. Alexis needs you. My mom and dad need you. All I’m asking is to hang around awhile, get better, and let me decide if you’re any fun to be around or not.”

Looking into her bright blue eyes, I know I can’t refuse her, but what surprises me the most is the fact that I don’t want to. Even though I know I shouldn’t, I find myself giving in. “You don’t have to worry about me being around your family. I really am clean. I haven’t—”

She rolls her eyes and pats me on the chest. “I’m not worried. I know you wouldn’t hurt any of us, Davis.” She shakes her head and is looking at me with hooded eyes. The faith she has in me fills me with a sense of pride. “I swear, sometimes I think I know you better than you know yourself. Come to dinner tomorrow night at Mom and Dad’s. Alexis and I are going over right after school so I can cut their yard, and then we’ll probably eat around five.”

I can't tell her no. "Okay... but if you talk to your parents and that doesn't work for them—"

She steps back, putting some distance between us again, and instantly, I miss her touch. "It's going to be fine. Trust me, they're all going to be excited to see you."

There's a part of me that hopes it's true, but the other part of me wants to leave and not find out. I've led men into battle. I've carried friends on my back to safety, and I've sat in a small ditch without a working weapon while bombs and guns go off all around me. I literally had a bomb go off ten feet from me. But even with all that... the fear I felt in all those situations is nothing like the fear I have of letting Abby down. And I don't know how to deal with that.

CHAPTER 3

ABBY

I'M STILL SHAKING. I left Davis' apartment, and it wasn't until I had driven for a few miles that it all hit me. He's home. No more wondering where he's at or if he's okay. It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders after seeing him—touching him—and knowing that he survived. He's a different man than I remember, but there's no way I can expect him to be the exact same. Not after everything he's gone through.

I don't know how long he'll be here, but I do know that I'll be seeing him tomorrow. I made him promise me before I left his apartment that he wouldn't leave town in the middle of the night and that he would be at my parents' house tomorrow. I trust that he'll be there.

When I get to my parents' house, I sit in the driveway and try to pull myself together before I go inside. I would have thought that after not having any contact with Davis in the past two years, my feelings for him would have gone away. I was wrong because if anything, this new Davis is even more appealing to me. His vulnerability is new, and I've never seen that side of him before.

I could sit here all night, thinking about him and replaying our conversation, but I don't have that luxury. The front door opens, and Alexis comes running outside as my mom and dad stand on the porch, smiling from ear to ear.

I get out of my car and barely get the car door closed before Alexis slams into the front of me. "Mom! Where have you been? You missed dinner, and Grandma made your favorite."

I pick Alexis up and swing her in my arms before setting her back on her feet, and we walk hand in hand to where my parents are waiting for us on the porch. “I missed lasagna? No way! Did you eat it all?”

She’s laughing at the outrage in my voice. “No, you know she saved you some. Papaw wanted to eat a third helping, and Grandma wouldn’t let him.”

I hold my hand up to my mom as we reach her. “Thanks, Mom.”

My dad is shaking his head. “Yeah, how about thanks, Dad? I saved you a piece of the apple pie too.”

I look at my mom, surprised. “You made apple pie? Wow, what’s the occasion?”

Alexis releases my hand and bounds over to her grandma. My mom takes a hold of her, but her eyes never leave mine. “You’ve been working so hard. I thought you deserved a treat, that’s all.”

I appreciate the sentiment, and I’ll take the slice of pie home with me, but I’m going to do my best not to eat it even though sweets are my favorite. “Thank you, Mom, for the food and the pie! And of course you too, Dad, for saving me a slice. Really, thank you both for everything. I truly appreciate you watching Alexis and always being here for us.”

My dad is leaning heavily on his cane, rubbing his hip. “We should be thanking you, Abby. You and Alexis are keeping us young.”

With Alexis still in my mom’s arms, I thread my arm through my dad’s. “You going to sit and talk to me while I eat? I’d like to talk to you and Mom about why I was late for dinner.”

My dad’s eyebrows raise. “Oooh, sounds interesting.” He rubs his belly. “But I might have to have another piece of pie to tide me over while you enjoy your dinner.”

I can’t help but laugh. I definitely got my sweet tooth from my father. My mom has always been thin and fit. For the longest time, I wished I looked more like her, but it’s only in

the past year that I've come to love my body, flaws and all. I help my dad inside, and even though I know he doesn't want to talk about it, I still ask, "How you feeling, Dad?"

He rubs his thigh, but I don't think he realizes he's doing it. "This new hip is doing wonders for me. I'm good as new."

My mom grabs my plate that she's been warming in the oven and sets it on the table and then nods at her husband of thirty years. "He was going to try and mow the yard tonight. I had to hide the key."

I glare at him with a stern look. "Dad, I told you I'd mow tomorrow. Actually, Alexis and I are coming to do that right after school."

He frowns at me. "You're not mowing my grass. I can do it just fine."

My mom and I share a look, and I see her pat the front pocket of her jeans, letting me know she still has the key hidden. Deciding not to get into it right now, I turn my attention to Alexis. "So what have you done all afternoon?"

She sits in the chair next to mine. "I did all my homework."

My dad grumbles, "Who gives kindergartners homework? When I was in kindergarten, we got an A if we didn't eat the crayons."

Alexis laughs out loud. "Papaw, that's crazy. You don't eat crayons."

He shrugs and tries to look serious but ends up laughing at the incredulous look on Alexis' face. "Okay, it wasn't that bad, but I know we didn't have homework."

She pipes up, "But I love homework."

I run my hand through her hair. "I know you do, honey. So did I at your age. You get it naturally."

My mom sits down next to Dad. "Okay, so eat... and tell us why you missed dinner."

I take a bite of lasagna, chew it slowly, and then swallow it all as my mom's face transforms into impatience. She can't stand not knowing something. After taking a sip of water, I lean forward. "I invited a friend to dinner tomorrow night. I hope that's okay."

She blinks at me while my father frowns. My mom must see it because she swats her hand across his arm. "Well, that's wonderful news. Of course, honey, any friend of yours is welcome here. You know that."

It's then I realize they think I'm bringing a date. "Oh no, it's not like that. He really is a friend. Well, he's more of Zach's friend than mine."

"Who is it, Mommy?" Alexis asks.

I turn to her, and she's watching me with wide blue eyes. "He's an old friend of Zach's. You met him a few times, but you were younger. His name is Davis."

She just nods her head, but my mom gasps and reaches for my hand. "Davis is here, in Whiskey Run?"

I take another bite of my food because just talking about him has me unnerved. I can't hide anything from my parents, but I don't want them to know that I still have feelings for my brother's best friend. "Yep, he's in town. He's been going to the new rehab center for therapy, and Walker offered him a job. Zach actually called me today to let me know Davis was here. With everything, I wasn't sure if he wanted to see us, but get this, he wasn't sure if we would want to see him."

Both my parents are shocked, and I don't blame them. None of us has ever hidden the fact how much we love Davis. It's not even the fact he's my brother's best friend or that I'm sure he's saved my brother's butt a few times. Davis is a great guy. My mom is shaking her head like she doesn't understand. "Of course we want to see him. Did you tell him we tried to come see him?" She holds her hands up to her face. "Oh my gosh, Abby, does he think we just deserted him these last two years? He has to know we tried to see him and wanted to be there."

I nod in complete understanding because everything she's saying is the same way I felt. We all did. "He knows, Mom." I'm about to tell her the story. It's on the tip of my tongue, but it's not my story to tell. A part of me feels like I'd be betraying Davis' trust, so I can't bring myself to tell everything I know. "There's uh, reasons why he hasn't been in touch, but I'd rather him tell you if he wants to."

My mom is about to argue with me. I know she wants to know what's going on, but my dad interrupts. "None of it matters. All that matters is he's coming to see us."

My mom nods and claps her hands together. "I'll fix my fried chicken. That was always his favorite."

"Fried chicken is my favorite too," Alexis pipes in. She's busied herself, drawing in a notebook with her crayons, but she's still paying attention.

I put my hand on top of her head. "Yep, it sure is, honey. Why don't you get your things together? We've got to get you home and ready for bed. We both have school tomorrow."

A lot of kids would hate to hear those words, but not Alexis. Nope, a smile fills her entire face, and she sprints from the table to grab all her things. As soon as she walks away, I take another bite of my food.

"How is he? How is Davis?" my dad asks.

It's obvious he's been worried about him just like the rest of us. Davis and my dad were close, and I know it hurt him to not be able to be there for him. "He's good, Dad. He really is."

He shakes his head. "Why—"

And before he gets into it, I stop him. "I'm sure you all can talk tomorrow. Ask him everything you want to know. He is good, though. I mean, he of course has a limp, and he's still doing rehab, but he's alive." I use the same word that Davis used to describe himself.

My dad isn't happy. It's obvious he and Mom want more, but they're going to have to wait because Alexis comes barreling back into the dining room. "I got it, Mom. I'm ready."

I stand up, grabbing my plate. My mom and I talk about dinner tomorrow. I offer to go to the store for her, but she tells me she's got it. I make her promise to not give Dad the key to the lawn mower and then Alexis and I are on our way across town to home, and I have the piece of apple pie in the back seat. I know we both need to get to bed. It's still early in the school year, and we're adjusting to our new schedules, but I know I'll be lying in bed tonight, thinking about Davis and letting myself imagine what could be between the two of us, even though I know nothing will ever come of it. He can never know my true feelings for him.

CHAPTER 4

DAVIS

I STEP into the rehab facility and go straight to the therapy room. I'm early for group, and even though I'm hoping we can start early, I realize there's no chance when it's only me and Kanan in the room. The therapist is nowhere around, and after bypassing the coffee bar, I sit down in the only chair left that's facing the door.

“You're here early.”

I look at Kanan, and I realize I'm rubbing my thigh. After flexing my fingers out, I force myself to let my hand rest in my lap. “Yep, I am. I was hoping to get started early, which I realize is ridiculous now.”

Kanan stares at me. He shifts in his seat and is rotating his shoulder to stretch it out. “We can start early. I'll be your therapist.”

I can't help it; I laugh. Kanan is a grumpy Marine. We worked together for three years under Walker's command, and after everything we've been through, he's someone I trust completely, but I definitely don't want to have him trying to heal me. “I doubt Dr. Kline would appreciate you taking her job or me bailing on group, thank you, though.” I turn in my seat to face him. “What do you think about all this?” I wave my hand around the room.

His eyes are on mine. “You mean the fact that Walker brought our whole team here and offered us jobs? Or that as part of our job, we all have to take part in mental and physical therapy? Is that what you mean?”

My answer is gruff. “Yeah.”

He shrugs his shoulders, sits back in his chair, and stares at the floor. “I think he knew that the six of us were lost, and we couldn’t get our shit together. I mean, think about it. This place came together in the two years since... everything happened. He’s brought all six of us here to supposedly work. I don’t know what I think about it yet. What about you? What do you think?”

I lean back in my seat and cross my arms over my chest. “I think Walker’s a good guy, and once you work for him, you become his family.” I grunt the rest of it because I hate hearing the way my voice thickens as I talk about family. “He saw a need for this just like he saw something in each of us when he brought us on the team. I’m not sure what I can do here to help, though. Fuck, I don’t have my shit together for sure.”

Kanan grunts in agreement and turns the other way, letting me know the conversation is over. I think about coming here. When Walker first asked, I said no. There’s no part of me that wanted to come here to work and do therapy, but Zach convinced me I needed to. I know Walker has big ideas and is going to make a success of whatever he does, but I’m not sure what I have to contribute.

I watch as Kanan grits his teeth and flexes his fingers open and closed. I figured since he offered, I’d do the same for him. “What about you? You need to talk?”

He looks at me with shock on his face, and then he chuckles. “Sure, do you want to swap war stories? You want to compare injuries or talk about how we got the short end of the deal?”

And for the second time in two days, I say the one thing that I have to keep reminding myself. “We’re alive.”

Guilt fills his face, and I know exactly what he’s feeling at this moment. I’ve felt it the last two years. And even though therapy has helped some, the survivors’ guilt still comes and goes.

He takes in a staggered breath and lets it out slowly. “Yeah... we’re alive.”

We’re both thinking about Randall, our friend that lost his life that day. It could have been either of us, but it wasn’t. We’re still here, and I have to believe there’s a reason for that.

Before I can say anything else, the door opens, and a few of the others come in. Colter and Elias mumble their hellos. Jason is being led into the room by a nurse, and then Daniel is pulling up the rear in his wheelchair with a permanent scowl. They get into their seats, and Dr. Kline walks into the room with a smile on her face. “Hey, everyone. I guess you all are excited about group today. Usually I’m the first one here.”

Everyone grumbles, and because I know the only way we’re going to get this going is if someone opens up, I open my mouth and let it all out. “I saw my best friend’s little sister last night. I’m going to see her daughter and parents today.”

“You mean Abby? Zach’s little sister?” Elias asks.

Jealousy flares in my chest even though I have no right, but just hearing another man say her name brings it out of me. Of course, Elias has heard about her. Through the years, both Zach and I have talked about her.

I nod my head at him. “Yeah, Zach’s little sister,” I say even though all the men in the room know that Abby is a grown woman.

Dr. Kline along with everyone else looks at me, and I realize that I need to give more information. “I served with Zach in the Army until we came to, uh, work with Walker. After the, uh, accident, I refused to see his family even though they’re the only real family I’ve ever known.”

Dr. Kline is nodding her head. “That’s good, Davis. I’m sure they’re glad to finally get to see you. Is there a reason you’ve put off the reunion for so long?”

In private therapy, we’ve talked about my history with addiction, so I know she knows about it. And even though the guys know, It’s not anything I want to talk about here in front of everyone, but I know that’s exactly what she wants me to

do. I shove my hand through my hair in frustration and grit my teeth. “I was addicted to Vicodin, hydrocodone, anything that could take the pain away. I didn’t want to subject her, her daughter, or her parents to me like that. Hell, I didn’t want to be around me like that.”

I look around the room, and the only one with their head up, looking me in the eye, is Dr. Kline. Even though I want to stop talking, I don’t. “Anyway, Abby came by my apartment yesterday, and she asked me to come see her family today.”

“How does that make you feel?”

I scratch my beard and think about the question. A year ago... hell, six months ago I would have rolled my eyes at that question and refused to answer. But after so much time spent talking about my feelings, I know that this is part of the process. “I feel good. Excited but nervous. Happy to see them again, but I can’t help but feel unworthy. What if I screw it up? What if I fall back into my old habits—”

Dr. Kline interrupts me. “You just have to take it one day at a time, Davis.”

I know she’s right, but that’s not what I want to hear. I want her to tell me I’m cured and that I can live a normal life—well, as normal as possible. But I know she can’t do that. I may never be able to live a normal life. There’s always going to be a shadow hanging over me, making me wonder if I’ll fall back into my addiction and let it completely suck me in this time until there’s no hope. I tense up just thinking about it.

Finally, the men and Rachel all lift their heads and look up at me. We’re all fighting our own demons, but I know every man—and woman—in here can relate to how I’m feeling right now.

Dr. Kline takes her glasses off and holds them in her hand. “Davis, I know it doesn’t feel like it, but it’s good that you feel this way. Those feelings—of letting someone you care about down, worrying about them more than yourself—those are not bad things to feel. But you have to let them work for you. Take those feelings and let them push you forward. Imagine the life you want and make it happen for yourself.”

I blink at her, unable to hold back the question. “What if I...”

I can't finish it though because this is probably what scares me the most.

Dr. Kline puts her glasses back on and tilts her head at me. “What if you fail? Is that what you were going to ask?”

I nod, unable to put my voice to the words.

She moves to the edge of her seat. “How are you feeling, Davis? Really?”

I shrug. “I still have pain in my upper leg, and it's a son of a bitch wearing the prosthetic. I'll think about how the medication will take the pain away, but then I'll think about the year of my life I wasted. How I was alone... I had no one.... And I know I don't want to go back there.”

Dr. Kline nods her head with a smile on her face. It's obvious she's pleased by what I said because she smiles, pointing at me. “And that right there is how you know you're not going to fail, Davis. Just in the month you've been here, I've seen a change in you, and now that you're letting loved ones in, that's just a step in the right direction. Don't lose sight of what you want and the things—and people—that are important to you. Lean on them... let them lean on you. You're strong enough to handle a lot more than you think you are. I know it. You just have to let yourself believe it.”

I suck in a breath, and my body shudders as I let it out. It feels good. Everything she said just feels right.

When I nod my head at her, she moves on around the room. As everyone takes their turn, excitement fills me.

As soon as group therapy is over, I go out to my car and drive across town before I can talk myself out of it.

School doesn't get out for another hour, but I'm hoping to talk to Brenda and Rick before Abby and Alexis get there.

As soon as I pull into the driveway, I'm out of the car. I probably should have called or something before coming over earlier than expected, but I have to get this out. Of all people, I

need to be honest with them, and if they turn me away, it will kill me, but I'll understand.

I knock on the door and take a step back. I swear I don't let out a breath until the door opens and Brenda smiles ear to ear, lets out a whoop, and practically knocks me over when she hugs me. She's laughing, crying, and rambling all at the same time. "Oh, my boy, I've missed you. God only knows how much I missed you."

I open my arms to her, and she wraps me in a hug. "Brenda, it's so good to see you."

She's completely fussing over me and reaches up to pull on my long hair. "Look at you. I can't believe you're here. Abby said you were coming, and I'm making all your favorites for dinner."

"Thank you," I tell her dumbly. I know there's so much I should be saying right now, but with her looking at me the way she is, I don't know if I'm going to be able to break her heart. She's going to be so disappointed in me. She and Rick both will be.

The front door opens again, and Rick is leaning against the frame. "Hey there, boy. It's about time you came home."

Brenda releases me, and I hold my hand out to Rick. He stumbles onto the porch with a cane in his hand, and instead of shaking my hand, he wraps me in a bear hug. He musses my hair like I'm a kid, even though I'm towering over him. "Come on in. Why you guys standing out here? Let him inside in the air conditioning, Brenda."

I stand back to let Brenda go in first, and then Rick waves for me to go in. "How's the hip doing?"

"I have nothing to complain about," he says.

I nod and stand awkwardly at the entryway. "I'm sorry for dropping in so early, but I wanted to talk to you before Abby and Alexis get here."

"Is it Zach? Is he okay?"

I put my hand on Brenda's shoulder. "He's fine. I talked to him two days ago, and he was giving me shi—" I cut myself off. "Sorry. He was giving me crap for not coming to see you all."

Rick grunts. "Good for him. We've missed you around here. Now what do you want to talk about?"

I open my mouth to speak, but Brenda puts her hand on my arm. "Well, we're not going to talk standing here. Let's go to the living room."

I walk into the living room and take it all in. It's exactly how I remembered it. Same pictures on the mantle, including the one of me and Zach when we were stationed in Afghanistan. There are new pictures of Abby and Alexis, but everything else is the same. When I sit on the edge of one couch, Brenda and Rick sit on the other one, facing me.

"All right, son, now what is it? Does this have something to do with why we haven't seen you in the last two years?"

I nod at Rick, grimacing. I know the best way to do it is to just get it all out. "When I was hurt, I didn't want anyone to see me like that."

Brenda smiles sadly. "Oh, we understand, Davis. We weren't mad about it or anything."

I take in a deep breath and let it out. "There's more. Zach didn't tell you because I begged him not to. I couldn't stand the thought of letting you down or disappointing you."

"You could never—" Brenda starts, but Rick interrupts her. "Let him talk, honey."

She purses her lips and nods her head. "Sorry, go ahead."

I run my hand through the scruff of my beard. "The pain was unbearable. It's not an excuse, but I just want you to understand..."

I stop, and Rick leans forward. "Just say it, son. We can handle it."

He's always done that. Called me *son*. I never realized how much it meant to me until these last two years. "I got hooked

on pain medicine. It was ugly, and I did things I'm not proud of. It pushed back my rehabilitation with my prosthetic and basically everything else. I was a mess."

Brenda, unable to hold back, asks, "Is that why you wouldn't see us the last two years?"

I nod. "Yeah, I didn't want to bring any of this to your family. For a year, I didn't even recognize what I'd become. I couldn't do that to Abby, Alexis, and you guys. I've been clean for a year."

Rick is watching me closely, and I'm not sure what he's thinking. "And now you're doing therapy at the new center at the edge of town?"

"Yeah. It was Zach's idea, actually. I was behind on therapy for my leg, and when he found out they required you to do mental therapy too, he thought it would be a good idea." I clear my throat. "Yeah, and Walker offered me a job too." I hold my hands up. "It's just temporary. I'm not sure how long I'll be here."

Rick just nods his head.

I push the hair off my face. "Anyway, I wanted to come here and talk to you about it. I understand if you don't want me around or if you think it's a bad idea for me to be around Abby and her daughter."

Brenda is shaking her head and seems beside herself. Rick is still staring at me quietly.

I put my hands on my knees. "If you want me to go—"

I'm about to get up when Rick's voice rings loud in the quiet room. "Sit down, son."

I stay where I'm at, unable to look either of them in the eye. This was a bad idea.

Rick is the first one to say something. "Look at me, Davis."

I raise my head to look at him, and he has so much compassion on his face, I'm sort of unnerved by it.

“We would never turn our backs on one of our kids. You went through hell, son.”

I shake my head. “But I’m not—”

He raises his hand up. “Stop. Don’t finish that sentence. You might as well be my son. Do you think of Zach as your brother?”

I nod. “Yes, sir.”

“And Brenda and I have always thought of you as part of our family. I’m sorry we weren’t there for you. We should have pushed harder. We should have made you see us.”

I wince thinking back on the days I spent in a stupor, not even knowing where I was half the time. My hands fist in my lap, preparing myself for the next question. “And Abby and Alexis? Are you okay with me being around the two of them?”

Brenda looks at her husband, and Rick’s eyes widen, so I continue, “Zach asked me to check in on them, but if that makes you uncomfortable—”

Rick stops me again. “I’m sure Abby will not be happy that her big brother thinks she needs looking out for, but yeah, son. We’re fine with you being around both Abby and Alexis. We know you, Davis. Maybe better than you know yourself. You would never hurt them.”

I nod my head because he is right about that. I would never hurt them. Brenda gets up, and I stand. She’s practically on her tiptoes to put her hand to my cheek. “Well, I’m glad that one of my boys is home. Now we need to get the other one here, and the family will be all back together again.” I don’t know what to say to her. I know she wants Zach home, but unless he’s changed his mind, he’s always talked about staying in.

“I need to start dinner. The girls will be here in a little while, and I promised to make fried chicken.”

“That’s my favorite.”

She laughs. “I know it’s your favorite. It’s Alexis’ too.”

Before she can walk away, I ask, “Abby said something about mowing the grass. You think I could do that before she

gets here?”

“Aww now, I can cut our grass. If someone hadn’t hidden the key, it would’ve been done already.”

Brenda takes the key out of her pocket and hands it to me. “Thanks, Davis. Afterwards, if you can put it on the trailer, that would be great. Abby’s going to take it and cut hers. Her lawn mower’s in the shop being serviced.”

“Absolutely,” I tell her. When she walks away, I turn to Rick. “If you really don’t want me to cut it, I won’t. But I was actually looking forward to it. It reminds me of when Zach and I would do it when we were here. I miss doing things like this.”

He sees right through me but shrugs his shoulders. “Go ahead. Thank you, Davis.”

I grip the key in my hand. “No problem. I’m happy to do it.”

I make my way to the garage, ignoring the pain in my leg where the prosthetic digs into my skin. With my hands on my hips, I take in deep breaths, relieved that I told them and they didn’t run me off. Now I just have to make sure I don’t fuck this up.

CHAPTER 5

ABBY

WHEN WE PULL INTO MY PARENTS' house and see Davis on my dad's lawn mower, I try not to stare. I really do. But how could I not? I was not prepared for shirtless Davis. It's been record high temperatures this past week, and I literally want to sit in my cold air-conditioned car just to cool myself down. Davis is built like no other man I've ever seen. He's a big guy, really big, in fact, and the way his muscles flex as he turns to wave at us has me swallowing hard.

When I get out of the car, all I can do is wave at him and hustle Alexis up the walkway and inside. Luckily, she's not asking a thousand questions because I already told her he'd be here today, so it's no surprise. The cold air hits me, but it's not enough. "Are you thirsty? I am. Let's get a glass of lemonade."

"Yummy! Lemonade," Alexis yells as she bounds to the kitchen. Thank goodness she has no idea what her mother is thinking right now. I try to pull myself together, but I'm fanning myself as I walk into the kitchen. My mom looks up as she finishes pouring Alexis a glass and smirks at me. "That Tennessee heat is a little hotter today, huh?"

"Scorching," I answer her as I take the glass.

I look out the window, and my dad is sitting on the back porch. "How's Dad doing?"

Mom laughs. "He's been following poor Davis around since he got here. We were both happy to see him today."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I don't have to because my mom says, "He told us... about the last two years. It makes me feel worse that we didn't force him to see us, but we can hopefully make it up to him now."

"I don't think he expects..."

She interrupts me. "Oh, I know he doesn't. He doesn't want anything from us, but maybe he should start. Your dad and I tried to explain to him that he's like family to us. We need to start acting like it."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, well, you're off to a good start. I mean, you already have him doing chores."

She laughs, and before I can stop, I'm laughing too. It doesn't take long until we're both laughing so hard Alexis is asking us what's so funny.

We hear the mower shut off, and Mom turns to Alexis. "Will you tell your papaw and Davis to clean up for dinner?"

Excited to be appointed to such an important job, Alexis runs out the door in search of her papaw.

After everyone is cleaned up—and Davis has his shirt back on—we sit down for dinner. The talk around the table revolves around Alexis, and eventually I have to put a stop to her asking a thousand questions.

"Thanks for dinner, Brenda. This is the best meal I've eaten in a long time."

My mom blushes at Davis' compliment. "Well, now, I'm hoping you come over more often. We still have Sunday dinner every week, and we'd love it if you come. And of course, if you have a lady friend, or any friends, for that matter, they're welcome. You know around here, the more the merrier."

I look at my mom with a pained expression. Did she really just encourage him to bring dates to dinner? Of course she did. Because she wants to make him feel welcome. There's no way I can sit across from him and a girlfriend. I blow out a breath and look at Davis. He's staring at me, and I try to smile to cover up my thoughts.

He's looking at me curiously, and I stare down at the plate in front of me. We make it through the rest of the meal, and when my mom brings out a plate of her famous chocolate chip cookies, Davis literally salivates.

Instead of eating a cookie, I lean back in my chair and watch him as he enjoys his dessert.

He points to the platter. "You not eating? I promise I won't eat them all."

I shake my head. "No, I'm going to pass. You enjoy them."

Alexis grabs a cookie and takes a big bite. "She's addicted to sweets."

"Alexis," I say with my face red.

She just shrugs. "What? That's what you always say. And then you talk about how when you eat something sweet, you can't lose weight."

My mouth drops open, and I stare at my beautiful daughter wide-eyed. Not only am I mortified to be talking about my weight in front of Davis, but I'm ashamed of myself. This is not what I want to be teaching my daughter. Not at all.

I open my mouth to try to explain, even though I'm not sure what I need to be saying to make things better when Davis turns in his seat. "You know what, Alexis?"

She takes another bite of her cookie. "What?"

"Your mom is perfect just the way she is. She's beautiful and doesn't need to change a thing."

Alexis just nods. "I know. I'm never going to give up cookies to lose weight. Cookies make me happy."

Everyone at the table laughs. I can feel my mom's eyes on me, but all I can do is look at Davis. He just said he thought I was beautiful.

There are a few different reasons why he could have said it, but it doesn't matter. He gave me something—and taught my daughter in the process. I mouth *thank you* to him and then look over at my dad. I need to get out of here and put some

distance between Davis and me. Already I can see myself completely falling for him, and that can't happen.

“Is it okay if I borrow your lawn mower? Mine is still in the shop.” I raise my hand. “And don't worry, I know now to have my lawn mower serviced in the winter instead of in the middle of mowing season. It's going to be another week before I get mine back, but my yard is starting to look like a jungle.”

My dad looks at me proudly. “Yes, you can still use it. Davis already put it up on the trailer and hooked it up to his truck.”

Alexis leans against Davis and smiles up at him. “Davis is coming to our house to mow the grass, Momma. I told him I'd show him where Uncle Zach is going to build my treehouse the next time he's home.”

With a smile on my face, I nod at Alexis. “Let's help Grandma clean up and we'll get going.”

Mom is already up out of her seat. “Davis, I'm going to send some leftovers with you, and I made an extra dozen cookies for you.”

“Thank you, Brenda. They won't go to waste, that's for sure,” he tells her as he rubs his flat stomach.

As everyone busies themselves cleaning up, I'm piling dishes. “Davis, you don't have to mow my yard. I didn't invite you over to take care of all of us.”

He stands up leans over to grab the serving plates off the middle of the table. He's so close, and our faces are inches apart. “What if I want to take care of you... and Brenda and Rick?”

I should be offended. I've taken care of myself for a long time, so why does my stomach do a little flip when he suggests it? “I appreciate what you're trying to do, I really do. But I don't want to be in your way.”

He straightens, putting distance between us. I should be able to breathe easier, but instead I'm missing being close to him. “What do you mean in my way?”

I shrug, holding the stack of plates in my hands. “You know... in your way of getting the rehab for your leg... or I’m sure you’re seeing someone, and you definitely don’t need to waste your time taking care of us.”

“I’m not,” he says.

I tilt my head to the side. I should let it go, but I know I can’t. “You’re not what?”

His gaze burns into mine. “I’m not wasting my time. And I’m not seeing anyone. I haven’t seen anyone since before the accident.”

My mouth falls open because it’s hard to believe that Davis is not seeing someone and hasn’t in over two years. Have the women of Whiskey Run lost their minds? He’s a catch. And if he’s been here a month, then he’s definitely had time to meet someone.

“And I would appreciate it if you’d let me mow your grass, Abby. I’d like to do something for you. Not because of your parents or because I’m best friends with your brother. I want to do it for you.”

Instead of asking him why, I suck in a breath, causing me to sound like I’ve been running instead of just standing here. “Okay. Thank you, Davis.”

He looks at me with satisfaction on his face. “Thank you,” he says with an emphasis on *you*.

He walks out of the dining room, and all I can do is stare after him. After all this time, the idea of spending time with Davis fills me with excitement. I tell myself not to get excited, but of course, I’m not going to listen. It’s hard not to imagine what could be when you’ve liked someone for as long as I’ve liked him. Way before I should have.

CHAPTER 6

DAVIS

I MOWED HER GRASS, played with Alexis, and now I'm sitting on her front porch, drinking sweet tea. I know I should leave. I don't want to wear out my welcome the first time I've come to her house, but something is keeping me from leaving.

Well, not something. I know exactly why I don't want to leave, and she's sitting next to me in the other rocking chair.

"You probably need to get Alexis in bed, huh?"

She sets her glass of tea on the table between us. "She has another hour before she has to be in bed. Right now, she's working on her math homework, and she'll probably be doing it for at least another thirty minutes."

I look in the screen door, and sure enough, Alexis is sitting at the dining room table leaning over a paper writing something. "She has that much homework in kindergarten?"

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, Davis. You're sounding just like my dad." She giggles and continues. "Alexis loves math. She asks her teacher for more homework, and even though she gives it to her, it's not enough. She has started creating her own math sheets and then does those too."

My mouth falls open. "Wow, you're raising a genius, Abby."

She laughs, but I can tell she appreciates the compliment. "I don't know about that, but she's pretty smart, that's for sure."

“How could she not be? She gets it from her momma.” I look around the yard that’s filled with a beautiful flower garden. She literally has a white picket fence surrounding the house, and her home is like a storybook. “I’m proud of you, Abby.” My eyes flare to hers. “I’m sorry. That must be weird for me to say.”

She sits up a little straighter, and her smile is tight. “No, it’s fine. I know what you meant. I was a teenage mom, and somehow my kid survived. Trust me, I understand, and I get it from people in town all the time. I guess people are surprised that I’m not pimping myself out on the street corner or something.”

I move to the end of the chair and lean toward her. “Abby, no, that’s not what I meant at all. I mean, you’re twenty-four. You’re a college graduate, a mom, a teacher. You have a home that is cozy. You love and respect your family, and you’re a great sister and a good friend. I know I’m an outsider looking in, but this life you’ve created is something else.”

She shrugs, but her eyes don’t leave mine. “It’s not that big of a deal, Davis.”

I reach over and put my hand on her arm and brush my fingers along her wrist. “It IS a big deal. It’s a really big deal, Abby. Trust me, the life you’re giving Alexis is everything. As someone that grew up without a mother or a father and moved homes every other month, what you’ve accomplished is amazing, and you shouldn’t discredit yourself. You’re amazing.”

She shudders a breath. “Davis.”

I know I said too much. It’s not like she doesn’t know the life I had, but I couldn’t just sit here and let her think what she has here isn’t special. Alexis is a lucky little girl—hell, anyone that is able to spend any time with Abby is lucky.

I squeeze her wrist and then force myself to let go of her. I stand up and move across the porch to lean against the column. With my arms crossed over my chest, I tell her, “I should probably get out of here. I have physical therapy early in the morning.”

She nods and gestures to my leg. “I hope everything you did tonight doesn’t cause you to be in more pain, Davis. I wasn’t joking earlier. I didn’t mean for you to come see us all and then work the whole time.”

I take one step down the porch and stop. “I know you don’t need me, Abby. You or your parents. But it felt good to be doing something for someone else... to feel useful again.”

She gets up from her chair and walks over, not stopping until she’s right in front of me. She’s leaning her head back to look up at me, and her hand goes to my waist. My muscles tighten at her touch, but she doesn’t seem to notice. “I like having you around, Davis.”

My hands fist at my sides. It’s either that or I’m going to reach for her and wrap my hand around her to bring her body flush to mine. My voice is strained. “Tonight was special, Abby, and it means a lot to be able to spend time with you and Alexis.”

She’s looking at me expectantly. She’s looking at me like she wants to be kissed. And I would give anything to lean down just the few inches needed to ravage her perfect, bowed mouth. Her tongue rolls across her lower lip in slow motion, and all I can do is watch. I bite back a groan, and because I know it’s the right thing to do, I put my hands on hers and remove them from my waist. I take a step away and drop her hands as I put some distance between us.

She crosses her arms over her chest, and I hate the look on her face, but I know I’m the one that put it there. “Anyway, thank you again, Davis. We really appreciate everything.”

She’s backing away from me and doesn’t stop until her back is to the door. “Can I come see you this week?”

She shrugs. “Sure, you know you’re welcome anytime. Plus, you know you have to come to dinner at Mom and Dad’s on Sunday.”

She has one hand on the door, and she’s stepped inside. It’s like she can’t wait to put some distance between us. She holds her hand up. “That reminds me. Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

She disappears inside, and while she's gone, all I can think is that I'm fucking this up. It's obvious she's into me. That's one of my favorite things about Abby. She's not going to beat around the bush, and you know where you stand with her. She isn't trying to play games or anything, and I know if I asked her out, she'd say yes. And even though I know I can't do it, I at least owe her an explanation. When she comes back, I'm going to tell her why she and I are a bad idea.

She walks out the front door carrying the bag of leftovers and cookies. "Thanks, I would have been missing those later."

She laughs, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Right. I know."

"Abby, I need to—"

I'm cut off when Alexis comes running out the door and dives for me. I brace myself for impact, and when she wraps her arms around my leg, she smiles up at me. "Bye, Davis. Mom said you are leaving."

I pat her softly on the head. "Yep, I'm going home."

Her lips pucker. "Are you coming back?"

I brush my hand through her hair. It's obvious that this little girl already has me wrapped around her finger because there's no way I can tell her no. Not with the way she's looking at me. "I already asked your mom if it was okay for me to come back and visit."

She squeezes my leg. "And I know she said yes. She likes you."

Even under the glare of the porch light, I can see Abby's cheeks turn pink. She puts her hand on Alexis' shoulder. "Okay, well, let's get you inside to get a bath. Davis needs to get home."

She squeezes my leg again, and I pat her on the back. "See you soon, Alexis."

She releases her hold, and her mom pulls her back. "Thanks again, Davis. Are you sure you don't want me to take

the lawn mower back to Mom and Dad's? I can put it in the garage."

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. I can drop it off on my way home."

She nods. "Okay, well, thanks again for everything. We'll see you soon."

I want to talk to her and try to explain. Ever since I put some distance between us, I can tell she's felt awkward, but I can't say anything right now. I hold up the bag. "Thanks for remembering. I'll talk to you ladies soon."

I turn and walk away, but it doesn't feel right. Even though I know it's not possible, I would give anything to be able to stay and spend more time with both Abby and Alexis. I thought I'd given up my fantasies of having a family of my own, but just one evening with Abby and her daughter and I'm already imagining what my life could be like.

The whole way home, I'm thinking about dinner with the Campbells, hanging out with Alexis, and then ending the night by sitting on the porch and talking to Abby. I've never felt so completely content in my life. It's as if I could sit there all night, every night, if I knew that I could spend it with them.

Out of habit, I massage my hand into my upper leg. The pain is real, but what is funny is how I almost forgot about it tonight. It felt like I was a man... instead of a cripple.

Later, when I get home, I get out of my truck and walk into my empty apartment, wishing that things could be different but knowing I'll never be able to get what I truly want. And that's Abby.

CHAPTER 7

ABBY

I'M JUST ABOUT to start the lesson on reading comprehension when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I never talk on the phone at school, but I do keep it handy in case of emergencies. I lift it out of my pocket and inhale sharply when I see my brother's name on the caller ID. I can't not answer it. All these crazy ideas pop into my head, and I know if something's happened and I don't answer it, I will never forgive myself.

I hit answer on the phone and bring it up to my ear. "Hey, Zach, hold on just one second," I tell him before he can get a word in. I then look to the class. "Okay, guys. This is an important phone call that I have to take. I need you to work quietly, and I'm going to step right out into the hall."

A few arms shoot up in the air, and I know what they're going to ask. I point to Julian in the front row because his hand was the first one I saw. "Julian, you're in charge. Please start a discussion on the chapter that we read last night. I'll be right back, class."

I walk out the door confidently, knowing that they'll be okay on their own. I have a good class this year. Of course, it could be that it's still the beginning of the year, and everyone's on their best behavior, but if nothing else, I'll be right outside. "Zach, you there?"

He chuckles. "So I'm a very important person, huh? I wish I was recording when you said that."

"Har, har, funny guy. What are you doing? You okay?"

He clears his throat. “Yeah, I’m good. I’m fine. I just wanted to check in and see how you’re doing.”

I pick at the chipped paint on my fingernail. “Right. That’s why you’re calling? It’s not because you’re wondering if I’ve seen your best friend or not?”

He laughs, and I can’t help but smile at the sound. Zach may be older than me, and I know that growing up I was like a thorn in his side, but now we’re closer than we’ve ever been. “You know me well. Okay, so did you go see Davis?”

I grip the phone tighter and try to keep my voice even. Zach may know I used to have a crush on his best friend, but he doesn’t need to know that the feelings are still there. “Yes, of course I went to see him. And he came over to Mom and Dad’s last night for dinner.” I leave out the part where he came to my house and that I practically mauled the man. My face heats just thinking about how I touched his chest last night on the porch. Obviously, I got carried away. I put my hand to my head just thinking about how he had to push my hands off him and then step away from me. Mortified doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“Were Mom and Dad excited to see him?”

I look in the window on the door to see my students, and Julian’s standing at the front of the class. It seems as if everyone is behaving, but I wait until a few of them see me watching them before I move away. “Excited? They were thrilled. But just so you know, Mom’s even more determined to get you home now. I believe her words were, ‘Now I just need my other boy home and we’ll have our whole family back together again.’”

“Shit.” He groans.

I laugh. “She loves you. She misses her baby boy.”

“Har, har, Abby. So what about you? What have you been up to?”

I roll my eyes, not ready to get into this conversation. “We’ll have to talk about my life another time. I need to get back into my classroom.”

He groans. “Puleeze, Abby Campbell. I know you better than anyone. We can discuss your life in about two seconds.”

“Really? You think so?”

There’s a loud noise on the other end and then a slamming of the door. “Absolutely. Because you don’t have a life.”

I shouldn’t care what he thinks, but of course I’m not going to just let that slide. “I have a life. I actually have a pretty busy life. You would be surprised by how many activities Alexis has.”

His tone is bored. “Oh, I know. Your six-year-old has more of a life than you do. Face it, Abby. You work, hang out with our parents, and take your daughter to all her things, and that’s it. You don’t go out with your friends—”

I interrupt him because even though he’s right about a lot of those things, I do have friends. “Uh, I do go out with my friends. My book club—”

He starts to cackle, and the sound is completely obnoxious. “My book club is great. We—”

He interrupts me again, and I try not to get mad. “You read books. You meet up with friends to read books.”

I look in my classroom again, and it looks like Julian completely has it under control. “We do more than read books, thank you very much. We’re actually going out this Friday night.”

“Do you want me to call Red’s Diner to reserve your favorite table for you?”

I grit my teeth. Yes, the book club meets at Red’s quite a bit actually. We’ve tried The Whiskey Whistler, but it was just too loud. I don’t want to be angry, but I am. I’m dealing with all these stupid insecurities, and Zach is not helping matters. What if Davis thinks the same thing about me? Shoot, who am I kidding? He probably does. “I’ll have you know that on Friday, I’m going out with my friends to The Club.”

He starts to laugh but then stops suddenly. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“No, I’m not joking. We’re going.”

He stutters. “To The Club? You’re going to THE club? The one in Jasper? That club?”

I should never have opened my mouth. I only did it because he was getting under my skin, but I should have kept my lips sealed. I blow out a breath, “Yes, THAT club. Our book club has talked about going for a while, but with Natalie and Ally having babies, we thought we should go. Of course, Natalie and Ally are not going. Beau and Austin are not having any of that. But Olivia and Chloe and I are going. I’ll be fine.”

He’s muttering, and I can’t make any sense of it. “Zach, I really have to go.”

“You know I always worry about you. Hell, now I’m probably going to be freaking out come Friday night.”

I roll my eyes. I swear, sometimes he acts like I’m still a child instead of a grown woman. But I do feel bad. I never want him to be thinking about me when he should be worrying about himself. I know what could happen if he was distracted on his job. “Bub, please don’t worry. I promise, I’ll be fine. Olivia’s cousin is an Uber driver, and she’s taking us there and picking us up. I’ll watch my drink, and I won’t go anywhere by myself. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

He’s quiet for so long I almost think he’s hung up. “Zach, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Please be careful, Abbs. You’re the only sister I got, and you’ve sorta grown on me.”

Instantly emotion wells inside me. Knowing what Davis let slip the other day about how my brother was the only one that escaped that mission physically unharmed still has me all in my feels. I suck back a sob. “Oh yeah, same to you, big brother. I’m sorta fond of you. Take care, okay? And Mom keeps saying you’re coming home soon. Alexis is all excited to see her uncle.”

“Fuck, I miss you guys. Okay, I’ll let you get back to class. Take care. Love you, sis.”

I barely get “Love you too” out and he’s hanging up.

I pocket my phone, take a deep breath, and make my way back into my classroom. I stand next to my desk and listen to the conversation around me. They’re comparing a popular song to last night’s chapter in the book. Julian looks at me, and I lean against my desk. “No, continue. I want to hear this.”

He excitedly turns to the class, and they keep talking. My thoughts sway to Davis and to my conversation with my brother, but I know I need to focus. I’ve already slacked on my job enough today, and even though this wasn’t the direction I thought class would go today, I am glad to see them critically thinking about the story.

I’ll have to think about Davis later tonight after school, after Alexis’ dance class and when I have some time to myself. Even now, just thinking about him causes my chest to feel funny, and there’s a pull in my lower belly. These symptoms are nothing new. I’ve felt them anytime I’ve ever thought about Davis, but maybe now that he’s here, and he’s obviously not interested in me, I can let those feelings go. It may take awhile, but I can always try.

CHAPTER 8

DAVIS

EVERY INCH of my body hurts. I've been at the rehab clinic all day. I went in knowing I needed to blow off some steam but not having any idea what all that would entail.

I first met with Dr. Kline and spent an hour talking about my feelings and all that shit. As a man who's always kept things bottled up inside, that was probably the hardest part of my day. After therapy, I made my way into the weight room. I thought I'd lift a few weights, but when I saw Kanan in there, I knew my workout was going to get more intense. We push each other, and when we started working out together, I found myself lifting heavier weights and doing more reps. I'm sure we were a sight. I could do heavy on arms and chest where Kanan has the ability to go heavy on legs. We worked side by side, and even though neither one of us said much, I feel like we got therapy out of it. At least when we're done and I'm walking out of the clinic drenched in sweat, I feel good. I feel really good.

I dig my phone out of my bag and am looking at the screen as I walk to my truck. I have five missed calls from Zach. I check my text messages, and sure enough, there's some from him too.

Hello! Call me.

Really dude? You can't sleep your life away. Get up.

Should I be worried? It's now in the afternoon and I know your ass is up. Where you at?

You better call soon or I'm going to have my dad come over and bring his Euchre cards.

I laugh out loud. Zach, his dad, and I have spent hours upon hours playing Euchre, and the man is lethal. He's way more competitive when it comes to his favorite card game.

I punch the button on the phone and call Zach.

When he answers, he doesn't even say hello. "Finally. Where the hell you been? I thought I was going to have to put in a missing persons report or something."

"Zach. It's literally three o'clock in the afternoon. What's up?"

"Where have you been?" he asks.

I pull the phone away from my face and look at it. In all the time I've known Zach, he's never been on me about what I'm doing. Unless... "Shit, dude, if you think I'm using, I'm not. I had therapy this morning, and I've been in the gym for hours. I'm just now leaving the rehab center."

"Fuck, man, I didn't think you'd been using."

I laugh because I don't believe him. "Right... Is that why you texted and called me a thousand times? You want me to believe you just wanted to chat?"

He blows out a breath. "Okay, look, I talked to my sister this morning, and she freaked me out a little. And then when I couldn't get a hold of you, I thought for sure you'd skipped town and you're over the small town life."

I stop next to my truck and lean back against it. "What about Abby?"

I hold my breath waiting for his response. Is he pissed because I've been spending time with his sister? Does he somehow know the thoughts I've been having about her?

Zach's voice is laced with frustration. "Shit, I'm sorry, man. I'm not even thinking right. How was therapy? You

doing okay?”

I ignore his question and ask my own. “What do you mean your sister freaked you out?”

I probably shouldn’t act interested, but I’m automatically thinking the worst. Did something happen to Abby? Alexis?

He sighs loudly into the phone. “I thought you were going to keep an eye on my sister.”

I bang my fist against the side of my truck. “Zach, what the fuck happened to Abby?”

He sucks in a breath. “Nothing. I mean nothing yet. Who knows what’s going to happen to her on Friday. I mean anything can happen—”

“What the fuck are you talking about? What’s happening Friday?”

“I tell you, I know she’s an adult, and I know she can take care of herself. She can usually hold her own, but... she’s still my little sister.”

I cut him off. “Quit your rambling, Campbell. I’m going to ask again. What. Is. Happening. Friday?”

He blurts it out in one breath. “She’s going to The Club.”

I think about Whiskey Run and try to remember if I’ve seen a dance club or something here. I don’t recall seeing one. “What club?”

I’m about to tell him I can’t imagine it’s a big deal. If it’s in Whiskey Run, I’m sure she’ll be okay.

“Brother, you don’t get it. She’s going to THE CLUB. It’s a... shit, I hate to even say it... a sex club.”

I rise to my full height, pushing away from the side of my truck. “What the fuck? She’s going to a sex club? Are you sure?” I ask him because I can’t imagine sweet Abby going to a sex club. And what exactly does that even mean? “What kind of sex club is this? I mean, hell, is that even legal here in Whiskey Run? I can’t imagine locals would put up with that kind of thing.”

I'm sure he's mistaken. Abby's not going to a sex club. Why would she?

Zach starts to ramble, and I hold the phone tightly, trying to focus on what he's saying. "The Club is in Jasper. Downtown Jasper. It's an invite-only thing, and it's a place for people to explore their sexual fantasies. Since she told me she was going, I've done all kinds of research, and I haven't found any negative reviews, but Davis, you know my sister. She doesn't belong in a place like that."

I run my hand over the scruff on my chin. I'm not going to mention to him that I'm half hard right now thinking about Abby exploring her sexual fantasies. I clear my throat as guilt fills me. "It doesn't make sense. Why would she tell you she's going there? Maybe she said that just to get you riled up. I mean, she had to know how you'd react. Why would she tell you that?"

I've already half convinced myself that there's no way she's going to a sex club when Zach drops his bombshell. "It's my fault. I know it is. Dammit, I was making fun of her for having no life, and she told me that she and her book club girls had been planning a visit to the club."

I ram my hand through my hair. It's starting to make sense now. Yeah, a sex club doesn't really sound like Abby, but also it's obvious that she's a little insecure about the life she's built for herself. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it," I tell him.

When I tell him that, it should be enough. And in most cases, it would be, but I have to remember we're talking about his little sister. He seems uneasy. "What does that mean, you'll take care of it?"

"I'll take care of it."

Zach starts to hem and haw around and finally spits it out. "Davis, we can't not let her go."

I set my phone on the hood of my truck and push the speaker phone button. "What the fuck do you mean we can't NOT let her go? I thought that was the whole point of you

calling me. You don't want your sister to go, so she won't go." I don't include the part where I don't want her to go either.

Silence again.

"Zach, just say it."

His voice is gruff. "If you stop her from going, she'll never forgive me. It will embarrass her in front of her friends, and honestly, she does need to have a life of her own."

As he starts to backtrack, my heart starts to race. There's no way I'm going to just stand by while Abby goes to some kind of sex club. "Okay, so I'll go. When is she going? Friday night, right? I'll be there."

I can hear the shock in his voice. "You? You're going to go to a sex club?"

I'm already tense just thinking about it. It's not like it's my kind of thing, at least I don't think so, but I've never been to one before. "Yes, what choice do I have? Your sister is going to some club where I'm sure there's some horny bastard that thinks he's got a chance. I'm going to shut that shit down."

"Uhhhh..." he starts, but I interrupt him.

"I know she needs to get out and have a good time, but there's no way she should be drinking at a place like that. Not without someone there to keep an eye on her. So yeah, I'm going to the fuckin' sex club."

"Uh, Davis, do you remember me saying that I don't want to embarrass her in front of her friends? I don't want my sister to hate me."

"I'm not going to embarrass her," I tell him, but it's obvious he doesn't believe me.

"I don't know about this. Abby's smart, and she said they have a designated driver. Maybe I should just trust that she's going to be okay."

I lean down closer to my phone, crossing my arms and leaning on the hood. "Fuck that, man. You're there and I'm here. Yeah, Abby's smart, but there's going to be all kinds of dumb dicks there. I'm going, and that's all there is to it."

Zach bursts out into a laugh. “Dumb dicks?”

I’m mad now and not in a laughing mood. “Yes, dumb dicks. You know those assholes that think just because she’s there, she’s up for anything. Dumb dicks.”

Finally, I get Zach’s approval. “Fine. I appreciate you doing this. I know you have better things to do than taking care of my little sister—”

“Forget it. It’s not a big deal. So when are you coming home?”

I change the subject because I don’t want to keep talking about this. I’m this close to telling my best friend that I want his little sister, and I know that’s not a conversation to be had over the phone.

“Soon. But don’t tell my mom or my sister, for that matter. I don’t want to disappoint them if it doesn’t work out.”

We talk for a few more minutes, and when we say goodbye, I push the end button on my phone and then start to pace back and forth in front of my truck. I worked out for hours already, but right now, I feel like I could go some more. With adrenaline pumping through my veins, I grab my phone and my bag and walk back to the facility because the punching bag is calling my name. I have to let off some steam one way or another, and I know exactly how I’m going to do it. I’m going to act like the bag is every dumb dick that I know is going to be looking at Abby Friday night. *Fuck me, how the hell am I going to survive this?*

CHAPTER 9

ABBY

“I’M NOT GOING.”

That’s what I say as soon as I open my door on Friday night and find Chloe, Olivia, and Jessie standing on my front porch.

Jessie turns to Olivia. “You’re still paying me, though. You already reserved me for the whole night. You can’t cancel now.”

Olivia ignores her cousin and pushes her way inside my door. “Oh, you’re going. Ally and Natalie already bailed. The three of us are going.”

Jessie huffs her breath. “What am I? Mincemeat? You mean the four of us.”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “You’re not old enough to get in. Plus, Aunt Julia would kill me if I took you there. You’re dropping us off.”

Jessie brushes her long hair off her shoulder. “And then what? I’m sitting in the car the whole night? Really? Why’d you tell me to dress up?”

Olivia glares at her. “Jessie, you’re an Uber driver. That’s what drivers do.”

Jessie crosses her arms over her chest and stares at her cousin.

Olivia shakes her head and smirks. “Fine, it was supposed to be a surprise. You’re dropping us off, but Eric is taking you for a late dinner at the fancy place next door.” Jessie starts to

bounce excitedly when she hears that her boyfriend is taking her out, and Olivia grasps her by the shoulders. “But you’re still our designated driver. You have to get us home.”

She squeals. “Promise. What’s the name of the restaurant? I’m going to look it up. Should I act surprised with Eric?”

Olivia points to the living room. “Yes, it’s a surprise, so act surprised. It’s called Seasons 105. Now can you have a seat so I can help my girl here on her little meltdown?”

Jessie looks at me, nods, and then walks into the living room.

Now that both Chloe and Olivia are staring at me, I’m about to explain when Chloe says, “I’m not going if you’re not going.”

Olivia puts her hands on each of our shoulders. “Ladies, you’re both going.” She looks at me in my shorts and T-shirt. “But you definitely can’t wear that.”

I pull at the hem of my shorts. “I can wear this because I’m not going. It’s not a good idea, Olivia. I’m a schoolteacher. What if I see someone I know there?”

She’s pushing me down the hallway. “Is Alexis over at Brenda and Rick’s?”

I nod as I stomp my feet toward my bedroom. “Yep, they picked her up a little while ago.”

Olivia doesn’t stop pushing until I’m standing in front of my closet. “Good. Even though I’d like to have seen her, I know she doesn’t need to hear my mouth. Think about what you just said. If you see someone you know there? That means you’re both there... at a sex club. It’s going to be awkward for them too, and do you think they’re going to go back to the fuckin’ PTO and tell them they saw you at The Club?” She turns me by the shoulders so I’m looking at her. “No, of course not. Now look. You’re going. We’re all going. We’ve talked about this since it opened last year, and we’re doing it. We’re just going to see what it’s about, and then we’ll leave.”

I purse my lips together and look at Chloe. She’s smiling softly and nodding her head, and even though I’m a little

scared about it, I know I'll regret it if I back out now. "Fine. What am I going to wear? You two look great, by the way."

They're both in short dresses with skinny straps. They look beautiful, and I don't know why I'm worried anyway. If I go with them, no one is going to be looking at me. "I was thinking I'd wear the black dress pants and my white button-up." I pull the pants and shirt from the closet and hold it in front of me. "What do you think?"

Chloe is frowning at me, and Olivia groans before pulling the clothes from my hand. She pushes me to the side and puts the clothes back into the closet. She aggressively shoves the clothes around as she mumbles to herself. Chloe and I look at each other and smile. That's Olivia for you. She's bold and upfront about things. You never have to wonder where you stand with her because she'll for sure tell you, but she's also one of those people that if she likes you, she'd do anything for you. Even give you the shirt off her back.

I clear my throat. "Okay, Olivia, what do you suggest I wear?"

She turns and looks at me. "Hold on. I'll be right back."

She stomps out of the room, and I look at Chloe. "Where is she going?"

Chloe shifts from foot to foot, appearing uncomfortable. "So, uh, she brought a bag."

"A bag? What do you mean a bag?"

She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. "A bag full of makeup, clothes, I'm pretty sure I even saw a wig in there."

My mouth falls open. "I'm not wearing a wig."

I hear the front door slam, and Olivia steps into the bedroom as I repeat what I told Chloe. "I'm not wearing a wig."

She grimaces at Chloe. "Snitch."

Olivia drops the bag on the bed and then lays the clothes over her arm next to the bag. She starts pulling things out. There's makeup, curling wands, and yes, even wigs.

She picks up the first dress and holds it up to me. “Nope.”

Then the next one. “Nope.”

She then puts up the third one in front of me and pauses as she looks me up and down. “Perfect.”

“It’s red.”

She nods and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I know that. And red will look perfect with your dark hair, green eyes, and olive complexion. Go put it on.”

I take the dress, still holding it to me, and turn to look in the mirror. She’s not wrong; red does make my hair and eye color pop. “But it doesn’t come to my knees.”

“Geez, I hope not,” she says as she smacks me on the ass. “Go on, get dressed. I need to do your hair and makeup.”

I start to walk into the bathroom. “Fine, but I’m not wearing a wig.”

“The wigs are mine. I like to keep people guessing. Now go on, get ready so we can go. I’m ready to get my freak on.”

I’m laughing as I shut the door and start to undress. I’ve almost talked myself out of this a thousand times this week, but it doesn’t look as if there’s any way Olivia is going to let me back out.

I put on the dress ready to hate it. Yeah, the color is good, but I thought for sure it would be too tight or show every bump and lump I have. I turn side to side and then back to front. I look... good. The neck is a little low cut, but nothing too bad. The bodice is fitted down to my waist and then flares out. I fluff the short skirt and giggle as I do a little spin.

“Get out here, Cinderella.”

I take a deep breath and open the door before ducking my head out. “Okay, so I’m just going to say it.” Both Olivia and Chloe are looking at me expectantly. I step out the door and point down at myself. “I mean, I look good. Right?”

They both gasp and circle around me.

“It’s perfect. You’re so beautiful.” Chloe exclaims, clapping her hands together.

Olivia is nodding her head. “It’s perfect. Now sit down and let me do your hair and makeup.”

I put my hand out to stop her. “Nothing crazy, Olivia.”

She cocks her hip out and puts her fist there. “Really? You know I do this for a living, right?” She grabs a brush and starts running it through my hair. I can feel pain as she tugs it, and I know I’d better smooth things over, or I’m going to be hurting. “You’re right. I’m sorry. You’re a master when it comes to hair and makeup.”

I smile up at her, and she pauses mid brush and stares me down. “And fashion obviously.”

I try to hide my smirk. “Of course, and fashion too.”

Satisfied, she nods her head and gets back to working on my hair. Chloe sits down on the bed and is scrolling through her phone. I can hear Jessie in the living room, talking on the phone, and Olivia is quiet as she works on curling my hair. Lost in my own thoughts, I start to think about Davis and wonder what he’s doing tonight. I haven’t seen him since Sunday, and I am a little disappointed. He had mentioned stopping by this week, and as each night went by, I couldn’t stop myself from wondering what he’s been doing and how he’s been feeling.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. I need to quit thinking of him because I’ve spent more time doing it than I probably should be.

“What’s that sigh about?” Olivia asks me.

Instead of answering, I ask her, “You almost done? We need to get there, right?”

She gently taps me on the shoulder with the back of the brush. “You can’t rush my work.”

She sets the brush aside and then moves to the front of me. “Beautiful. You really don’t need much makeup. I’m going to do a red lip and add some mascara.”

With her comment stuck in my head, I pucker my lips while she does her thing. I may be thinking about Davis tonight, but no one else needs to know that. I'm going to have a good time, one way or another.

CHAPTER 10

DAVIS

I SIT in the corner of the bar area, and my eyes are glued to the front door. Zach didn't know what time Abby was coming tonight, so I've been here since the doors first opened. The waitress was giving me dirty looks when I nursed the same soda for the first hour I was here. She comes over to me again with a firm look. "Hey, I'm sorry, but my boss is going to give me crap if you're not drinking. There's a two-drink minimum..."

Her voice trails off, and her eyes won't meet mine. I'm sure it's because I'm a big guy that looks rough around the edges. I lift up a little and pull my wallet from my back pocket. I open it and pull out a hundred-dollar bill. "I don't drink, but I'll pay for the drinks. The rest is for you if you let me sit here for awhile."

Her eyes widen, and she nods. When she takes the bill from my hand, she tucks it into her apron. "Stay as long as you like." She starts to walk away but stops. "Have you been here before?"

I shake my head, and she nods. "Okay, well, you've found the bar area. The rest of the club is where the action is." She points to a menu folder sitting in the middle of the table. "There's a menu there that talks about each area and what you can find where. If you have any questions, just wave me down."

I grunt, "Thanks."

She nods. "I'll make sure your soda stays filled. If you need anything else, just call."

"Thanks," I repeat.

My eyes are back on the door before she even walks away. The Club is not what I expected. It's probably judgmental of me, but I expected to see naked bodies everywhere, tacky velvet decorations, and the smell of sex and bad decisions.

First of all, I had to work all week to even get an invitation. When all else failed and I was completely desperate, I contacted Walker. He's well known in Whiskey Run and Jasper. He wasn't comfortable with getting me an invite until I told him why I wanted one. But even then, The Club had to do a background check, and I had to sign an NDA. There was more paperwork when I got here, and I had to leave my phone in a locker at the front.

The bar area is clean, and everything is high-end black and gold with huge chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. I cross my arms over my chest and squint into the darker room, waiting to see Abby walk in the front door.

It seems like I've sat here forever when she finally comes in. My mouth falls open when I see her in the tight red dress that accentuates her curves. She laughs at something one of her friends says and brushes her long hair off her shoulder. She's breathtaking.

I'm on the edge of my seat, ready to get up and follow her wherever she goes, but I relax when she sits down across the room. She looks around, and I wait for her eyes to land on me, but they don't. I wanted to go unnoticed, at least that was the plan, but right now, I want her eyes on me and only me.

The waitress walks over to their table, and I watch Abby listen to her spiel. She talks and laughs, and I wish I was closer so I could hear her.

The longer I sit here, the more comfortable I get. Maybe she doesn't plan to go to any of the rooms. It would be great if she sits here all night.

I keep my eyes on her, and it's then that I notice three men that are hovering at a table close to them. One woman that's with Abby waves the men over, and I tense again, scooting my chair back, ready to go to her if she needs me.

They're all talking, and my eyes are glued on Abby. As soon as the frown appears on her face, I'm on the move. My limp is exaggerated after the workouts I've had this week, but I'm not going to let it slow me down. I have no idea what I'm going to say because I told myself I was going to keep a safe distance, but I want her to feel safe. Right now, that's what is important.

When I get close, I hear the red-haired woman laugh. "Sorry honey, we're not interested. We're here to have a good time."

One of the guys moves closer to her. "Oh, no worries there. We can show you a good time."

"Again, we're not interested."

The man starts to say something as I stop next to the three guys, putting myself between them and Abby. "She said they're not interested. Move on."

The guy turns to me, and when he has to lean his head back to look up at me, I stare down at him with a grimace. I widen my stance to be ready in case he and his friends get stupid, but they slowly start to retreat.

I turn to Abby, and her mouth is hanging open. "Davis? What are you doing here?"

"Davis! Zach's friend? That Davis?"

I ignore her friend, and so does Abby. She points at the two other women. "This is Olivia and Chloe. Guys, this is Davis. My brother's best friend."

"Well, well, well," the redhead says.

"Hi," I grunt at them and swing my gaze back to Abby. "You okay?"

She nods, and the one named Chloe says, "Hey, Abby, Olivia and I are going to walk around. You good here, or you

want to come with us?”

She looks at her friends and back at me. “I’m going to hang here for a minute.”

Her friends grab their drinks and giggle as they walk away. I nod my head at Abby. “You care if I sit down?”

She points at the chair, and I slide it closer to her before I sit down. “You didn’t answer me. You okay?”

Confusion fills her face. “Okay? Yeah, I’m okay. What are you doing here, Davis?”

I lean across the table. “Don’t be mad.”

All at once, the expression on her face drops. “Zach.” She puts her hand to her forehead and shakes her head. “Of course! Zach sent you here.” She leans back in her seat, putting some distance between us. “Well, you can go. I’m a grown woman, and I don’t need my brother—or his best friend—to watch me like I’m some child or something. Oh my God, I’m so mortified.”

I reach for her, and she jerks back. I let my hand fall to the table as I plead with her. “Don’t be mad. It’s not like that. Trust me, I know you’re a grown woman. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I didn’t know anything about this place, and there’s no way I could have stayed away, knowing you were here.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, and I hate seeing the hurt on her face. “I’m sorry, Davis. I’m sorry that Zach got you involved. I’ll talk to him and make sure he understands that he shouldn’t have done this. I’m not your responsibility.”

I scoot my chair closer to her, and this time when I reach for her, she doesn’t pull away. “Abby, will you listen to me? And then if you still want me to go, I will.”

When she doesn’t respond, I plead with her. “Please?”

She nods, and I take the hand that’s clasped to her chest and hold it between the two of mine. “Yes, Zach told me about you coming here tonight, but he didn’t ask me to come. When he told me you were going to be here, I told him I would be

too. He said he didn't want me to embarrass you, and I promised him I wouldn't, but I had to come. I couldn't stay away."

She huffs out a breath and shakes her head. I rub my thumb along her wrist. I shouldn't be touching her, but the temptation is too hard to resist. "Yes, I'm your brother's best friend, and I'd do anything for him. But I'm here for you. I needed to know that you're okay."

Her face softens, and she blinks at me. I squeeze her hand a little tighter, hoping she gives me the answer I want. "Now I can leave if that's what you want me to do, but I'd like to stay with you." I hold one hand up. "But I won't interfere with anything you want to do. I just want to make sure you make it home safe."

She's shaking her head. "Davis, I know you have other things to do—"

I cut her off. "I want to be here."

She looks around the room that is starting to fill up. "Is this your kind of thing?"

I lean toward her. "I've never been to a place like this before, but if you'll let me, maybe we can explore it together."

Her voice is thick with emotion. "What do you have in mind?"

I reach for the menu on the table, open it, and lay it down on the table in front of her. "Check it out. Does any of this interest you?"

She peers down at the menu and then looks up at me. "Excuse me, Mr. Jones. Are you asking me what kind of sexual fantasies I have?"

My whole body heats. I would like to take her out of here and be alone with her while she explores those fantasies, but I know it's not possible. Instead of answering her, I point to the book. "Pick something."

CHAPTER 11

ABBY

I STARE DOWN at the white pages with black lettering. The words are a blur because all I can think about is sitting this close to Davis with my hand in his. Does he realize he's still holding mine and rubbing his thumb across my wrist? It's nowhere near cold in here, but goosebumps travel up my arm, and I shiver.

“You okay?” he asks.

I nod and focus on the book. “The Velvet Room.”

When I raise my eyes to his, I tell him again, “I'm going to go to the Velvet Room.”

I pull my hand from his and start to get up, and he does too. “You care if I go with you?”

I start to talk, and he has to lean down to hear me. “You don't even know what the Velvet Room is... maybe it's not your thing.”

He runs his hand up and down his flat belly. He always looks good, but tonight he's wearing black jeans and a long-sleeved black button-up, making him look even more mysterious and manly. “You think I won't like it?”

I shrug. “I'm not sure.”

He huffs out a breath. “I'd like to go with you.”

I turn to walk away and am pleased to find out that he's waiting for me to ask him to come along. Once I'm a few steps away, I turn to look at him. “You coming?”

He walks toward me, and I ignore the unsteady gait of his walk. I know he doesn't want my sympathy. I lead the way, following the signs. There's someone standing outside the door, and she stops us. "Welcome to the Velvet Room. We ask for complete silence in there. You can watch the couple, but you cannot touch." She laughs. "I mean, you can touch each other, but you can't touch the performers."

I feel Davis' hand at my lower back, and when the woman opens the door, he guides me into the darkened room. I almost bump into someone, and Davis pulls me against him. He guides us through and stops when we're standing next to the oversized bed in the center of the room. There's a rope around the bed, letting people know how close they can get. I know that my eyes are about to bug out of my face as the couple is sitting on the bed, fully clothed, kissing.

Davis puts his hand on my chin and tilts my head up so I'm looking at him. "You okay?" he whispers to me.

I nod, and he releases his hold on my face. When he starts to move, I grab his hand.

He squeezes mine and positions himself behind me, pulling my back to his chest. I should release my hold on him, but there's a comfort of having my hand engulfed by his.

I turn back to the couple in front of us, and all I can do is stare. When the man's voice is loud in the room, I startle. "Take your clothes off. I want to see you."

My nipples pucker at the command in the stranger's voice.

The woman is plus size, and I wait for hesitancy or insecurity, but I don't see any. There's no doubt that the man finds her attractive. He can't take his eyes off her. I watch as the woman undresses, and she doesn't stop until she's completely naked. I look around the room, and even though it's dark, every eye is focused on the couple. "Turn around. I want to see all of you," the man says, and I turn back to watching the couple.

The woman turns her back to the man, and what surprises me is the smile on her face. She's enjoying this. All the people

in the crowded room have their eyes on her and the way she tilts her head, pulls her shoulders back and carries herself. She's confident and sexy.

I didn't realize I was doing it, but I'm leaning into Davis, and his arms come around me, his fingers latching together under my breasts. He leans down and whispers in my ear, "Is this okay?"

I turn my head slightly, and I'm so close, I could press my lips to his, but I don't. "Yeah," I mutter.

I burrow into him, and his hands tighten around me. His hardness is pressed to my back. I shift from one foot to the other, and that's when I feel it. I freeze, and I feel Davis do the same behind me. Is that what I think it is?

I have to know. I shift again, arching my back, pressing my ass out, and sure enough, I can feel Davis' hard length pressed against my lower back. Now that I feel it, I can't unfeel it. Davis doesn't pull me in any closer, but he doesn't push me away either.

The man in front of us gets up and presses his hand to the woman's shoulder. He runs his fingers along her collarbone, and I suck in a breath when they go over the sensitive skin beside her breast but don't really touch her. I can see her physical reaction to it by the way her body shudders. He brushes his hand down to her waist and grips her hips. "Kiss me, darling."

My breath starts to come out in little pants as the couple kisses. It starts as a slow progression, but then he practically consumes her. It's as if he can't get enough. His hands are everywhere, worshipping her.

When they move to the bed, I can feel my whole body heat. Watching them is like nothing I've ever done before. I try to control my breathing, and when the heat doesn't subside, I almost bring my hand up to fan myself but instantly drop it because I don't want to draw attention to myself. The man flips the woman onto her back, pushes her thighs apart, and leans down to kiss her between her legs. It's too much; all of

this is too much. I turn in Davis' arms, and he leans down instantly, looking at me with concern on his face.

I tug at the front of his shirt. "Can you get me out of here?"

He doesn't hesitate. He grabs my hand and leads us to the exit. Once we're in the hallway, he pulls me in front of him and puts a hand on each side of my face. "You okay, Abby? Talk to me."

I nod my head. "Yeah, geez, how embarrassing. I started getting really hot, and I thought I was going to pass out. I'm sorry. If you want to go back in there, I can wait right here."

There are a few people walking by, and he moves closer to me. "I'm not leaving you."

I'm taking deep breaths, trying to suck air into my lungs. His hand is heavy as he rubs up and down my back.

I take a deep breath and count to ten. When I feel a little calmer, I ask him, "Do you think you can take me home?" Before he answers me, I continue, "I mean, I can ask Olivia, but I don't want her and Chloe to call an early night just because of me."

He grabs my hand and starts walking down the hall. He doesn't stop until we're all the way downstairs and standing at the lockers. He grabs his phone out of one and turns the key in to the attendant. He holds his hand out, and I put my key in his palm.

After looking at the number, he walks down the aisle, gets my phone out, and then turns that key in too.

After handing me the phone, he says, "You want to text them in case they're ready too?"

I point to the lockers. "No, their phones are in there. I'll call Jessie. She's Olivia's cousin and driving for us tonight."

I call her and explain that I have a ride home. After an "Ooh, girl, get it" comment, I hang up with my face flaming.

"You good?" Davis asks. He looks worried, and I nod my head quickly to assure him.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

He leads me to his truck and helps me in.

It’s not until we’re halfway to Whiskey Run before he asks me, “You going to tell me what happened back there?”

I turn in my seat. “I told you that I got too hot.”

He’s staring straight ahead. “So I guess The Club is not your thing, huh?”

“Actually, I really enjoyed it.” He opens his mouth, but I stop him. “I can see why you think I didn’t, but I did. I was enjoying it, but I’m glad that we left when we did.”

He looks at me curiously. “Why?” His hands tighten on the steering wheel, and his jaw tightens. “If you liked it, why did you want to leave? Did I make you uncomfortable?”

I’m about to reach for his arm to reassure him, but instead, I let my hand fall on the console between us. “You didn’t make me feel uncomfortable at all. If anything, I felt more at ease with you being there.”

He nods his head, his eyes on the road in front of us. “But…” he starts and then stops.

I wait for him to continue, but when he doesn’t, I ask him, “What is it? What were you going to say?”

CHAPTER 12

DAVIS

WE'RE DRIVING along the straightaway between Jasper and Whiskey Run. I turn my head to look at Abby. Her eyes are wide as she stares back at me, and I'm still trying to figure out what happened back there. She wasn't having a panic attack; I've seen plenty of those, and that wasn't one.

I shouldn't ask, but I can't stop myself. "What did you like about it?"

She looks down and fiddles her hands together. "Uh, I liked how confident she was. I couldn't imagine undressing like that for one man, let alone a room full of people. I liked the way the man looked at her. He was worshiping her with his eyes. He literally looked as if he was in pain until he got to touch her. And you could tell it wasn't a show; he was obviously into her. Heck, everyone was into her." She pauses for a minute and then murmurs huskily, "You were."

I shrug. "She was pretty."

She blurts out a laugh. "Pretty? You thought she was pretty? So you have that kind of reaction to a woman that is pretty?"

I knew eventually we would have to talk about it. I knew she felt my erection pressed into her back. I could dispute her claim and tell her exactly why I had the reaction I did, but I'm not ready to admit to that yet. Instead, I change the subject. "So you were enjoying it but you wanted to leave."

I turn on the road that leads to downtown Whiskey Run, and we're just minutes from Abby's house. I'm dreading it,

because I want to spend more time with her.

She sits back and leans her head on the seat. “I don’t know how to explain it. I felt hot all over, my heart was racing, my belly felt funny. Geez, I’ve never.... Forget it.”

I turn onto her road and sit up a little straighter. Just listening to her talk, I’m hard. The way she’s talking about it with her voice husky has me thinking all kinds of things.

“No, I’m not forgetting it. Tell me.”

I pull into her driveway, park the car, and turn in my seat to look at her. “Talk to me. You’ve never what?”

She still has her head leaned back on the chair and is staring at the ceiling of the truck. Her eyes are clenched, and she groans. “I lost my virginity the night I conceived Alexis. I didn’t know it then, of course, but even though we’d dated for a while, Wayne wanted my virginity, and that was it. Then I was pregnant and well, I haven’t dated anyone since then. I mean, I’ve dated but not... you know. God, this is so embarrassing. I think, I don’t know, I thought I was having an orgasm, which is weird, right? That’s not possible.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. *She’s your best friend’s little sister. She’s your best friend’s little sister.* I keep repeating that to myself in my head. “Abby, are you telling me that you’ve never had an orgasm before?”

She finally lifts her head and turns to look at me. She’s staring at me wide-eyed, and I know the answer before she even opens her mouth. “No, I mean, never with someone else. Of course I’ve tried by myself, but I’ve never been able to get there. At least I don’t think I have. Does that make sense?”

Speechless, all I can do is stare at her. Abby is twenty-four years old. She’s a sexy, curvy woman that should have men falling to their knees to be with her, and she’s telling me that she’s never had an orgasm.

When I say nothing, she clenches her eyes shut, shakes her head, and reaches for the door. “Shoot, you must think I’m a freak. I’m sorry. Look, thank you for tonight. Thanks for getting me out of there when you did... Can you imagine if I’d

had an orgasm right there in front of everyone? Of course, it probably wouldn't have happened because I'm frigid but... geez, can you imagine?"

She freezes with her back to me, and all I can do is stare at the back of her head with my mouth open. *She has never had an orgasm.*

She slowly turns her head to me. "Davis... geez, I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like I get around you and I just can't stop talking. I can't believe I just told you all that. Please forget it."

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I can't forget it."

She grimaces, and I tighten my hold on her, not wanting to let her go just yet. There's no way she's frigid. I'm telling myself that I'm doing this for her, but I know it's a lie. "I need you to do me a favor."

She blurts out a laugh. "What? Act like I don't know you the next time I see you? Trust me, I get it."

I hold her tighter and lean toward her. "No, I need you to breathe. Take a deep breath and let it out."

She does as I ask, and then I tell her to do it again.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

I nod. "Okay. Lean back in your seat and relax for a minute."

When she moves in her seat, leaning her head back and closing her eyes, I can't stop myself from glancing down her body. Her skirt has ridden up, showing off her creamy thighs. With every breath she takes, her breasts rise and fall. Fuck me, I hope I can do this.

"Davis?" she whispers. "I think I'm good now."

I nod. "Right. So do you trust me?"

She opens her eyes and looks at me, and her voice is soft. "Yes, of course I do."

My jaw is tight, and I force the words out. "I'm going to help you."

She sits up. “Help me? Oh my God, I don’t want your help. Not like this. I’m not some charity—”

Before she can finish, I put my hand on her thigh, and she stops talking. I told myself I wasn’t going to touch her intimately tonight, and even now, I’m going to try and keep that promise.

“You are not a charity case. I want to do this, Abby. Fuck, I want this more than anything.”

Her eyes are fixed on mine. They’re wide and trusting, and I know I need to do this right. “Will you let me.... Please?”

I don’t try to hide the pleading in my voice. I wasn’t lying. I do want this even though I know I shouldn’t. This is so fucking wrong.

When she nods her head, I ask her, “Are you wet, Abby?”

She scrunches up her nose.

“Answer me,” I insist.

She lets out a breath. “I think so.”

Fuck me. “That’s good. Lift your skirt up.”

She hesitates for a minute and leans back a little. The last thing I want to do is pressure her into anything. “If you don’t want this, all you have to do is tell me.”

She reaches for my hand on her leg to hold me there. “No, I do. I do want this.”

I nod, and she grabs the skirt of her dress and raises it up until I can see her white panties. I feel as if my tongue has swelled, and I can barely get the next words out. “Good. Slide your panties down.”

She lifts her hips and pulls her panties down to her knees. I move my hand from her leg, but as soon as she’s in position, I cover her thigh again.

“Widen your legs.”

She stretches her legs apart, and my fingers press into the soft skin of her thigh. It’s taking every bit of willpower I have

not to reach between her legs. “Touch yourself.”

She tenses and looks at me with curiosity. “You trust me, right? Put your hand between your legs and touch yourself.”

Her hand slides along her lower belly, and she tentatively touches herself. “Get your finger wet,” I murmur to her.

She slides lower, sliding her finger through her slick folds.

“Touch your clit.”

She moves to her clit, and I slide my hand a little up her thigh, holding her legs apart, letting my fingers dig into her skin. She circles her finger around her clit. Her hips flex, and she lets out a moan. Her hand moves between her legs, and I can't take my eyes off her. My cock is hard, but I ignore it as I watch her. Her breathing picks up speed, and then all of a sudden, she stops and groans, letting her hand fall away from her core. “Forget it. It's useless. I can't.”

Don't touch her. Don't touch her, I tell myself. I know when I do, there's no going back, but I can't stop myself. I slide my hand up her inner thigh, and as soon as I get to her honeyed heat, she gasps and lifts her hips to meet me. I slide a finger through her swollen lips. She's soaked, and I coat my finger with her cream before moving to her engorged clit. “Fuck, I told myself I wouldn't touch you, but baby, you need this, don't you?”

Her words are not coherent. It comes out as a groan and a grunt. I circle her clit, over and over, increasing the pressure. Her breathing is erratic, her hips pumping in the seat, and she's so close. “Let go, Abby. I got you, baby. Let go.”

“Davis,” she moans, and just hearing her sex-laced voice makes me almost come in my jeans.

Her whole body tenses. Her hands grab on to the console and the door, and she white-knuckles them as her body starts to convulse. I don't relent, though, wanting her to ride it out until she's completely satisfied and has no doubt that she did in fact have an orgasm.

“More,” I tell her.

She releases her hold on the door and console and wraps her hands around my arm. She's trying to pull my hand away, but I won't let her. I reach over with my other hand and slide my finger inside her as I keep circling her clit. A guttural groan escapes her as I finger-fuck her with one hand and pet her clit with the other.

Her body writhes uncontrollably, and her moans fill the truck. When her body flexes and goes taut, I don't slow down. She jerks as the orgasm consumes her. Even when her body starts to relax, I can't stop touching her. With my finger buried deep inside her, I can still feel the tiny flutters from her release.

She sighs with satisfaction, and I reluctantly pull my hands away from her body. My finger is glistening, and I bring it to my mouth, savoring the sweet taste of her. I moan around my finger, and when I open my eyes, she's staring at me in shock.

Shit. I just finger-fucked my best friend's little sister.

It's on the tip of my tongue to apologize when she shakes her head side to side. "Wow! That was... I mean, I never..."

I let out a breath. "Stay right here."

I get out of the truck and pull at my pant legs, trying to make room in my now too-tight jeans. I bend over double and let the pain of my erection pressing into my jeans fill me. When I stand upright, I make my way around to the other side of the truck and open the car door. Abby is still sitting with her panties at her knees in shock.

I lean toward her, putting my hand to the side of her face, forcing her to look at me. "Abby, I..."

She pulls from my hold. "So help me, Davis, if you're about to apologize to me—"

I cut her off. "I'm not. I know I probably should, but no, I can't apologize for that." I take a deep breath and let it out. "Are you okay?"

She's watching me closely, searching my face, and finally she nods her head. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm really good."

I nod and then reach for her panties, gripping each side of them. “Lift up for me.”

She does as I ask, and I try not to stare at her as I cover her up. After pulling the skirt of her dress down to her knees, I step back and help her out of my truck.

Her legs are wobbly, and I put an arm around her as I walk her to the door. The whole walk, I’m praying she doesn’t ask me to come inside because I don’t think I’m strong enough to refuse her. When we get there, she fumbles in her purse for the key, and when she pulls it out, I take it from her and unlock the front door.

After she steps in, she turns, looking at me expectantly.

I hold my hand up, stopping her from whatever she’s about to say. “Please don’t, Abby. If you ask me to come in, I won’t be able to say no, and I can’t. This was not a good idea...”

I let my voice trail off when I see the way her face transforms in front of me. She was so satisfied, almost smug, and now she’s looking at me timidly with insecurity. I reach for her, pulling her to me. I breathe her in, running my hand through her hair and then down her back before holding on to her hips. I want her. Fuck that, I need her, but I know I can’t do this. “Trust me, I want you, Abby. I want you so bad it hurts, but I can’t do this.”

She nods and steps out of my reach, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sure, I get it.”

“Abby...” I start, and she takes another step back.

“Really, it’s fine, Davis. Thank you for bringing me home and, well, for everything.”

She’s about to close the door, but I hold my hand up to stop her. She finally looks at me. “Listen to me, Abby. Just listen to what I have to say and then I’ll go, okay?”

She nods again, and I grit my teeth. She was feeling confident only minutes ago, and now I’ve made her feel bad about herself. This is not what I wanted. “When we were at the club and you were in my arms...”

I pause, and her eyebrows rise. I lock my hands together in front of me to stop myself from reaching for her. “You were the reason I was hard, Abby. It had nothing to do with that woman or what that couple was doing. My reaction was from having you in my arms and feeling your body against mine. I want you. But I know I can’t have you.”

“Zach doesn’t tell me who I can and can’t date.”

I nod my head. Abby has always been independent, and I know what she’s saying is true, but I also know that Zach is my best friend, my brother. I can’t do this to him. “It’s not just your brother, Abby. I’m not the man you need... the man you deserve.”

She opens her mouth, but I shake my head. “I’d better go, Abby. Thank you for trusting me and letting me pleasure you. I’ll carry that with me always.”

I turn to go, and she steps out on the porch. “Davis.”

I stop but don’t turn around, and she continues, “You’re not leaving Whiskey Run, right? Not yet. I mean, you’ll be here for awhile, right?”

I nod my head, but that’s not enough. “Davis, promise me you won’t leave without telling me and Alexis bye first.”

Gruffly, I answer her. For the first time, it feels like I mean something to someone, and it’s a woman that I would literally die to be with. “I promise, Abby. I won’t leave without telling you and Alexis bye first.”

I wait until I hear her murmur okay before stepping off her porch and making my way to my truck. I refrain from looking up at her house until I’ve backed out of her driveway, and she’s still standing there, leaning against the column of her porch watching me go.

I wish things were different. I wish I was different. I wish I was the man she deserves.

CHAPTER 13

ABBY

“ALEXIS, we have to leave in five minutes,” I holler down the hall.

“I’m almost ready,” she says.

I finish putting things in my purse, making sure I have my phone and wallet before going over to the mirror by the entryway. Looking at myself, I put on lipstick, seeing the blush on my face as I do so. I feel like I’ve had a perpetual blush since last night because I keep thinking about the time in the truck with Davis. The way he made me feel... Even now, I have to wave my hand in front of my face to calm down.

When the doorbell rings, I startle before going to look out the peephole. I suck in a breath when I see Davis standing on the other side. I’m holding my breath as I swing the door open and let it out in a swoosh. “Davis... hey.”

His eyes devour me, looking me up and down. “Hey, Abby. You look beautiful.”

I look down at the black dress pants, white tank top, and jean jacket I have on and then back at him. “Thank you.”

His jaw is tight. “You have a date?”

I grip the doorknob. “A date? No, Alexis has a dance.”

He widens his stance and crosses his arms over his chest. “Alexis is too young to go to a dance.”

I can’t help it. I laugh out loud. “Geez, Davis, you sound just like my dad and my brother. She’s not going to a dance. She has a dance recital.”

Alexis comes to the door and is breathless as she slams into Davis, wrapping her arms around his leg. He grunts, and it's obvious by the look on his face that he has pain in his leg, but he doesn't let Alexis see it. He bends over to look at her. "Well, look at you, beautiful."

She smiles up at him proudly. "I have a dance, and I have a solo. Are you coming to watch me?"

I tap her shoulder. "Alexis, I'm sure Davis has other things —"

He interrupts me. "I'd love to come. If that's okay, I mean."

Shocked, I nod my head. "Of course, I mean we'd love for you to come."

He holds up his keys. "I can drive. I can move the booster seat over to my truck if that's okay."

I nod and dig into my purse, pulling out my keys. "I'll unlock my car door." I point at the bag in the corner of the room. "Grab your bag, Alexis. We have to go."

She grabs her bag and is bounding out the door after Davis. When I lock up and make it outside, she is instructing him on how to put the seat in his truck. He takes it all in, doing as she says before making sure she's belted in.

I'm already in the passenger seat when he's done, so he gets into the driver's side.

"I didn't even think. Am I dressed okay? I can drop you off if you'd rather I did that."

I look at him in shock. He could wear anything and look good. I practically choke on the words. "Uh, no. You look great."

I look out the window to avoid his gaze. When we get to the school where the recital is being held, Alexis walks in between Davis and me, holding both our hands. We go straight to the audience chairs, and I stop. "I hate to ask you this, but can you hold these seats while I get Alexis where she needs to be?"

He nods his head. “Sure. Anything you need.”

I can feel my face flame because my mind immediately goes where it shouldn't. I point to the seats. “Mom and Dad are coming too.”

He nods, and I grab Alexis' hand to walk away. We only get a few steps and Davis calls after us, “I can't wait to see you up there, Lex.”

She lets go of my hand and runs back to Davis. When she stops in front of him, she holds her hands up, and he leans down. She instantly wraps her arms around his neck, and he hugs her back. When his eyes close, I can see how much this means to him. Emotion wells inside me, and when he releases her, she pats him on the cheek and then comes back to me, grabbing my hand.

I take her behind the stage and talk to her coach. When I get Alexis settled, I make my way back to where I left Davis. As soon as I see him, my stomach clenches. I should have known that if I left him alone, he wouldn't be that way long. And of course, it's Katie Long that has decided to stop and talk to him. Katie was one of the mean girls in high school, and she hasn't changed much since then. My pace slows, but I keep putting one foot in front of the other until I stop next to Davis.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Hey, Abby. This is... I'm sorry, what was your name?”

I try to hide my smile. “Yeah, I know Katie. How's it going?”

Davis moves his hand to my lower back. “I'm going to sit down and make sure I save these seats for your mom and dad.” He ignores Katie and takes a seat.

Katie watches him, staring at his butt as he walks away before turning to me. “Who is that?”

“His name is Davis. He's a friend of the family.”

She leans in and whispers, “Is he seeing someone?” Before I can answer her, she laughs. “Forget it. When has that ever stopped me? I'm going to take the row behind you.”

She slides into the next row and sits in the seat directly behind Davis.

I grit my teeth and sit down, leaving the two seats between us empty for my mom and dad.

“Hey, you okay?”

I nod. “I’m good. Thanks for coming. I know Alexis will love having you in the audience.”

It all feels so formal, but with Katie’s eagle eyes watching us, I’m completely on edge. My parents show up, and instead of letting them slide past, after saying hello, Davis gets up and moves down the aisle next to me. My mom and dad are smiling at both of us, and Davis leans toward me. “Is it making you uncomfortable with me being here?”

“What? No, why would you think that? I’m glad you’re here.”

“Ever since we got here, you’ve been... quiet.”

I look behind us, and sure enough, Katie is staring at us. “Uh, I don’t know if you realize it or not, but Katie is interested.”

He leans back in his chair as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. I feel the heat from his arm on the back of my chair. “Who?”

I look at him in surprise. Not many people forget Katie when they meet her. She’s beautiful, confident, and flirty. I gesture behind us with my eyes, and he turns to look and then quickly faces me again. “Her?”

I nod.

He scrunches his nose up. “No thanks.”

My mouth drops open. “No thanks? Really? I mean, from what I understand, she’s a sure thing.”

I wait for him to change his mind and maybe turn around to check her out again, but he doesn’t. He leans forward. “Still not interested.”

I try not to smile, I really do, but I can't hold it back. The announcer for the recital comes forward, and I turn in my seat, smiling like a loon.

The recital only lasts an hour, and Alexis' solo is short, but I swear I hold my breath the whole entire minute and thirty seconds. When she's done, Davis is on his feet, clapping with the rest of us.

After the recital, we all go out to dinner, where Alexis is the star of the meal. She talks to all of us, replaying the night's events. When we get back to the house, Davis comes in, and Alexis insists that he help tuck her in.

We're walking into the living room when he stops at the entrance. "I should probably go."

I hold my hand up. "Before you leave, do you think we can talk for a minute?"

While we were at dinner, I came up with this plan, and I know if I let him leave without talking to him first, I won't forgive myself.

He rubs his hands together. "Sure."

I point to the couch, and he goes to sit down. I move to sit next to him. "Why did you come over here tonight, Davis?"

He opens his mouth and closes it, but I wait him out. When he starts again, he leans his elbows on his knees. "I wanted to see you."

"Did Zach ask you to?"

He rubs his hand through his hair. "When I came to Whiskey Run, Zach asked me to check in on you."

I open my mouth, but he holds his hand up to stop me. "And last night, Zach and I talked about me going to The Club. But tonight..." I stop and try to collect my thoughts but decide to just put it out there. "Tonight was all me. I wanted to see you, especially after last night. I needed to make sure you were okay."

I laugh. "You wanted to make sure I was okay after that orgasm." I fan myself. "I swear I'm still feeling the effects of

it today.”

His cheeks turn ruddy, and while I have him off guard, I decide now is as good as time as any. “I want to ask you to do something for me, Davis.”

He visibly gulps as his eyes bore into mine. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

I slide to the middle cushion next to him. His eyes widen. “I’ve been fine without sex, and I guess that’s because I didn’t really think I was missing anything.”

I let my voice trail off, and Davis’ breaths are coming out in pants. He adjusts himself in his jeans, and his eyes are still on me. “Anyway, now... I feel like I have a little bit of an inkling of what I’m missing, and I...”

My voice trails off, and finally Davis talks. “What? You what?” he asks in a husky voice.

I take a deep breath and then blurt it out in one long sentence. “I want to have sex with you.”

His mouth drops open, his eyes dilate, and he shudders in a breath. “Abby—”

I cut him off. “Just listen to me. We both know you’re only here for a little while, and you’ll be leaving again. I trust you, and after last night, I know it can be good between us. I’m not asking for anything more.”

He wants to say yes. I can tell by the way he’s looking at me that he wants to say yes, so he surprises me when he says, “I can’t. We can’t. It wouldn’t be right.”

I roll my eyes. “Davis, you want me. You said so yourself.”

He nods his head once, but his voice is grim. “I do want you.”

I throw my hands up in frustration. “So what? I’m asking for sex, nothing else. If you’re worried about my brother, he’s not going to know.”

He stands up from the couch and moves across the room, putting some distance between us. He goes to the window and looks out into the dark night. "I can't," he says again.

Deflated, I let my shoulders fall. "Right. Okay, I get it."

With his back to me, I let the emotions roll through me. I had convinced myself that even though I wanted a relationship with him, I would settle for a one-night stand. I'm not sure what that says about me that I'm willing to offer myself to a man for one night of sex, but I don't really care. I would take whatever he offers me. And I guess after last night, that's nothing.

I stand up and cross my arms over my chest.

CHAPTER 14

DAVIS

I'M GRIPPING the curtains in my hand, trying to convince myself I'm doing the right thing. No matter how much I want Abby, I can't have her.

I turn around when I feel like I've finally got myself together only to find Abby standing up with her arms crossed over her chest and her face crestfallen. "Abby," I start.

She puts her hand up. "Stop. It's fine. I get it."

I shake my head and take a step toward her. "You get what, exactly?"

She rolls her eyes. "I'm not stupid, Davis. I'm practically throwing myself at you, and you're saying no. I get it. I get all of it."

"Explain."

She lifts her chin and looks me in the eye. "You don't want me... If you did, then nothing would stop you from having me."

I'm shaking my head, making my way toward her before I can think twice about it. "I do want you, but it's not that simple."

She shrugs, and her lower lip is puckered out. "It's just sex, Davis."

I reach for her, putting my finger to her chin and lifting her head up so she has to look at me. "It wouldn't just be sex. Not between us. I think you know that."

Her eyes are wide, but she nods in agreement. I let my hand slide from her chin down, and I wrap my fingers around the base of her neck. “Why me?”

“Why you? Are you really asking me that?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I told you that I haven’t been with anyone in over two years. If this is some kind of pity thing...”

She sputters. “Pity? You think I pity you?” Her hands go to my waist, and she clenches my shirt in her hands. “And I told you I haven’t been with anyone since I conceived my daughter. She’s six now. If there’s any pity thing happening here, then—”

“Stop. Listen to me, to what I’m saying. No one has seen me except doctors.”

She blinks up at me. “You mean your leg? You think if I see your leg I’m not going to want you anymore?”

I cringe at the thought of showing her the mangled skin. “Trust me, Abby. You probably won’t.”

Her hands slide up my chest and rest gently on my shoulders. “Davis, I’m just going to put it out there. I’ve wanted you for a long time. Probably long before I should have. I hate what happened to you, but the only reason it’s going to bother me to look at it is because I hate that you were hurt. Regardless of how your body looks, I still want you.” She lets out a soft sigh and shakes her head. “You made me feel good last night, and I want to do the same for you.”

I suck in a breath, and as I dip my head, all I can think is I shouldn’t be doing this, but it doesn’t stop me. I lean down and press my lips to hers. I’ve dreamt about her lips, but nothing could prepare me for how it feels to actually kiss her. I tilt her head to the side and deepen the kiss. When her tongue slides along mine, I can’t hold back the groan of satisfaction.

Her nails are digging into my shoulders, and her body is pressed tight against mine, but it’s not enough. I let one hand slide to her lower back, pulling her up against my hard cock. The pain is real, but it’s the best kind of pain.

When her hand starts to slide down my belly, I come to my senses. I cover her hand with mine and continue kissing her, letting her know how badly I want her.

She pulls away and is staring up at me in awe. I know I'm looking at her the exact same way. Her lips are swollen, her nose red and her eyes dilated. With just a kiss, she looks thoroughly satiated. She grips the front of my shirt like she's afraid I'm going to leave. "Come to dinner tomorrow night, Davis. Alexis goes to her grandma and grandpa's." She lifts her shoulders. "You don't have to decide now. I don't want to guilt you into anything, but we can have dinner and talk if nothing else."

Tell her no. That's what I'm saying in my head, but what comes out is just the opposite. "I'll be here."

She rears back in surprise, and I take a step back. "I'll see you tomorrow, Abby."

Without a backward glance, I limp my way to the front door and out into the cool night.

Driving across town, I bypass my apartment and don't think about where I'm going until I pull into the rehab center. The compound next door is lit up, letting me know that there is probably a mission happening right now. The urge to be a part of it is overwhelming, but taking one step in that direction, I stop. That's not my job anymore. I'm no longer healthy enough for the missions.

I turn toward the rehab center and make my way to the front. Everything is locked up, but I have my card key to get into the gym area. I've never needed to let off steam more than I do now.

Once I let myself in, I see a couple of the guys on the other side. I wave at them and go toward the locker room. After grabbing some clothes out of my locker and getting changed, I head back out and find my way over to where they're working out. "What's up, guys?"

Kanan, Jason, and Colter are all working out. Colter is standing over Jason, helping him position the weight bar in his

hands. “Okay, I have one hundred and twenty-five pounds on the bar. Straight up. Ten reps and just call out if you need my help.”

I watch my three friends. Two of them are hovering over Jason, and I know what they’re doing. Jason is uncomfortable working out in here in the daytime. It’s louder, and since he can’t see, he has trouble communicating when the gym is packed. We all take turns working out with him at night.

Jason lifts the bar, counting as he goes. When he’s done ten reps, Colter helps him shelf the weight and then they all sit down, wiping themselves off with towels.

“Good job, Jason. You keep going up in weight and you’re going to outlift me soon.”

He laughs. “Right. I heard you benched two-eighty the other day. I’ve got a ways to go to get to that.”

That was the day that I found out Abby was going to The Club. “I haven’t hit that number since then. I was motivated that day.”

Kanan tilts his head to the side. “Oh yeah? Got anything to do with the woman you’ve been seeing?”

“I’m not seeing a woman,” I tell them, but even saying it, I know I’m lying.

Colter laughs and points to my face. “Really? Because I didn’t think that shade of pink was really your color.” He’s laughing as he leans down and explains to Jason, “Davis has lipstick on his face.”

I wipe at my face, and sure enough, there’s pink lipstick on my fingers. I grab a towel and wipe it off before looking at my three friends. “I’m in trouble, guys. Fuck that, I’m a dead man.”

“Abby?” Kanan asks.

I groan and nod my head. “Yeah, Zach’s little sister.”

Jason speaks up. “If I remember correctly, she’s not that little.”

Instantly, I come to Abby's defense.

Colter puts a hand up to my chest. He stutters out the words a little but gets them out. "Davis, I don't think he was talking about her like that."

Jason sits up. "I was talking about how she's of age. You keep talking about her like she's a kid or something. She's an adult. What did you think I meant?" He snaps his fingers. "Oh, you thought I meant... fuck, dude, I may be blind now, but I remember exactly what Abby looks like. She's a curvy woman, and she's hot as fuck. I mean, if I thought I had a—"

I move toward him. "Don't finish that sentence, fucker."

All three of the guys start to laugh, and I look around at them. Kanan is the first one to speak up. "Look, it's obvious you have feelings for her. I'm sure if you talk to Zach and explain how you feel... I mean, you're his best friend. If anything, I would think he would want you of anyone to be with her."

I sit down on the closest machine and let my head hang between my shoulders. "Maybe before... but not now."

Jason is the first one to speak up. "You have to quit looking at yourself as a cripple, man. Look at how far you've come already."

I nod. "I know, but I'm not talking about that. Zach wouldn't want his sister with an addict. Hell, she deserves better than that."

Colter sits on the bench next to me. "You're not an addict."

I look at him. "I'll always be an addict." I take a deep breath. "Let's forget about me. What about you guys? How are you liking it here? What do you think about all this?"

Kanan shrugs his shoulders. "We're getting paid to work out and talk about our feelings. I still don't know exactly what we're being hired to do, but I guess we'll figure it out."

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my arms. "I went and talked to Walker about it last week. I told him I can't keep getting paid for doing nothing, and he told me that doing the

work—meaning physical and mental therapy—is part of the job. He said when I’m ready, he wants to hire me to take lead on security here at the clinic.”

The guys all look at me with their mouths wide open. “Wait, so this is legit? He’s really offering us jobs?” Jason asks.

I nod my head and realize he can’t see me. “Yes, it’s for real. Trust me, I’m with you. I honestly thought he was just wanting to help us. I mean look at us, we were all injured on the same mission. It was not his fault by any means, and his retrieval was swift and efficient, but regardless, he couldn’t sit by while we all threw our lives away. He brought us here... each of us... because he thought we could make a difference. He has big plans for this place.”

Colter nods. “And you want to be part of it. I can hear in your voice how much you want it. Did you take the job?”

I shrug. “No. I told him I needed to think about it. What if I screw up... what if?”

Kanan throws his hands up. “What if a bomb is dropped on us right now? There’s so many what ifs, Davis. What if you don’t try? What if you give up this opportunity, or what if you give up and leave Whiskey Run and leave Abby too? You think that would make your life better? Fuck no, it won’t. Sometimes you have to take a chance.”

I crack my fingers together. “I know you’re right. I can see the possibilities with this place, and I know I can make a difference.” I rub my hand over my face. “And fuck, I would give anything to make this work with Abby.”

Kanan sits down next to me. “Then make it work, Davis. We were all given second chances that day. We have to make the most of it.”

I know what he’s saying without him saying it. We owe it to Craig, our friend who died on that mission. We have a second chance—he doesn’t. We have to grab on to it and not let it go.

CHAPTER 15

ABBY

AS SOON AS I hear the doorbell ring, I know I fucked up.

I hold my hand to Alexis' head. "The fever is gone. How's your tummy?"

She nods her head. "Better. I'm hungry."

Good. That has to mean she's feeling better. "Okay. I'm going to go answer the door, and I'll be right back."

She nods, leans back on the bed, and opens her book.

I practically run out the bedroom and down the hall, pulling at my oversized T-shirt. When I get to the front door, I stop and look at the mirror, then groan. My hair is everywhere. I think I brushed my teeth today, and that was it. The doorbell rings again, and I suck in a breath. I have no choice; I have to answer it.

I crack the door open and stare up at Davis. Of course he looks good. He's dressed in jeans and a long-sleeve thermal shirt. His hair is pulled back, and he's smiling at me.

"Davis..." I start.

He frowns at me. "What's wrong?"

I lean my head against the door and clench my eyes shut. "I'm sorry, I should have called you. Alexis is sick and—"

He walks toward me, pulling me into his arms and pushing the door open at the same time. "What's wrong? Where is she?"

"In her room."

He practically carries me down the hall and stops at Alexis' room. We walk inside, and Alexis smiles when she sees him. "Davis! Did you come to make sure I was okay?"

He goes to sit on the edge of the bed. "I sure did, honey. What's wrong? You not feeling good?"

She sits up in the bed, and I lean against the door frame, watching the two of them. Alexis pulls her book in her lap and is shaking her head. "I'm feeling better now, but I puked my guts out."

I move into the room. "She's not joking, Davis, and I'm not sure if she's contagious or not. You may not want to get too close."

He swings his head to me and looks me up and down. "What about you? You feeling okay?"

I nod my head and pull at my shirt. "Yeah, I'm fine. I was about to fix her something to eat and then hopefully get a quick shower."

He nods and turns back to Alexis. "How about I get you situated on the couch and make us a grilled cheese sandwich while your mom takes a shower? Would that be okay?"

She opens her arms to Davis and is nodding her head. "I love grilled cheese sandwiches."

He doesn't hesitate. He picks her up and stands up while her legs and arms go around him. His limp is exaggerated with the weight of Alexis in his arms, but it doesn't stop him. When they get to me, he stops. "You okay with that?"

I blink up at him. "Are you sure about this? I don't want you sick."

He leans down, and his voice drops a little. "If I do get sick, are you going to take care of me?"

There's absolutely nothing sexual in the question, but why does it feel like there are butterflies in my stomach? "Of course I will."

Alexis chimes in. "Mommy is good at taking care of people."

They walk past me, but I hear him tell her, “I’m sure she is.”

Instead of following them, I go to my bathroom and shower real quick. When I get out, I brush my hair and let it hang down my back. I grab a T-shirt and shorts and get dressed. Looking in the mirror, I feel like I should put makeup on, but I know it’s a waste. My night is going to be spent taking care of Alexis, and I don’t need makeup for that. I walk down the hall and stop when I get to the kitchen. Davis’ eyes travel down my body and back up again. There’s heat in his gaze. “You are just in time. Go sit down with Lex and eat.”

He has a plate in his hands, and he’s walking with me toward the couch. When I sit down, he hands it to me. Alexis is happily munching on her sandwich already. She looks at me. “Eat it, Mom. It’s good.”

I take a bite, chew, and swallow it. “Thank you, Davis.”

He nods his head. “You’re welcome.” He goes back into the kitchen, grabs another plate and a few bottles of water, and carries it all into the living room. “Sit here,” Alexis tells him, pointing at the seat between us.

He slides by me and sits down in the middle, putting a drink in front of each of us. “This is good,” I tell him.

He nods. “You smell nice.”

I flush and go back to my sandwich. I sit and listen to Davis and Alexis talk. When we’re done with our food, I gather the plates and carry them into the kitchen.

Davis follows me. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “Yes. I’m sorry about tonight. I should have called you earlier to let you know, but well, I’m sure you can imagine what I was doing.”

“I’m glad you didn’t call.”

I finish washing the last dish, and he takes it to dry. “You’re glad I didn’t call?”

He nods as he puts the dish on the shelf. “Yeah, because if you did, you would have told me not to come tonight.”

I can't help it; I laugh. "Really? I'm sure there's better things you'd rather be doing right now."

He shrugs, crosses his arms and legs, and leans back against the counter. "I wouldn't know what that better thing is."

I roll my eyes. "Whatever, Davis. You expect me to believe this is what you want to be doing?"

He leans toward me. "Honestly?"

He's so close, I can't even take a breath. "Yes, honestly."

He leans in closer, and his voice drops. "I know you don't need me, but it feels good to feel needed nonetheless. I know it was just a shower, but I'm glad I could help. I'm glad you let me help. I like being here for you and Alexis."

I know I'm giving away too much, but I'm not holding back. "I like having you here, Davis."

His smile deepens, but I shake my head. "So you realize now that if you stay, we're probably going to be watching cartoons or something, right?"

He shrugs as if it's no big deal. "So you're letting me stay?"

I nod. "You should definitely stay."

He inhales deeply and nods his head. "Then cartoons it is."

I'm about to walk away when he stops me with a hand on mine. "What about you?"

I tilt my head and look at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

He clears his throat. "What would you like to be doing tonight?"

My laugh is deep and throaty. "I'm not sure you want to hear what I'd like to be doing."

He swipes his finger softly across my wrist. "I do. Tell me."

I grab on to his arm and squeeze. “Well, actually I thought about it all night. If I could do anything tonight—and I mean anything—I would have liked to have your face between my thighs.”

He sucks in a breath and jerks as if I’ve physically punched him in the stomach. His mouth drops, and he’s staring at me as if he’s never seen me before. I shrug my shoulders and smile at him. “You asked. I’m just being honest with you.”

He hangs his head down and clenches his eyes shut. I swear it looks like he’s in pain. “You okay, Davis?”

He groans and opens his eyes. “Yes, I’m fine. But for the rest of the night, I’m going to be thinking about that. I tasted you on my fingers the other night. It wasn’t enough. I need more.”

I search his eyes and don’t hold back. “I thought for sure you were going to come over here tonight and tell me that you can’t—”

He cuts me off. “I should have done that. I planned to ask you if we can be friends, but as soon as I get near you, I lose all common sense. You can do better than me... even for a fling, Abby. But I don’t care. I want it to be me that pleases you. I want to be the one to feel you come undone.”

My nipples pebble, and I rub my thighs together. “I want that too.”

“Mom!!!!” Alexis hollers from the living room, pulling me from my trance.

“Coming,” I holler to her.

I start to go, but Davis stops me. “So another night then.”

I nod. “I hope so.”

He nods, and I turn to go but stop when he’s not following me. “You coming?”

He smirks. “I’m going to be a minute. Let me, uh, collect myself and I’ll be there in a minute.”

I can't help it. I giggle, covering my mouth with my hand.
"Okay, take your time. I'll save you a spot."

I walk back into the living room with a smile on my face.

"Where's Davis? I found us a movie to watch."

I point my thumb to the kitchen. "He'll be right out, honey. Go ahead and start it up."

She pushes play on the cartoon, and I make my way back to the couch. When Davis eventually comes into the room, he sits between Alexis and me.

She spreads out, putting her feet in his lap, but he doesn't seem to mind. Halfway through the movie, his hand slides across the cushion. As soon as our fingers touch, he laces our hands together, and we sit just like that for the rest of the movie.

I know what I said earlier, but in all honesty, this is turning out to be a perfect night just like this.

CHAPTER 16

DAVIS

IT'S BEEN three nights since I've seen Abby, although we've texted back and forth. Alexis is better, but they've been busy with school and dance practices. I've tried not to be pushy, but with every ding of my phone, I'm on edge.

And right now, as I sit in my apartment, it's no different.

My phone rings, and I feel guilty when I see Zach's name on the caller ID. I texted him to let him know Abby was okay after our visit to The Club. I haven't actually talked to him on the phone since then, though. I answer it a little subdued. "Hey, Zach."

"What's up, brother?"

Fuck, the guilt is real.

"Not much, just sitting here." And automatically, my mind goes to shit. *Thinking of all the ways I want to violate your sister.* I'm definitely going to hell. There's no doubt about it. "What are you doing?"

"Going on a short mission tomorrow."

I lean forward and tense. "What's the details? Where are you going?"

"Relax," he says. "It's in the States. It's an in and out."

I let out a breath. I know shit happens everywhere, but from my experience, the missions in the States go way smoother. "That's good. Let me know when you're back in."

"Sure thing. You seen my sister?"

“I have. Alexis was sick the other day, and I went over and hung out for a while.”

Worry fills his voice. “She okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, just some kind of stomach bug. She’s fine now.”

He’s quiet for so long I automatically get defensive. He huffs. “So, uh, you just hanging out taking care of sick kids these days?”

“You asked me to look out for your sister and niece.”

He laughs. “I know, and I should have figured you’d take me literally. How about Mom and Dad? You seen them?”

I swallow. Yes, I saw them at the dance recital, but I don’t mention that. “Actually, I missed Sunday dinner and so I’m going to see them this Sunday.”

“Good, good.”

I’m quiet, and all I can think is how I need to talk to him and let him know what I’m thinking about Abby. I owe him, that but I also don’t want to tell him over the phone.

“I’m actually going to go see Abby in the next night or two. You okay with that?”

“Uh,” he starts. “What does that mean, ‘see Abby’? Is there something you need to tell me, Jones?”

I cringe. “Probably, but I think I’d rather talk to you in person. You coming home soon?”

“Home? What the fuck, man? You liking that small-ass town or what?”

How do I tell him it’s not the town? It’s being near his sister that makes it seem like home. “Yeah, well Whiskey Run sort of grows on you.”

I hear an alarm go off over the line, and Zach says, “Shit. I gotta go. Take care of my family, bro. I’ll call you in the next day or two to let you know I’m good. Walker will have my coordinates.”

“Love you, bro. Take care of you.”

The phone clicks, and I’m taken back to what my life used to be. There’s a part of me that is sick knowing I’m sitting here safe and Zach is still putting his life on the line to save others. But at the same time, I couldn’t imagine leaving now. Not with Abby and Alexis here.

My phone dings, and I look at it immediately, holding my breath, hoping it’s Abby.

Hey.

It’s her, and I type in a response and push send.

Hey you.

The bubbles pop up, and her text finally comes through.

What are you doing?

I’m not going to lie to her.

Sitting here, thinking of you.

She doesn’t respond right away, and I think for the thousandth time that I’ve overstepped. When her text finally pops up, I jump from my seat and almost fall on my ass as I try to gain my balance. I read the text from her again.

Alexis is at her dad’s for the night. Do you want to come over?

I’m on my way

I text her, as my heart starts to race.

I drive across town in record time. When I get to her house, I park right in the driveway, not wanting to hide the fact I’m here. When I walk up to her front porch, before I can knock, it swings open, and Abby is looking up at me with desire in her eyes. “That was fast.”

She has her hair up in a high ponytail. Her T-shirt is tight and hanging off one shoulder, and her shorts don't leave a lot to the imagination. "Fuck, you're beautiful."

She smiles and tilts her head to the side. "You don't have to flatter me."

I grip her chin with my thumb and forefinger. "Trust me, by the end of the night, you won't have any doubts about how beautiful I think you are."

I grab her shoulders and turn her around. I close the front door and lock it, and with my hand to her back, I guide her down the hallway. When we get to her bedroom, I stop next to the bed and tower over her. She's looking at me with so much trust and desire, but I still have to ask as I brush the hair away from her face, "You okay with this?"

She taps her foot and reaches for me. "Stop. Yes, I want this, Davis. I'm not changing my mind. Anything you're willing to give, I want."

I reach for the hem of her T-shirt, and her eyes widen as I start to pull it up her body. She stops me and looks around the room. "Should we turn the lights off?"

My jaw tightens. "No way, baby. I want to see all of you."

She licks her lip. "Are you sure?"

I can't resist. I lean down and kiss her because that's all I've thought about. I planned on a peck, just something to tide me over and to convince her how much I want her, but it's not enough. Cupping her jaw, I deepen the kiss, and her whole body trembles against mine. I force myself to let go of her lips. "I'm sure."

When I lift her shirt this time, she lets me take it off, even lifting her arms to help me. With one snap at the back of her bra, I'm taking her straps down her shoulders, and her hands are trembling against my chest.

When I toss her bra to the chair across the room, my eyes have not left hers. I take both hands and start at her neck. She jumps, and I smile. "You okay?"

She nods breathlessly. “Yeah, I’m good. Already this is better than the other time.”

Jealousy rages inside me, but I try to tamp it down. “When I’m done with you, you’re not going to remember THAT time.”

She sucks in a breath, and before she can exhale, I let my hands slide down her shoulders, across her collarbones, and then to her breasts. Cupping her, I circle my thumbs over her puckered nipples. Her back arches, her head falls back, and I can’t resist. I press my lips to her neck, kissing there and then moving down to her breasts.

Pleasuring her with my tongue is my new favorite pastime. She’s so responsive, I know it’s going to be explosive between the two of us. Sucking her nipple into my mouth, I swirl my tongue, and her moans fill the room. Her hand is at the back of my head, holding me to her, and I smile into her hot skin.

As I trail my tongue down her navel, she sucks in a breath and doesn’t let it out. I slap her hip and reluctantly pull my mouth off her sweet skin. “Breathe.”

She lets out a breath and instantly sucks it in again.

I lean back and look up at her as I put my fingers into the waistband on each side of her shorts. She’s looking at the ceiling instead of me, and that’s not going to work. “Abby.”

She looks at me through her thick lashes.

“Eyes on me. Breathe,” I command her.

She nods her head as she shudders a breath.

I want to rip her shorts off, but I pause. “What’s wrong? Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She shakes her head. “Forget it.”

My fingers dig into her hips. “I won’t forget it. Tell me.”

“It was dark the other night. My belly is...” She lets her voice trail off.

I struggle to stand up, balancing on my one good leg before putting my weight on both. I hold my palm out. “Give

me your hand.”

She doesn't hesitate. I wrap my fingers around hers and bring it to the bulge between my legs, cupping myself with it. “Feel me, Abby. I'm hard now because I want you. I'm attracted to you. You're worried about what you look like, and I'm about to come in my pants just touching you.”

She squeezes me, and I wrap my hand around her wrist and pull her hand away. “Pull your shorts down, Abby.”

Her eyes flare to mine, and she nods her head. I take a step back and watch as she pulls her shorts and underwear down in one swoop. When she steps out of the legs, she drops it all to the floor and then stands up tall, slapping her hands to her thighs.

I point to the bed. “Lie back. Open your legs.”

She sits on the bed and scoots back until her head is toward the top and lying on a pillow, but her legs are squeezed together.

I crawl up the bed and put a hand on each of her knees, pushing them apart. Her eyes are trained on me, and I know I should take it slowly, but her pink, glistening core beckons me closer. I slide a finger through her swollen lips, and her hips buck under my command.

She comes up on her elbows and reaches for me, wrapping her hand around my wrist on her knee. “Davis.”

With my eyes on hers, I slide my tongue through her folds, and when I get to her clit, I suck it into my mouth. Her eyes roll back in her head, and she trembles.

I don't stop suckling her clit. I slide my finger deep inside her, curling until I'm stroking along that spongy special spot that has her body tense and her hips starting to writhe. With one hand inside her, I throw my other arm over her hips to hold her to the bed. I ravage her swollen clit with my mouth as I work her G-spot, and she's begging me, “It's too much, Davis. Oh shhhh, it's too much.”

But I don't relent. When I feel her body go taut and her pussy clamps down on my hand, she screams my name as the

orgasm rolls through her. I can't resist, tasting her sweetness and licking her until her body lies limp on the bed. Her earlier inhibition is completely gone. Her legs are spread wide open, and she's sprawled out underneath me, not trying to hide a thing.

I crawl up the bed, still fully clothed, and lie down next to her. We both catch our breath, and when she seems to calm, I pull her into my arms, fitting her against my body.

She leans back to look up at me. "That was... everything."

I kiss her forehead and lean my chin on the top of her head. "It sure was. I like having you come undone in my arms."

Her hand tightens on the front of my shirt, and she peers up at me. "Your turn."

I shake my head. "No, today was for you."

She gasps and pushes away from me. "Oh, hell no, Davis Jones. That was not the deal. I want it all, and by all, I mean I want you inside me."

I groan hearing her talk that way, but I try my best to stay strong. "I can't..."

She blinks at me. "What do you mean, you can't?" She nudges her hips against me, and sure enough, my hard bulge is evidence that I physically can do what she's asking.

CHAPTER 17

ABBY

IT'S NOT like me to be so forward, but I say it anyway. "You want me."

He grunts. "Fuck yeah, I do."

I shake my head and look at him with confusion. "I don't understand. Why can't you then?"

He leans his forehead against mine. "Abby, I haven't done this—"

I hold my hand up to stop him. "I don't want to hear about the other women you've been with."

He brings his hand up to cup my cheek. "You don't understand. I don't remember any of those women. They didn't mean anything." His finger trails down my cheek. "But with you, it's different. It's going to mean something."

I swallow, wanting to ask him for forever but not wanting to press my luck. "That doesn't explain why you can't."

This whole time, I've been pressing into him, circling my finger around his erect nipple through his shirt, pumping my hips against his.

He groans, covering my hand with his. "Abby, I don't know how this even works or the logistics of it. I just don't know."

I search his face and see the vulnerability there. As gently as I can, I nudge him. "You're not leaving here until we've done the deed, Davis."

He laughs, shaking his head. “I’m going to be a klutz, and I don’t want that. I want this to be perfect.”

I grip his chin. “It already is. Now listen. I’m naked, and you’re fully clothed. We need to fix this.”

When he doesn’t try to stop me, I push him to his back. “How about this time, you let me be on top?”

He peers up at me through his dark lashes. “You like it on top?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not sure, but I’m guessing if it’s with you, I’m not going to care what position I’m in.”

He cups my bare shoulder. “You sure know how to make a man feel good.”

I pat his flat belly. “Well, if you’ll cooperate, I’ll make you feel a lot better.”

Instead of smiling, his face is grim. “Abby, it’s not just my leg. My body is scarred. It’s not pretty.”

I repeat his words back at him. “You trust me, Davis?”

He nods his head, and I pull at the hem of his shirt. “Lift up.”

He lifts up, and I pull the material up his body and toss it to the floor. I’ve somehow forgotten that I’m completely naked, leaning over him, but he hasn’t. His hand goes to my breast, and he plucks my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

I lean back and look at his naked chest. “You know, that day you were mowing grass without your shirt on, I wanted you then.”

This time he does smile. “I wanted you too.”

I lean over, kissing across his chest. He lets out little pants as I make my way across his body. I grab the button of his jeans, and he covers my hand with his. “Let me do it.”

I sit back on the bed, giving him space. He lifts his hips, pulling down his pants to his hips. The bulge between his legs is impressive, and my eyes are glued to it.

He takes one leg out of his pants and then takes a deep breath before moving to the other. "I can leave it on."

I reach for him. "I want to see you, Davis. All of you."

He gulps and nods his head before working the other pant leg down. He struggles with it, but I sit and wait patiently.

When he has the pants off, he's breathing heavily.

"Can I touch you?" I ask him.

He grunts at me, and I shake my head. "Stop. Talk to me, Davis. Is that comfortable to you? I can take it off."

He lifts up on his elbows and looks down at his prosthetic. There's a sock covering his thigh, and it disappears into his prosthetic. "You'll probably be more comfortable if I left it on."

I move until I'm sitting between his legs. "I want to see all of you, Davis." I don't wait for him to respond. I reach for the strap that's holding on his prosthetic and undo it. After a few tries, I get it undone, and I help him take it off. When I lean over the bed, I lay it gently on the floor. Next, I pull at the sock covering his stump and peel it down before dropping it to the floor too. I look into Davis' dark brown eyes. "Breathe."

He lets out a breath in a woosh, and I smile at him. I point to his thigh. "Can I kiss you here?"

He bites his lip and nods his head. His leg is covered in scars, and I want to kiss each one, but I don't want to make him even more uncomfortable. I lean over, pressing my lips to his upper thigh. His leg jerks, and I smile, knowing I have an effect on him. I put my hand at the waistband of his underwear. "Can I kiss you under here?"

He threads his hand through my hair. "There's no way I can tell you no."

I gently remove his underwear, and my mouth drops. All I can do is stare at his erect cock that is sticking straight up between his legs. He puts his hands behind his head and is smiling at me. "It's going to fit. It may be a little snug, but I have a feeling you were made just for me, Abby."

His words do something to me. He's claiming me, and I don't even know if he realizes it or not. I drop his underwear to the side of the bed, and he grabs on to my thighs. "Climb up here. I need to be inside you."

I crawl up his body until I'm resting my core over his erection. "I'm not on the pill or anything."

He groans. "I'd give anything to be inside you bare."

"If you stick around, I can get on the pill," I tell him with a flush to my face. We haven't even had sex yet, and I'm talking about doing it again.

His hands grip my hips, and he slides me back and forth on his cock. He's not even inside me, and it feels too good. Each time his cock presses to my clit, it throbs.

He circles my waist with one arm and then leans over the bed, grabbing his pants. "I have a condom."

He takes it out of his pocket, rips open the package, and sheaths himself in mere seconds. He slaps a hand to my ass. "Lift up."

I lift up, and he nods his head in approval. "Take me, Abby. Take all of me."

I circle my hand around his cock and position it at my entrance. Slowly, I lower myself and stop as he fills me up. His face is pained, but instead of thrusting into me, he's holding still. "You okay? Take your time."

I lower myself a little more and groan. "Oh wow."

He nods. "You're so tight, Abby. Fuck, you feel so good wrapped around my cock, baby."

His words encourage me, and I go even lower, but it's still not enough. I take a deep breath and lower my body in a quick thrust, impaling myself on him.

"Fuck," he bellows when he's completely inside me.

The need to move is overwhelming, and I start to shift front to back, side to side, finding a pattern that works for me. My senses heighten, and my thrusts turn erratic. His hand

slides between us, and he presses his finger to my clit. I lean back, and he hits inside me at a different angle. All of it is too much, but I can't stop. All of it feels too good.

“Come for me, Abby. I need to feel you come.”

The orgasm shoots through me, and my body flexes. He grunts, and before I know it, he has me flipped to my back, and he's pummeling inside me. It all feels so good, and just as I think I'm about to come down off my high, Davis increases the pressure on my clit, bites into my shoulder, then nips it with his lips, and I'm coming again. This time, he joins me, and watching him lose control is everything.

When we're both completely spent, he's resting on his elbows over top of me. I wrap my legs and arms around him, pulling him down. His voice is gruff. “I'm going to smash you.”

I shake my head, and my voice is thick with emotion. “I don't care. I need you to hold me.”

He moves to my side and pulls my naked body against his. His arms and leg are wrapped around me, and he's whispering to me, telling me how good I am. “That was perfect, Abby. I thought I knew... fuck, I've never felt anything like it.”

I lean my cheek against his bare chest. His heart is thundering in my ear, but I don't care. I hold on to him, wishing I never had to let him go.

CHAPTER 18

DAVIS

SHE WAS out cold when I left this morning. I even made some noise, but she wasn't budging. I sat on the edge of the bed and watched her sleep for awhile, images from last night replaying in my head.

A hundred times I told myself I needed to leave and go home, but I couldn't force myself to get out of bed. Lying there with her body wrapped around mine, I felt truly alive for the first time ever, and I didn't want to let it go. If it wasn't for knowing that Jason would be at the gym waiting for me this morning, I never would have gotten out of that bed.

"Sorry I'm late," I tell Jason as I walk in the gym. I still have the smell of Abby on me, and I'm not mad that I didn't have time to shower. Call me a dirty bastard, I don't care, but I like it.

Jason is sitting at a weight bench doing curls. "You're fine. You know I don't need you guys babysitting me."

I roll my eyes. "Fuck off with that. You've been at the clinic for a week. We're just trying to make sure you get adjusted okay, that's all."

The gym is empty this time of the morning, but I'm still surprised we're the only two in here. Jason keeps working, and I set myself up on a rack next to him. We work silently, and I'm so into my own world that I jerk when Jason says, "So what's going on? You're quiet."

I have the dumbbell over my head, and I bring it down slowly on the exhale. "Nothing's going on."

He's quiet for just a minute and then starts again, a little breathless as he finishes a rep. "You going to talk to Zach?"

I grunt as I pull the bar back over my head. "Talk to Zach about what?"

He grabs the towel next to him and wipes his face off. "About how you're in love with his little sister."

I lower the bar and this time drop it, causing a big thud and the ground to shake. Jason jerks in his seated position, but he's got a smirk on his face. He's just trying to get me riled up.

I'm quiet as I rack another set of weights on the bar, but Jason is not giving up. "You can deny it all you want, but fuck, dude, I can't even see your face, and I know what's up. Zach is going to take one look at you and know for sure. You might as well figure it out before you see him."

I lift the weight over my head, trying to concentrate, but it's useless. When I lower the bar and drop it, I stand up and move over to Jason. "You need more weight?"

He grunts, hating to ask for help. "Yeah, can you grab the thirties?"

I take the twenty-five pound weights from him and set them on the rack before grabbing the thirties. As I'm giving them to him, I tell him quietly, "I'm not denying anything."

He nods his head with a jerk. "I knew it."

"You need a haircut," I tell him.

Jason's always worn his hair cut down to his scalp. It's so long now, it's hanging over his brow. "You're one to talk."

I look at him in confusion, and he just laughs. "Don't look at me like that," he says, stunning me again. "I may not be able to see, but I can hear, and the word on the street is you're starting to look like Sasquatch with all that hair on your head."

"Fuck you, man."

He just laughs. "Yeah, fuck you too."

We go back and forth for awhile and get a good workout in. After I walk with him back to his apartment, I get into my

truck and head home. There's plenty of things I need to be doing, but all I can think about is getting back to Abby. We didn't talk about the future. Hell, we hardly talked at all.

And I know we need to.

Determined to do just that, I grab donuts and coffee from the Sugar Glaze Bakery and then make my way across town to Abby's house. My stomach knots when I see a sports car sitting in the driveway, but I pull up beside it and park. When I get out, Alexis comes running to me. "Davis!" she screams.

I don't have much time to prepare, but I lean my back against the truck as she barrels into me, and I pick her up in my arms. "What's up, Lex?"

She sputters a laugh. "Lex! My name is Alexis. My dad is dropping me off. Did you come to see me?"

I laugh with her because how could I not? Her laugh is contagious. "Silly, I know your name, but if I like someone, I give them a nickname. And of course I came to see you and your momma."

I hug her and then set her down on the ground. She grabs my hand and pulls me. "You'll have to give Mom a nickname too then."

I follow behind her. "You're right, I'll have to."

We get to the side of the house, and Abby is working in her garden. I look at her first before looking at the man standing behind her. His forehead is creased as he stares back at me. By the glint in his eyes, I know he recognizes me. I fix him with a terse smile. "How's it going, Wayne?"

His frown deepens. "Good. What are you doing here?" He holds his hand up and looks between his daughter, who's still holding my hand, and then me. "Wait. Are you the Davis that Alexis has been talking about?"

I look down at the little girl smiling up at me. "Yep, that'd be me."

She pulls from my hand. "Dad, the last time you were here, I wanted to show you my new book, but you didn't have

time. Can I show you now?"

He smiles at his daughter. "Sure thing, honey. Abby, you and I need to talk before I go."

She has a small shovel, and she waves him away. "Sure thing, Wayne."

When he and Alexis walk around to the front of the house, Abby gets to her feet. I move in closer to her and put my hands on her shoulders. "Does he always come around and stare at your ass like that?"

She's shocked, letting me know she has no idea that her ex is having impure thoughts about her. "He was not."

I let my hands slide down her back and cup her ass. "Trust me, he was. And I don't like it."

She drops the shovel and then slides her hands up my chest. "You left without saying goodbye."

I push hair off her face and tuck it behind her ear. "I didn't want to. Trust me, I was loud trying to wake you up, but you weren't having it. I came back so we could talk."

She stiffens. "Talk? Why do I not like the sound of that?"

I hear Alexis before I see her, and I reluctantly step back from Abby with a sigh. I wish we could be out in the open about us, especially with her ex, but I'm not going to spring it on Alexis. "I have donuts in the truck. I'm going to go grab them."

Alexis overhears me. "Donuts! I love donuts."

Wayne stops her before she runs to me. "Alexis, we've talked about this. Donuts will make you fat."

Abby gasps, and my hands fist at my sides. Did this dumbass really just tell a six-year-old she'll get fat if she eats a donut?

Abby must know I'm about to say something because she comes to stand in front of me with one hand to my chest. Her voice is strained. "Wayne, let's you and me have that talk. Alexis, tell your dad bye and you'll see him later." She peers

up at me. “Davis, will you take Alexis with you? Thank you for the donuts. I’ll be in in a minute.”

Alexis hugs her dad and then grabs my hand for us to go to my truck. I give Wayne the death glare, making sure he remembers those threats I gave him years ago. “I’ll be here if you need me,” I tell Abby, and she smiles at me softly.

Alexis and I go to my truck and grab the thermos of coffee and the donuts. She’s about to go inside, but I don’t want to be that far from Abby. “How about a picnic, Lex? We can sit right here.” I gesture to the front porch, and Alexis jumps up and down. “Let’s do it, Davis. I love picnics.”

I nod. “So do I.”

I open the box and lean down to show her all the donuts. “Now you can have any that you want, but I saw one that made me think of you. Can you guess which one?”

She looks in the box and then at me with her mouth wide open. “The pink one with the pink and white sprinkles?”

I nod and hold the box out to her. “That’s the one, kiddo. Have at it.”

We sit down on the porch, and I take a sip of coffee while she munches on her donut. Abby and Wayne are still around the corner of the house, and it’s killing me that they’re out of sight.

“You want me to get you a water from inside?”

She shakes her head, and I’m surprised that she looks thoughtful, staring at her donut. “What’s wrong? You don’t like it?”

She nods her head. “I love it. Strawberry is my favorite.”

I nudge her gently with my elbow. “Then what’s wrong?”

She blinks up at me, and I’m entranced because she looks so much like her momma. The worried look on her face has me turning toward her. “Talk to me. You can tell me anything.”

She opens her mouth, closes it, and then opens it again. “Do you think my mom is fat?”

I rear back. “No. Why would you ask me that, Lex?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I think my mom is great, but my dad always says that I don’t want to end up fat like her. I just... I just know that she likes you, but I don’t want you to wish she was different, that’s all.”

I look down at this little girl and wonder how in the world is she only six years old? Obviously, she’s had to grow up a little fast, and her father is not helping matters with the bullshit he says to her. “I wouldn’t want to change her, Lex. I think your mom is perfect just the way she is.”

And just like that, her beautiful smile is back in place. “That’s good because donuts make her happy, and I like it when my mom is happy.”

I’m nodding in agreement when Abby and Wayne come from around the corner of the house. She stops, surprised to see us on the porch, and Wayne keeps walking toward his car. I’m up making my way toward him when Abby stops me. “Where are you going?”

I soften just looking at her. “Do you trust me?”

She tilts her head to the side and whispers, “You know I do.”

Because I can’t resist, I lean over and press my lips to her forehead before making my way to the driveway. Wayne is just about to get into his car, and I hold the door before he closes it. “Wayne, can you and I have a little chat?”

He rolls his eyes. “What? You going to threaten me again? Trust me, I remember you and her goon brother threatening to put me six feet under if I didn’t shape up. What do you want now?”

I lean down so I don’t have to talk loud enough for Abby and Alexis to hear me. “I don’t want you talking about Abby. Not about her weight, how she looks, what she’s doing, nothing. I don’t want her daughter to hear anything negative from you when it comes to her mother. Do you get me?”

He glares at me. “She’s my daughter.”

I lean farther into the car. His hand is on the door, and I cover it with my own, pushing the pressure points. “Yeah, I know she’s your daughter. But I also know if you hurt her—or her mom—with your words or any way else, you’re a dead man. Trust me, I won’t think twice.”

He looks as if he’s about to argue, but he doesn’t. His face is scrunched up as I apply more pressure to his hand. It wouldn’t take much for me to break a few bones, and honestly, I would take great pleasure in it. He nods his head, and it’s only then that I release my hold on him and step away.

“Bye now, we’ll be seeing you.”

He puts the car in gear and then asks me, “How long you in town for anyway?”

I put my hands on my hips. “As long as she wants me here.”

His eyes widen as he gets my drift. I wave at him as he’s backing out of the driveway. When he’s gone, I force a smile to my face and make my way back up to the porch. Alexis is now drinking a bottle of water, and Abby is watching me closely. “What was all that about?”

“Nothing. I wanted to have a man-to-man, that’s all.”

I sit down on the porch next to Abby and point to the box. “Can you tell which one I picked out for you?”

She looks at Alexis. “Well, look at that. She said you picked one special out for her. Are you telling me you picked out a special one for me too?”

I nod, unable to stop the smile that forms on my face. “I have to take care of my two favorite girls.”

Alexis giggles, and Abby’s gaze turns heated. Fuck, if we were alone right now, I’d take full advantage of that promise in her eyes. Instead, I point at the box. “Can you guess?”

She looks at the assortment of donuts and answers me unsure. “The chocolate donut with chocolate icing and chocolate sprinkles?”

I nod, and she shakes her head. “How did you know?”

I chuckle. “Are you kidding me? You’ve always loved chocolate ice cream, chocolate cake, chocolate frosting. Anytime we went anywhere, you got chocolate.”

She picks up the donut and holds it in her hand. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

I shrug. “I remember everything about you.”

She takes a deep breath, and her breasts rise and fall.

Alexis laughs, unaware of the sexual undertones. “Mom has a sweet addiction.”

We all laugh, and Abby takes a bite. She moans as the flavor hits her tongue, and I can’t take my eyes off her satisfied face. When she swallows, she’s looking at me, and there’s no holding back. “I’m finding that I have an addiction to sweet things too.”

The electricity between us is palpable. She knows exactly what I’m addicted to, and I can’t wait to have her again.

CHAPTER 19

ABBY

MY MOM KNOWS.

It's Sunday, and tonight is dinner at my parents' house. Alexis, Davis, and I all came over together and we're all starving, not having eaten since the donuts earlier today.

My parents didn't say a word when we all showed up together. They still haven't said anything, but my mom knows something is up. I can tell by the way she keeps staring at me.

My dad and Davis have talked through the whole meal while I try to focus on Alexis, avoiding my mom's knowing gaze.

"So how's rehab going?" Dad asks.

Davis clears his throat. "Good, really good, in fact. Walker is doing amazing things at the rehab center."

"What're your plans when you're done, son? You staying in Whiskey Run, or you leaving again?"

I sit perfectly still, waiting for Davis' answer.

"Well, actually, I talked to Walker this week about the job he offered me. It would be full-time."

I can't keep quiet any longer. "What kind of job? Will you be going on missions?"

He shakes his head. "No, I'm not able to do any more missions. My condition is a liability. He offered me a job at the center and the compound next door. I would be the head of security."

I can hear the pride in his voice as he talks to my dad about the job. It sounds as if he plans on staying at Whiskey Run. What does that mean for us?

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him, but I don't. We make it through dessert, and we're all in the kitchen cleaning up when my dad asks Davis to help him with something in the garage. They leave, and Alexis asks if she can print out some more homework sheets from her grandma's computer. After Alexis makes her way into my parents' home office, I'm left alone with my mom. "Go ahead, say it. I know you've been dying to."

She is wiping down the counter. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I laugh and finish putting away the dishes. "Okay."

It takes her all of ten seconds before she's across the kitchen, standing next to me. "Okay, fine. Spill it. What's going on?"

I look at her wide-eyed, trying my hand at innocence. "I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Abby Jean Campbell, you better talk to your mother."

I lean against the counter and cross my arms over my chest. "What do you want to talk about?"

She puts one hand on her hip and juts it out. "I want to know why when you showed up here, you were practically glowing. I haven't missed all the little looks and little secret smiles you two have been giving each other all night. Now if you don't want to tell me just yet, that's fine. Just say it. But don't lie to me."

I take a deep breath, and I know it will feel good to talk to someone about it. I talked to Olivia and Chloe on the phone this morning but didn't get any sound advice there. They're both just telling me to enjoy it and have as many orgasms as he's willing to give. Which is good advice, until I think about my daughter getting attached. "I'm not sure, Mom. We haven't really talked about it. I don't know what's happening between the two of us. I mean, don't get me wrong, there is obviously

attraction there, but before dinner I would have bet money he would be leaving soon, so yeah, I can't really tell you much."

"You love him."

She says it so matter-of-factly, I don't even try to argue with her. There's a part of me that has loved Davis for a long time. In the beginning, it was a different kind of love, but now it's all-consuming, and I'm not sure what to do with it. "Yeah, of course I love him. We all love him."

She shakes her head and puts her hand on my shoulder. "No, it's different, Abby. You're in love with him."

I could deny it, but I don't have any reason to. "Yeah, I love him, Mom. And he's probably going to break my heart."

"You don't—" she starts, but she's cut off when Davis appears in the doorway.

"Sorry to cut in, but Alexis is wondering if we can get her home. I guess she has a paper in her folder she wanted to do before school tomorrow."

The whole time he's talking, his eyes are searching my face, and all I can do is stand here with my mouth hanging open. He heard me. He heard me say I love him. I want to bury my face in my hands. How dumb can I be? Of course he's going to hightail it out of my life now. Geez, I slept with him last night, and already I'm confessing my love for him to my mother. I won't blame him when he leaves.

My voice is loud and shrill. "Yes. Of course. Good idea. I need to get home and grade some papers anyway. We should go." I grab my mom and hug her. "Thanks for dinner, Mom. I'll talk to you later."

I practically run past Davis to find my dad and tell him bye. Alexis is already gathering her things, and as soon as we've all said our goodbyes, we're in the car, driving the few minutes to my house.

Luckily, Alexis fills the conversation in the car. She talks about dance, school, homework, and even asks if there are any leftover donuts. As soon as we pull into the driveway, I'm

climbing out of the truck and helping Alexis out. “Well, thank you for the ride, Davis. We’ll talk to you soon.”

I’m walking toward the house without a backward glance, ready to get to the safety of my house. It’s not until I’m struggling with my purse, leftovers, and Alexis’ bag that I realize Davis has followed us up on the porch.

When I find the keys, I pull them out of my purse and put them in the door to unlock it. “Did you forget something?”

“Nope,” he says.

I push the door open, and we all step inside.

“I’m going to my room,” Alexis announces. “And I know, I know, bath in an hour and then brush my teeth and in bed. Davis, will you tuck me in later?”

He calls after her, “I sure will, Lex.”

She disappears down the hall, and I look everywhere but at Davis. “So I should probably apologize.”

He puts his hand to my chin and brings my face up. “Apologize for what?”

I look down the hall. Most likely, Alexis will be in her room for the next hour, poring over a homework sheet. She won’t look up until her bath alarm goes off, but I’m not taking any chances. I grab Davis’ shirt and pull him through the house, and when we get to the back door, I step out into the dark night, and he follows me onto the porch. I take a step back from him. “I’m sorry for what you heard at my parents’ house.”

He widens his stance and puts his hands on his hips. “You mean you’re sorry that I heard you tell your mom that you’re in love with me?”

I clench my eyes and nod my head. “Yes.”

“Did you mean it?”

I peel my eyes open and tilt my head to look up at him. The moon is out bright tonight, and he’s watching me closely.

My breath is just a whisper. “Did I mean it when I said that I love you?”

He swallows and nods his head, holding the rest of his body perfectly still. The damage is done. He’s already heard me say it, and there’s no reason for me to deny it now. “Yes, I meant it, but I shouldn’t have said it. I know you think I’m crazy. You have sex with me and the very next night, I’m telling my family that I’m in love with you.”

He crowds me, putting his hands to my waist. “You love me?”

I slap his chest lightly and shake my head. “Are you making fun of me, Davis?”

He leans down and looks me in the eye. “I’m not making fun of you. You can say it a hundred times, hell a thousand times, and that wouldn’t be enough.” He tilts my chin up. “I just want to hear you say it to me.”

In a quick breath, I tell him exactly how I feel. “I love you, Davis.”

He trembles and then presses his lips to mine. His firm lips take control over mine, and all I can do is let him have his way with me. When he pulls away, we’re both breathless, and his forehead is pressed to mine. He whispers to me, “I love you, Abby. Fuck, I love you so much.”

I rear back in shock. “You love me?”

His hands go to each side of my face, and he peers into my eyes. “Yeah, baby. I love you. You deserve a better man than me, and your brother is going to probably kill me when he finds out, but yeah, I love you.”

“I don’t care what my brother thinks. I’ll talk to him—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“No. I’ll talk to him. He needs to hear it from me.”

I lean my head against his chest, and he runs his hands up and down my back. I groan, “You’re killing me, Davis.”

His hands are gripping me tightly, pulling me against him. His manhood presses into my belly, and I slide up to my

tiptoes, wrapping my arms around his neck. “When do you need to be home?”

His hot breath is against my ear. “I’m not leaving until later. It will be after I’ve read your daughter at least two of her stories and I’ve tucked her into bed and we know she’s sleeping. And after I’ve given you at least two orgasms so you don’t forget about me tomorrow when you’re at work.”

I kiss his chest, grab his hand, and pull him to the back door. “Come on, let’s see if we can hurry Alexis up a little bit.”

He follows behind me without complaint. His hand is in mine until we get to Alexis’ room, and only then do I pull my hand from his. I try to explain by whispering, “I need to talk to her before—”

“I understand. I’m fine with whatever you need to do, Abby. Just know I’m not going anywhere. I’ll wait as long as you want me to.”

Dang, what did I do to deserve this man? After I nod, he walks into Alexis’ room. I sit in the chair while Davis sits on the edge of her bed while she shows him her books and papers.

She’s still riled up from the night, and she’s not going to go to bed soon, but it’s fine. Even though I’m looking forward to later tonight, this right here is good too. Almost too good.

CHAPTER 20

DAVIS

FUCK, what a surprise. I've been counting down the hours until Abby and Alexis were going to get home from school. I did orientation at work this morning and then caught up with my workout and therapy this afternoon. I had just run home, taken a shower, and was about to head out the door when the knock at my door takes me by surprise.

“What's up, fucker?”

My mouth drops when I see Zach standing in front of me.

I open my arms and wrap them around my friend, pulling him in for a hug. “You're home.”

He grimaces as he pulls me away. “Come on, no more of the mushy stuff. I've been with Mom and Dad since early this morning, and Mom has not stopped.”

I laugh. “She misses you.”

He nods. “I know. I miss them too. So what's up? You going to invite me in or what?”

I tense but hope he doesn't notice. “Actually, I was just heading out the door. I was on my way to your sister's. You want to come?”

His forehead creases, but he nods his head. “Sure. Am I good to leave my car out front?”

I walk outside, and he follows me as I shut the door. “Yeah, it will be fine.”

I unlock my truck, and we're both silent when we get in. I barely get out of the driveway and Zach turns to me. "So, uh, we going to talk about it? You're going to my sister's?"

It's a perfect opening for me to tell him now, but I should have thought this through. I need to tell him and make sure he's calm when we're not going to be around Abby and Alexis. I have a feeling he's going to lose his shit, and I don't want him to do it around Alexis and upset her. "Yeah, is that a problem?" I answer vaguely.

He rolls down the window and lets his arm hang out, making waves with his hand. "Nope, no problem. I'm just curious what you're doing at my sister's house."

Tell him. Now is the time to tell him. "Uh, have you met your niece? She got wind that you were coming into town soon, and she thought we should measure things and make the plans for the treehouse for when you get here."

Last night when Alexis was trying to stay up late, she was using every tactic possible, and the treehouse was one of her requests.

Zach groans. "Fuck, I forgot all about the treehouse."

I can't help but laugh. "Well, I guarantee she hasn't. She's going to be excited to see you home."

I nod. "I'll be excited to see her too, minus the treehouse."

I can't help but laugh. Zach is good at a lot of things, but patience is not one of his strong suits. "It will be fine. Plus, I'm here to help."

He bangs his fist on the dashboard. "Fuck yeah, that's what I'm talking about."

I'm smiling as I turn onto Abby's road. She and Alexis should be home by now, and I can't hide my excitement about seeing them again.

"What are you smiling about?" Zach asks.

My face freezes, and I think fast. "I'm thinking about the first time you say 'fuck' in front of Alexis. Abby is going to have your ass."

He slaps me in the arm. “Fuck you, man. I can handle my sister.”

No, I can handle your sister.

The thought fills my head before I can filter it, and I start to cough to cover it up. Thank God I didn’t say it out loud.

We turn onto her block, and the nerves hit me. I should have probably given her a heads-up, but I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.

When we get to her house, I knock on the door. I try to move to the side so Zach is the first person they’ll see, but he’s standing off behind a column trying to hide. Shit is about to get bad.

Abby opens the door, and the smile she gives me literally lights me up. “Abby,” I say, my voice strained. Her smile drops, and she shakes her head. “What? What’s wrong?”

Before I can answer, Zach jumps out. “Surprise!”

It takes her a minute, but she recovers quickly. “Zach! You’re home!” she says just as Alexis comes running out the door. “Uncle Zach!”

They run to him, and he gathers both of them in his arms. They’re laughing and smiling, and I lean against the column, enjoying the way both Abby and Alexis are carefree and happy in this moment.

When they’re done with the hugs, Alexis is pulling Zach inside. I grab on to the waistband at the back of Abby’s pants and lean down to whisper into her ear, “I haven’t told him yet.”

She gives me an irritated look. “Yeah, I gathered that.”

“I just wanted to wait—”

She shakes her head. “Whatever, I get it.”

Before I can say anything else, she’s inside and heading straight to the kitchen. “You guys are in luck; I fixed my big pan of lasagna.”

Zach is going through Alexis' papers. "Did Mom tell you I was here?"

Abby shakes her head. "Nope, you're just lucky, I guess."

He gives Alexis a high-five. "Hell—I mean heck—yeah, I'm lucky!"

We all gather around the dinner table, and conversation is flowing. I can't keep my eyes off Abby, but she's doing her best to ignore me. Eventually, when dinner is over and Alexis is sent to take a bath, Abby starts to clean up the kitchen. I stand up to help her, and she tries to stop me, but there's no way I'm going to sit here and let her do all the work. I start rinsing plates and loading the dishwasher while Zach leans back in his chair.

I do my own thing while brother and sister talk. I try to give them space until I hear Abby ask him, "So what are your plans while you're in town?"

Zach laughs. "Well, first things first. I'm going to get some strange tonight and thank God, I got my wingman to help me out."

I watch Abby, and her back stiffens. "You're going out?"

Zach laughs. "Yeah, Mom. We're going out, but don't worry; we won't drink and drive, and we'll make sure to wrap it up."

Abby's face turns a bright red, and she grabs a towel to start cleaning the top of the stove. She's scrubbing it like it's dirty, and there's not a speck of food on it as it is. I scrunch my nose, yawn, and tell Zach, "I'm actually pretty tired and I'm not interested in anonymous sex with some woman. Let's stay in. We can watch a movie or something."

"Fuck that!" Zach says and then holds his hands up when Abby gives him a look. "Sorry, I mean, heck with that. I haven't been laid in at least four months. I'm due. And hell, what about you? I know it's been a while. We're both due."

Abby drops the towel on the counter. "I better go check on Alexis in the bathtub. You guys have fun tonight. Lock the door on the way out."

Zach calls after her, “You haven’t changed your locks, have you? I may come here instead of going to Mom and Dad’s tonight.”

Abby smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “You have the key. But please don’t bring your women here. I really don’t want to have to explain that to your niece.”

Zach rolls his eyes. “We won’t. We’ll take them somewhere else before we come here.” He finishes with a wink, but she misses it because she’s stomping out of the room.

Zach jumps out of his seat and claps his hands together. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Seriously, let’s stay in. We can go out another night.”

But Zach is not listening. He grabs my keys I laid on the counter and starts walking out the door. I have no choice but to follow him. “Zach, brother, come on. Chill out for a minute.”

He stops, and for the first time tonight, the smile is gone off his face. “Davis, I just got off a mission. You remember what that’s like. I need to let off a little steam. Now are you going to go have a beer with me or what?”

Fuck, I know exactly how he’s feeling, and because of that, I follow him and catch my keys when he throws them at me. I lock the door to Abby’s house and then hit the unlock button on my truck. Zach is inside waiting on me when I get in.

With a turn of my wrist, the motor starts. “Where we going?”

“The Whistler.”

I nod and head toward downtown. I have to park in the side parking lot, and I’m quiet as I follow Zach inside.

We grab a high table next to the dance floor. I’ve only been in here one other time, but it still surprises me looking around. The outside makes it seem like it’s a small hole in the wall, but once you get inside, everything is fancy and nice.

“What do you want?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “I’m not drinking. I’ll drive us home. Live it up.”

He waves at the waitress, and when she comes over, he turns the flirting on. I grab my phone and open the messaging app. “Hey,” I text Abby.

I’m at a loss for words right now. There are so many things I want to say to her, but none of it seems enough. I wait for her to respond, but she doesn’t. I send another text. “I’m coming in to see you when I get back.”

I see that she’s read the message, but she doesn’t respond. I guess it’s a good thing that she didn’t tell me to stay the fuck away.

I pocket my phone and then ram my hand through my hair. Zach takes a sip of his beer when the waitress sets it down. “Fuck, Davis. Maybe I should be DD. You seem to be wound pretty tight.”

Before I can answer him, I hear the guys hollering as they walk in the front door. Sure enough, all the guys are here—Jason, Colter, Elias, Kanan, and they even got Daniel to come out tonight. Zach is on his feet, and he’s hugging and slapping the backs of all the guys. I sit back in my chair and just smile as I watch them. There’s a big part of me that wants to be with Abby right now, but I also know I need this. After the explosion where we were all hurt, we all fell apart. None of us were able to find our way. It was only after Walker brought us to Whiskey Run that we were able to start to get our shit together. And this, having all the guys here—with Zach—has been needed for a long time. Zach’s a goofball and always has been. But when Zach was the only one that left physically unscathed, the guilt almost killed him. Even though no one blamed him, he felt it and has had a hard time with the emotional healing.

The rest of the night is filled with laughter, drinking, and all of us having a good time. But no matter how much fun we’re having, as soon as Zach stands up, swaying on his feet, and says he’s ready to leave, I practically push him out the

door to my truck. Kanan is sober and is driving the rest of the guys back to the Center.

As we drive across town, Zach is snoring softly in the passenger seat the whole way to Abby's house. When we get there, I help him out of the truck, and even though I struggle with his weight, I do what I can to get him inside without making a racket. He hands me his key, and I unlock the door and then help him inside. We go into the living room, and the couch has been made up. I help him sit down, and by the time his head hits the pillow, he's out again. I take off his shoes and then cover him up.

When I'm sure he's out, I tiptoe down the hallway and walk into Abby's bedroom, closing the door behind me.

I sit on the edge of the bed and whisper her name. "Abby."
Her voice is soft in the darkness. "Yeah?"

When I know she's awake and I'm not going to scare her to death, I climb on the bed, letting my booted feet hang off the end and then wrap an arm around her, pulling her back to the front of my body.

"Don't be mad at me, Abby."

She turns her head to look at me and sighs. "I'm not." She rolls around so she's facing me, and her eyes find mine in the darkness. "I was jealous, and I don't have a right to be."

I cup her face. "You shouldn't be jealous."

She lifts her head and leans it against my chest. "This is moving too fast, Davis. I think we should slow it down."

Pain shoots through my chest. "What? Why?"

Her voice is muffled, but I can make out what she's saying. "I wanted to vomit when Zach was talking about you going to get strange, but the more I thought about it, the more I understood. At least for you. You haven't been with a woman in a while, and now that you have, maybe you want to see what's out there."

My voice is gruff. "The only woman I want is lying in my arms right now. I didn't hook up with any woman—hell I

didn't even look at a woman while I was out. All the guys came, and they drank a little—”

She puts her hand to my chest. “I think we should hold off on telling Zach and Alexis about us. I'm being irresponsible, and I need to think about Alexis.”

“Abby.” I only say her name, but there's so much more I want to say.

I feel her body tremble as she takes a deep breath and lets it out.

When she doesn't say anything, I lean down to her ear. “Abby, you loved me yesterday. Are you telling me that you don't today?”

She pulls back to look at me with a gasp. “No, God no. Davis, I'm giving you an out. I understand that you've been through hell, and I'm giving you an opportunity to—”

“You,” I tell her almost angrily. How the hell does she not know her worth? “You are what I want, Abby. Yes, I've been through hell, but you are my heaven.”

Her hand grabs on to my shirt. “Davis,” she says with feeling.

“If you want time, I'll give you time, but I'm going to prove to you that I'm the man you need.”

She scoots closer to me, burrowing her body into mine. “You're the man I need, Davis. The man I want.”

We lie here until our breaths are matched in patterns. Whether she realizes it or not, her hand stroking across my chest invigorates me, making me wish I could have her right now. “I was jealous, Davis,” she admits.

I kiss her forehead, her cheek, and then finally, I reach her lips. When we pull apart, I already know it's not enough. “You have no reason to be jealous. You're the only woman I want.”

Her fingers dig into my waist, and her hips move toward mine. I know what she needs. “We can't make love, Abby. Not with your brother in the other room.”

She practically whimpers. "I'll be quiet."

I smile at the desperation in her voice. "You need it, don't you, baby?"

She nods against my chest.

I push her to her back and lean over her. I let my hand trail down her belly and press there. "You need me to make you come?"

She trembles so hard it's like a fast convulsion. "Yes," she moans softly as she lifts her hips.

I let my hand slide under the band of her shorts. She sucks in a breath and lets it out with small pants. I stroke my fingers back and forth along her lower belly, and her breath hitches. When I finally make it to her honeyed core, she's already so wet she coats my finger. I circle her clit, and she throws her head back with a moan.

I cover her mouth with mine, swallowing her sounds of lust. I apply pressure to her swollen clit, and her hips pump into my hand. Our kiss is ravenous and all-consuming. She's so close, and when the orgasm hits her, she grabs my wrist and starts to whimper in my mouth. I release her mouth but stay close, and our breaths are mingled together. Her body is pulled taut, and her pussy pulsates, hips jerking uncontrollably.

When she starts to come down, her voice is filled with emotion. "Fuck."

I smile at her. "I think that's the first time I've heard you cuss."

She smiles and shakes her head. "What are you doing to me, Davis? You make me feel things I didn't even know I was capable of."

I lean my head against hers. My cock is hard, pressing against the zipper of my jeans. My heart is pounding in my chest, and all my senses are heightened. "You're mine, Abby. I said it once, and I'll say it again. You're my heaven... and when you're ready, everyone is going to know it."

She smiles and rests her head against my chest. We lie here for the longest time. I keep telling myself just a few more minutes, but around three a.m., I know I need to get out of here. I definitely don't want Zach finding me in her bed.

I slip from her hold, kiss her softly, and then make my way outside. In the cool of the early morning, a sadness comes over me. What I want more than anything is right inside, and I'd give anything to be able to sleep with her in my arms and be able to wake up next to her. Soon... soon, she's going to be mine completely.

CHAPTER 21

DAVIS

IT'S BEEN three days of pure family time. And yes, I have been included, but it also means that Abby and I have not been alone at all.

After spending a few hours over at the Campbells', I left Zach there and drove straight over to Abby's house. Alexis and Abby are playing outside, and when they see me, they both come over to the truck.

I'm smiling ear to ear when I get out, and I catch Alexis, who practically slings herself at me with a laugh. "What's up, Lex?"

She throws her head back. "Oooh, you still haven't come up with a nickname for Momma!"

I look Abby up and down. "You're right. I'm going to have to fix that, aren't I?"

Alexis nods. "Yep. Do you want to see the new book I got from the library today?"

I nod my head. "I sure do."

She takes off running toward the house, which means I have around ten seconds before she'll be running back out the front door. I plan to make good use of those ten seconds. I wrap my hand around Abby's waist and pull her to me. "I've missed you," I tell her before kissing her until we're both breathless.

I barely pull away before I hear the screen door opening. I turn to Alexis but see Abby out of the corner of my eye with a

smile on her face, touching her fingers to her now swollen lips. I sit down on the porch and talk to Alexis about her book, and of course, we have to read it together. When she's done, she disappears inside to grab another.

Abby is sitting in the rocking chair across the porch. I get up to go sit in the one next to her. "Hey."

She smiles and looks at me through her long lashes. Her blue eyes are darker than normal, letting me know what she's thinking about right now. "Hey, Davis."

The sound of my name on her lips causes my smile to widen. "I need to ask you something."

She nods curiously.

"Your brother leaves in a few days, and I don't want to wait any longer. I want to talk to him man to man, face to face. It's past time he knew how I felt about you."

She grips the arms of her chair. I'd give anything to pick her up and slide her to my lap, but I don't have that luxury. Not yet.

When she doesn't say anything, I ask her again, "What do you think? I won't do anything you don't want me to, but I need for him—hell, I need for everyone to know that you're mine."

She opens her mouth, but as soon as she does, Alexis comes running out the door onto the porch. She's pointing at the house next door. "Can Jamie come over and play, Mom?"

I look where she's pointing, and a little girl is standing on the porch next door. Abby stands up and waves at the other mom and tells Alexis, "She sure can. You guys play in the yard while we're outside, okay?"

Abby barely gets it all out and Alexis is screaming and waving for her friend to come over. The mom walks her to the fence and waves as the little girl comes in the yard.

Alexis and Jamie take off running to the back yard, giggling.

As soon as they're around the side of the house, I'm asking her again, "Abby, talk to me."

She blinks at me, unsure. "You realize this changes everything. If anything happened to the two of us, I don't want your friendship with my brother—"

I cut her off. "Abby, don't talk like that. I'm in love with you. When I think about you and me, I think about our future. I think about dating you, waking up with you in my arms, walking hand in hand with you through downtown... I think about.... you wearing my ring."

She gasps, and her eyes are huge on her face. I reach for her hand and rub my thumb along her wrist. "Don't act surprised, Abby. I love you. Some people will think I'm too old for you, I'm a cripple, and I have my own demons that I'm dealing with... but I hope you know that no one could love you as much as I love you."

Her hand curls into mine, and she speaks to me in an emotion-filled voice. "And Alexis?"

I nod. "I know you're a package, Abby. But more than that, your daughter already has me completely wrapped around her little finger. I love her and would do anything for her. She will always be safe, protected, and loved. I promise you that."

She stands up and comes toward me. My hands are on her hips, and I'm about to pull her to my lap when I hear a blood-curdling scream.

Abby and I both are on the move, down the porch and to the backyard. We get to the side of the house, and Jamie is running toward us. "Alexis is stuck in a tree!" she screams at us.

I run as fast as I can, forcing myself to move faster than I have in a long time. When I see Alexis high in the tree—the one that Zach and I are supposed to build a tree house in—my stomach lurches, and I almost drop to my knees. She's so high up.

I hold my hands toward the sky. "Alexis, listen to me, baby. Quit crying, okay?"

Her sobs slow, and she hiccups.

Abby is standing next to me. “Alexis, you’re okay.”

She starts to shake her head, and in my most calm voice, I ask her, “Are you hurt anywhere?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m scared.”

Fuck, so am I. If anything happens to this little girl, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“Okay, listen to me, okay?”

She nods, sucking in her bottom lip. She’s trying not to cry, but I can see her body physically shaking.

“Okay, listen. I’m going to catch you.”

Abby gasps next to me, and I can feel her eyes trained on me, but I don’t dare look away from Alexis, who is vigorously shaking her head side to side. “I can’t,” she cries.

I’m nodding my head, hands held up to her. “Yes, you can. Lex, I won’t let you get hurt. I promise.”

She pulls at the dress she’s wearing and yanks on it. She’s so shaky on the tree branch, I move underneath her in case she falls instead of jumps, but she doesn’t move.

When she turns back to look at us, she’s about to cry again. “I can’t. My dress is stuck, and I can’t get it unstuck. Please, Davis. I don’t want to be up here anymore. Please get me down. Please.”

I’m on the move and stop at the bottom of the tree. Even though I’ve always carried a pocketknife, I still check to make sure it’s there. When I wrap my hands around it, I drop it back in my pocket and make my way up two steps up the tree. Abby puts her hand on my thigh. “Davis, this is crazy. Let me go after her; I’m smaller than you.”

I shake my head. “No way, honey. I’m going up and bringing our girl down. I promise, she’s going to be fine.”

She nods, sucking back a sob. “I trust you.”

Jamie and her mom are coming around the back of the house, and they come to stand next to Abby.

I climb up the tree, and the whole way up, I'm talking to Alexis in a soothing voice. "You are doing a great job, Lex. You just stay calm and hold on. That's the only two things you have to do, okay?"

She stutters, "Ookay."

I keep climbing, cursing my prosthetic the whole way up. My movements are clumsy, and I'm missing steps and catching myself, but there's no way I'm giving up.

I get to where she is and sit on the thick branch. I reach for her, and she's only able to move a few inches toward me, but she latches on to my neck in a death grip. I hold on to her and brush my hand through her hair. "It's okay, Lex. I got you."

She starts to cry, burying her face into my neck, and I kiss her hair. I look at where the branch is tangled in the ruffles of her dress. Any way I pull it, it's going to rip. I pat her back. "It's okay. Please stop crying, you're killing me."

She pulls back. "I'm not killing you."

I wipe at the tears on her face. "It means it hurts me that you're crying. I hate for you to be sad and scared."

She puts her little hand on my cheek. "I don't want to hurt you, Davis."

Fuck, this little girl completely has my heart. How can Abby even question it?

I pull the pocketknife from my pocket. "I'm going to have to cut your dress, but I promise I'll buy you as many dresses as you want, okay?"

She nods. I cut the dress, pulling her free from the branches, and then pocket my knife again. I heft her closer to me, and she wraps her legs around my middle. She's holding me so tightly I can barely breathe, but I don't have the heart to ask her to loosen up.

"Hold on to me, and no matter what, don't let go, okay?"

She nods into my neck, and I start to move, bringing us both down the tree. I take it slower on the way down, and each move brings a grimace to my face. I know I'm going to pay for this later, but nothing else matters right now. I have to get Alexis to safety.

When we get closer to the ground, I know that I'm going to have to drop the last few feet, and I'm afraid to do it with Alexis in my arms. I stop and tell her, "Honey, I'm going to hand you down to your Mom, okay?"

She shakes her head side to side. "Honey, it's okay. We're so close to the ground, you're going to be okay. I promise."

She takes a deep breath, and I call down to Abby. "Abby, I'm going to hand Alexis down to you, okay?"

She hollers down from below, but I can't see her. I hang on to the tree with one arm and then wrap my other arm around Alexis. "It's okay. Your mom's got you, okay?"

She nods, and I lift her one-handed away from me and dangle her down a little. I turn to make sure Abby has her, and she hollers up, "I got her."

It takes all I have to let go of her, but I do, trusting that Abby's got her.

As soon as she's down, she's crying in her mom's arms, but she's unhurt. I keep hanging here, trying to catch my breath.

Abby soothes her daughter and then passes her to Jamie's mom, who takes the two girls around the side of the house while Abby comes to stand underneath me. "Davis, are you okay?"

I nod, sweat forming at my brow. "I'm fine. I need you to back up."

She gasps and puts her hand to her lips as if she just remembered. "Your leg!"

I grit my teeth, hating the fact that she's been reminded that I'm a cripple. "I'm fine. I just know the landing is going

to be off. I need you far away, Abby. Don't try and catch me; you'll be hurt."

She moves to the side, and her eyes are wide as she watches me. All I need to do is jump and land on my good leg. I may topple over, but that would be better than the alternative.

I try to go a few inches lower, but I lose my step, and as I start to fall, I push away from the tree with my good leg and accidentally land on my injured leg.

The pain of the prosthetic ramming into my stump is like a shock to my system. I go down with a loud thud, and there's no way I can hold back the scream that escapes my mouth.

Landing on my back, I try to catch my breath. Instantly, Abby is standing over me, and I roll over, trying to get up, but the pain is too much. I lie with my face buried in the grass. I can feel Abby's hands on my back, my arms, and my legs. When I groan, she stops and moves up by my head. "Davis, are you—"

I cut her off. "Go on, Abby. Alexis needs you. Go to Alexis."

She's sobbing now. "She's scared, but she's fine. I need to help you."

"Go," I tell her again.

"I'm not leaving you."

I roll over on my back and look up at her. The pity on her face is too much for me to handle right now. "Please go, Abby. Please, I don't want you here. Can't you see that? Just leave me the fuck alone."

She gasps and rears back as if I've hurt her, which I know I did. This is not her fault. I shake my head and soften my voice. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, but please just go, Abby."

She gets up and walks away, not looking back at me one time.

I struggle to get up to my feet, and when I do, I'm limping so badly, I'm afraid I'm going to have to crawl to get to my

truck.

I walk around the opposite side of the house and finally make it to my truck. I get in and leave, knowing that the future I thought I could have is now not possible. There's no way I can force myself on Abby and Alexis. I love them enough to know that they're both better off without me.

CHAPTER 22

ABBY

TWO DAYS and he's not responded to any of my text messages. Zach is not any help. He's not telling me a thing, so I do the only thing I know I can do. I left my brother hanging out with Alexis at the house, telling him I'd be back.

The whole way to Davis' apartment, I planned out what I was going to say. I can only imagine what he's feeling right now, but we can't keep going like we are. Plus, Alexis is upset that she hasn't seen him since the whole tree incident.

When I get to his apartment, the shades are drawn, and the front door is closed. I knock on it and step back, crossing my arms over my chest. He obviously doesn't want to see me, but we can't keep going like this.

I can hear someone on the other side of the door, but after a minute passes and it doesn't open, I knock again.

Finally, Davis cracks open the door and peers out to me. "Hey, Abby."

I let out a sigh of relief. At least he doesn't seem angry with me. "Hey, Davis, can I come in?"

He nods and opens the door, backing into his apartment. He lets go of the handle and makes his way over to the couch. His limp is more pronounced, and I know it's from jumping from the tree the other day.

He sits heavily on the edge of the couch and locks his hands together in his lap. "How's Alexis?"

I tilt my head to the side. "You want the truth?"

A worried look crosses his face. “Yes, is she okay?”

I shrug. “Physically she’s just fine. She doesn’t understand why you haven’t come to see her. She thinks”—I let out a breath—“she thinks that you’re mad at her for climbing the tree, and she blames herself that you were hurt.”

“Fuck, Abby.” I groan, hating myself even more right now. “I’ll come see her, I’ll explain.”

“Okay, thank you.”

He nods and claps his hands together and clears his throat. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I move to the edge of my seat and hold my breath. “Okay.”

“I’m not going to take the job here. I think it’s time I move on.”

All I can do is repeat what he just said. “Move on?”

He nods and is looking at his hands instead of me. “Yeah, I think it’s best for everyone if I go.”

“Bullshit, Davis. That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

He rears back in surprise, but I’m not holding back. “If you’re doing this, then tell me the truth, tell me you don’t want me, tell me this was just a fling, but don’t act like you’re doing what’s best for me.”

He remains calm, which makes me even madder. I get up, and so does he. He winces, grabbing his knee and bending over in pain.

I had planned to go, but I can’t leave him like this. “Davis, are you okay?”

He grits his teeth. “I’m fine.”

I come toward him. “Have you taken anything for the pain?”

“No!” he says loudly and then softens his voice. “No, I haven’t taken anything. I can’t.”

I reach for him, but he jerks away from my touch. I let my hand drop to my side and try to hide the hurt from my voice.

“Davis, there are non-narcotic pain pills you can take. Heck, even an over-the-counter pain reliever can help you some.”

He sits back down on the couch. “No, I can’t. I’m afraid that if I do... I won’t stop there.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeeze. “Davis, it’s okay...”

He pulls from my touch. “Abby, you don’t get it, and I’m not going to explain it. It’s over between us.”

The sob escapes before I can stop it. My mouth drops open, and all I can do is stare at him. “But... you love me,” I tell him and feel ignorant as soon as I say it. If he loved me, he wouldn’t be ending it. He wouldn’t be pushing me away and leaving Whiskey Run.

He stands up to his full height and puts his hands on his hips. His voice is calmer than I’ve ever heard it, hiding any emotion he may be feeling. “Abby, it’s just all too much. We just have too much against us. You’re young, too young. Your brother. My, uh, health.”

I clench my eyes shut. I want to beg him. I want to get down on my knees and plead with him not to do this, but I don’t. I open my eyes to look at him, and his head is back, staring at the ceiling. He won’t even look at me.

It feels as if my heart is splitting in my chest. “I gotta go,” I tell him.

I walk across the room, secretly hoping he’ll stop me, but he remains where he’s at. I run from his apartment and don’t stop until I’m sitting in my car. I hold back the tears long enough to drive around the corner. In a rush, I pull to the side of the road and put my car in park. Only then do I let the tears fall. I cry, and big, wracking sobs shake my body. I thought I could come here today, and we could work things out. I thought this was something we could work through and overcome, but obviously he’s not interested. He doesn’t love me. He never did.

CHAPTER 23

DAVIS

I DON'T KNOW how long I've been sitting outside Abby's house, but it's been awhile. I went to a boutique in Jasper and bought all the dresses on the rack for Alexis. They're still sitting on the passenger seat of my truck, untouched.

My plan was to drop them off on the porch with a note and leave, but I can't bring myself to do it. It seems too final.

I lean my arms and head on the steering wheel and close my eyes. Since I saw Alexis up in that tree the other day, I've been on a downward spiral. I'm not the man that I once was. I climbed that tree, but the whole time, I wondered if my leg was going to give out on me or worse than that, what if I physically wasn't able to save her?

When I got her to safety but then fell myself, every worst-case scenario has been swimming in my head. What if Abby and Alexis need me and I physically can't do what needs to be done? What if I turn to drugs again to deal with the pain? What if I can't be the man that Abby—and her daughter—deserve?

I wasn't lying to her when I said there are too many things against us. It's the truth. This may not be what I want, but it's the best thing for Abby and her daughter.

With a sigh, I lift my head. I'm about to open the door when I'm startled by the sight of my best friend—my brother—standing beside my door with a frown on his face and his arms crossed over his chest.

I open the door and step out, matching his stance.

His voice is grim. “You the reason my sister came home with her eyes practically swollen shut from crying?”

Fuck. It kills me that I’ve hurt her. “Yeah, I’m to blame.”

He points toward the house. “And I guess you’re the reason that my niece has been walking around like she’s lost her best friend in the world.”

I swallow, completely ashamed of myself. “Yeah, that’s my fault too.”

“What the fuck, man? What’s your problem?”

I shake my head and stare off in the distance. “I know, trust me, I know. But I’m leaving soon and—”

Zach cuts me off. “You’re leaving Whiskey Run? You’re leaving Abby and Alexis?”

When I nod my head, he screams, “Fuck” and starts to pace back and forth in front of me.

I hold my hand out to stop him but think better of it. “I thought you’d be happy about that.”

He stops and glares at me. “Happy? Why the fuck do you think I talked you into coming here, Davis? You were all prepared to tell Walker no, and I’m the one that convinced you that this was a good move. But fuck, dude, if I knew you were going to string my sister along and break her heart—”

It hits me then. All the ways that Zach tried to convince me to come to Whiskey Run. His insistence that I take care of his sister and his niece. The constant pushing us together. “You tried to get us together?”

He laughs snarkily. “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. My sister has been in love with you for way too long. I never thought anything of it until that day about a year ago when I showed up at your apartment.”

I search my memory, trying to figure out what he’s talking about.

He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “You were just a few months clean. I had been worried about you, and when you

went outside to help your neighbor with something, I went through your apartment, looking for drugs or anything else.”

My mouth drops open. “You searched my house?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Fuck you, dude, you can’t be mad about it. The time before that, you were literally passed out foaming at the mouth. I thought you were dying, so yeah, forgive me if I went through your things to make sure you were staying on the up and up.”

I’m not mad about it. “So what does that have to do—”

He holds his hand up to stop me. “When I went through your things, I found the pictures of my sister. You’re fucking lucky they started when she was eighteen. But yeah, it seems you have a little shrine of my sister and her daughter. It was then I knew that maybe I could help you and her get together.”

Angrily, I point at him. “You wanted to fix your sister up with an addict?”

He rolls his eyes and comes toward me. He moves to lean against my truck, and we’re shoulder to shoulder. “Trust me, I thought long and hard about it. And that was a year ago. You’ve been clean ever since. Plus, you’re the best man I know. Of course, I’d be okay with you and my sister together.”

I rub my hand over my unshaven chin. “Did you know that your sister helped me then? I mean, I didn’t see her, but she’s the reason that I was able to get my shit together.” I take in a deep breath and let it out. “I wanted to see her... but I knew I couldn’t see her like that.”

Zach turns to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Look, brother, I can only imagine what you’re going through. I’ve told Abby to give you time and you’d figure it out, but now you tell me you’re leaving...”

I lean my head back and look up at the sky. The thought of leaving Abby practically guts me. “She deserves more.... She deserves more than me,” I tell him, pounding my hand against my chest. “How can I stay? I’m a fuckin’ cripple, Zach. What if Abby or Alexis need me and I can’t help them? What if I fail

and fall into the fuckin' black hole again and I can't get out? What if she... changes her mind?"

He's quiet for so long I lower my head and look at him. He's the complete opposite to me. I'm tall, dark, and big. He's blond and has blue eyes like his sister. Half the guys call him Hollywood because of his good looks. He's looking at me, searching my face. "You're living in fear, man. And that's not the Davis Jones I know."

"I'm not the same man, Zach. I haven't been for a long time."

"Bullshit. That's bullshit, and you know it. Look at you, you're still the same guy. You're still the same person you've always been. You can't let the past or your injuries hold you back. Plus, have you met my sister? When she loves someone, it's forever. She's not going to change her mind about you. But whatever this is, you can't just push her away." He sighs and shakes his head with a laugh. "For years, she's told me she's a grownup and can make her own decisions, but I'm just finally catching on. She's right. This is a decision that only she can make. But you have to talk to her before you ruin both your lives."

I let out a deep breath, but even doing so, it's like there's a pressure on my chest. I've felt it since I walked away from here a few days ago. I gesture with my head toward the house. "Abby and Alexis in there?"

"Abby is. I took Alexis over to Mom and Dad's. I actually went looking for you at your apartment before coming back here."

I grit my teeth together. "I need to talk to Abby."

He grips my shoulder. "I know you do. I'm going to go over to Mom and Dad's to get Alexis now, so I'll try to give you guys some space."

I start to move away from the truck, but Zach stops me. He moves in front of me and puts a hand to my chest. "Don't hurt her, Davis. Not again."

I choke back my emotions. I've been such a damn fool. I nod my head, and only after Zach searches my face does he seem satisfied. He lifts his hand from my chest, and I remember the dresses I brought for Alexis. I reach in my truck to grab the bag, and then I limp my way toward the house.

I knock on the door and stand back, hoping that Abby will talk to me. I won't blame her if she refuses me.

When the door opens and I look at Abby, my stomach drops. I've never felt anything like this in my life, but in this moment, I hate myself. I hate what I've done to her. Her eyes are red, and even though they're dry, it's quite obvious she's been crying. She's looking at me as if she's waiting for me to disappoint her and break her heart all over again. I soften my voice. "Abby, baby..."

Her eyes jump to mine, and she grips the side of the door a little tighter. "What do you want, Davis?"

I hold up the bag. "I brought these for Alexis. I promised her that I'd replace the dress I had to cut."

She doesn't reach for the bag. Instead, she crosses her arms over her chest. "She doesn't care about the dress, Davis. She cares about you."

I let my hand holding the bag fall and gesture toward the house with my head. "Can I come inside?"

She's going to tell me no. I can see it clearly on her face that she doesn't want to let me in. "Zach said Alexis is at your parents'. Can you and I talk for a minute?"

She surprises me when she takes a step back and holds her hand out for me to come in.

I walk past her, and my body brushes against hers. My reaction is instant. My heart rate picks up and my cock stiffens, but I try to tamp it down with my thoughts. I walk into the living room and set the bag on the coffee table. She follows behind me. I wait for her to sit down, and when she does, I sit on the couch next to her. She sits stiffly, with her back ramrod straight and her face pulled tight. Nothing like the Abby that I'm used to.

“When are you leaving?” she asks me.

I curl my hand into a fist, fighting myself from reaching for her. “I’m not sure if I’m leaving. That’s going to depend on you.”

She leans back. “Me?”

I nod. “If you can’t forgive me, I understand, Abby.”

She repeats my words. “Forgive you?”

I scoot closer to her. “I shouldn’t have walked away from you. I should have stayed and talked this out with you, told you how I was feeling.”

CHAPTER 24

ABBY

I JUT my chin at him. I know the answer, but I want to hear him say it. “Why did you walk away?”

He doesn't look at me; instead, he looks down at his clenched hands. “Because I knew that you deserved a better man than me.”

My nose scrunches up. “A better man?” I shake my head in confusion. “There isn't a better man than you, Davis.”

He opens his mouth, but I stop him. “No, listen to me. Please listen. You're a man that climbed a damn tree to save my daughter. You didn't think about yourself or how it could affect you, you just did it. You're the man that has made me feel alive for the first time in my life. You're the man...” I let out a shuddered breath. “You're the man that loves me and loves my daughter, but you'd walk away because you think you're not enough for me... for us. Well, I've got news for you, Davis Jones. You're more than enough, and you can leave here, but just know even when you leave, Alexis and I are still going to love you. You'll be taking our hearts with you.” I reach for him, putting my hand on his. “Or you can stay here. We can fight our demons together. You can teach my daughter about love and that men, real men, stick around. You can love me the way you think I deserve to be loved.”

When he lifts his head and looks at me, his eyes are wet. He says my name with such emotion I swear I can feel it. “Abby...”

He turns his hand over and threads our fingers together. “I’ve been so stupid.”

I lean toward him. “You have been pretty stupid.”

He puts his big hands on each side of my face and searches my eyes. “I love you, Abby. I’m sorry that I hurt you and Alexis, but I promise from this point forward, in everything I do, I will always think about you and your daughter first. I won’t walk away again. If you ever want me gone, you’ll have to tell me.”

My hands go to the front of his shirt, and I grip the material. “That’s not going to happen.”

He leans in, and just when his lips touch mine, the front door opens, and Alexis is hollering Davis’ name. “Davis! You’re here! You’re really here!”

Zach is trailing behind her. “Sorry, I told her you were here, and she wasn’t having it. We had to come straight over.”

I pull away from Davis, but not far. My brother is looking at me, and I know he’s worried. I broke down earlier and told him everything. Well, not everything, but I did tell him how I feel about Davis. “It’s fine. We’re fine,” I assure him.

He looks between his best friend and me. “Good. That’s good. I’m going to go out to the porch for a few.”

We don’t try to stop him. Davis holds his hand out to Alexis. “Hey, Lex, I missed you.”

She comes to stand in front of us. “I missed you too. Are you okay? Mom said you were hurting, but if we were patient, you would come back. I was really patient, wasn’t I, Mom?”

I nod my head and tug on her braid. “You were super patient.”

Davis points at the bag on the table. “I brought you some dresses.”

She smiles but doesn’t even turn toward the bag. “Thanks, Davis. Are you feeling better? I’m sorry for climbing the tree, and I’m sorry that I caused you to get hurt.”

Davis reaches for her. “Lex, baby, it’s not your fault that I got hurt. I’m sorry that I left the way I did. I know you were worried about me, and I shouldn’t have left. I promise I’ll never do that again.”

She jumps into his lap and puts her arms around his neck. “I love you, Davis.”

The big, burly man’s eyes widen and then clench. “I love you too, Lex.”

She pulls back, sitting on his lap. “Did you ever come up with a nickname for Mom?”

He looks at me, and I don’t try to hide the love shining in my eyes. Seeing the two of them together, knowing how much they love each other, gives me a warm feeling. My heart literally feels twice its size. “It’s okay, I don’t need a nickname.”

Davis reaches for me. “Mine.”

Alexis laughs. “That’s not a nickname.”

But Davis shakes his head. “Heaven. My Abby. Abby Love. Love of my life.”

Alexis giggles. “Davis, do you love Mommy?”

He nods his head and then drags his eyes from me to look at my daughter. “I do. I love her—and you—more than anything in this world. Is that okay with you?”

She leans in, resting her head against his chest. “Yes, I’m glad. Because we love you too.”

He holds his arm out, and I join them. He’s got both arms wrapped around us, holding on like he never wants to let us go. I burrow into him, ready for whatever the future holds because together we can do anything.

CHAPTER 25

ABBY

IT'S BEEN four weeks since the whole tree incident. Davis asked Alexis to promise not to climb any more trees unless he was watching, and she agreed. In exchange, Davis promised to work on the treehouse.

My brother left on an emergency mission, and even though I've talked to him a few times since he's left, I still miss him.

I've been cautious these last few weeks, and I hate the feeling. I want to be happy, I want to feel free, but there's a part of me that's worried Davis is going to freak out again and walk out on me.

"What are you thinking about?"

Davis' voice is gruff in my ear. It's Saturday and early in the morning. It's about this time that Davis sneaks out of the bed, goes into town, and gets our favorite donuts from Sugar Glaze and then comes back to "surprise" Alexis and me with breakfast.

"Nothing," I answer him, hating the lie as soon as it leaves my mouth.

He kisses my cheek and rests his chin on the top of my head. "You're lying to me, baby."

I trail my hand up his chest and circle my finger around his nipple, determined to get his mind somewhere else.

But he's not having it. He puts his hand over mine to stop me. "Talk to me. What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

I rest my head against his bare chest and let it out. All the thoughts and feelings I've had that I thought I could ignore. "Every day, I worry that you're going to decide this is it. I'm afraid I'm going to wake up, and you're going to be gone. I love you, Davis. God, I love you so much, but I'm scared. If you left now, you would destroy Alexis and me."

"Hey, hey, hey," he says, lifting my chin up so I have to look at him. "I'm not going anywhere. If it was up to me, I'd go to bed with you in my arms and wake up the same way. I think about you all the time. I hate being away from you. I want..."

When his voice trails off, I sit up a little and look at him. "You want what?"

"I want us to be together."

I tilt my head to the side. I can barely make out his face in the darkness. "I thought we were together."

He pushes me to my back and leans over me. "I want to be together, together."

I smile and let my hand trail down his body. "I'm sure we can take care of that right now."

He chuckles in the darkness. "My girl has a one-track mind."

I slap his chest. "And you don't?"

He nuzzles his nose into my neck. "Oh, I do, but that's not what I meant. I want us to be together, together. I don't want you worrying about what I'm doing or..."

I stop him. "It's not like that. I'm being ridiculous. We've been together a little over a month. Our relationship is so new... I just don't want you to walk away. This is a me problem, Davis. It's not anything you can fix."

His voice is thick. "What if we got married?"

I suck in a breath. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it, but that's not what I tell him. "Davis, I wasn't hinting at..."

I let my voice trail off when he leans across me, grabbing something off the floor. When he rises back up, he has his jeans in his hands, and he's digging in the pocket. Once he finds what he's looking for, he drops the pants, sits up, and brings me up with him. "Abby."

"What is it?"

He puts a hand at my neck. "Baby, I still struggle every day. I know I'm still not the man you deserve, but I'm working on it. I bought this ring two weeks ago because I know that no matter what our future holds, I want you to be my wife."

The tears come before I can stop them. "Wife?"

He chuckles. "Yeah. Will you marry me, Abby Campbell? I promise to love you and your daughter for the rest of my life. I'll never leave you, and you will never doubt the love I have for you."

I struggle to get the words out. "You want to marry me?"

He shakes his head and leans his forehead against mine. "How could you not know that? I want forever with you, Abby. I've already talked to your dad and your brother about it. They gave us their blessing... as long as I'm what you want."

"Yes, yes, you are the man I want, Davis. The only man I want."

He slides the ring on my finger, and then his lips cover mine, and he kisses me until we're lying down, and he's pulled me atop him. When he pulls away, he whispers, "I'll have to tell Lex I came up with another nickname for you."

My smile widens. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah... wife. And I can't wait to call you that for the rest of our lives."

"I love you... husband."

I groan. "Fuck, I love hearing that on your lips. I love you too, wife."

EPILOGUE

DAVIS

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS,” Jason says.

I just laugh as I guide him toward the hair salon. “Come on, dude. We are past time to get our hair cut. Walker told us both that we needed to tighten this up.”

Abby is in front of us, leading the way. “I’m not going to lie. I’m going to miss the long hair.”

I put one hand at her waist. “I can leave it if you prefer.”

Jason overhears and stops in his tracks. “Yeah, let’s skip it. Come on, let’s go to Red’s Diner. My treat. I’ll buy you each a piece of the apple cinnamon Blaze cake that everyone keeps going on about.”

Abby threads her arm through Jason’s and walks him the last few steps toward the salon. “Jason, my friend Olivia is the best in town. We can’t cancel now. Plus, Davis has already promised us dinner at Red’s, his treat.”

Jason grumbles, but he follows right along with her. That’s the power of Abby. She eases even the hardest of hearts.

When we get inside, the salon is full of women, and they all stare. Olivia comes up to Abby and pulls her into a big hug. “There she is. It’s been forever since I’ve seen you. Heck, when was the last time I saw you? Oh yeah, the sex club.”

Abby grabs her friend and covers her mouth. “Seriously. Why don’t you buy a billboard and put it up on there that we went to a sex club? Geez, Olivia.”

She just laughs, and Abby shakes her head. “Anyway, you know Davis. My fiancé,” she singsongs and then pulls Jason toward Olivia. “And this is Jason.”

She looks at Jason, and her eyes widen. She walks toward him and puts one hand on his elbow and then puts her other hand on his to hold it. “Hey, Jason, you want to go first?”

His voice is gruff. “Yeah. Sure. Might as well get it over with.”

Olivia is unfazed. She laughs and then threads her arm through Jason’s. “Okay, so sexy and grumpy. My kind of man.” She pulls him toward her chair and calls over her shoulder, “You two have a seat.”

Abby and I go sit down, and she’s smiling widely as she watches her friend walk across the shop with Jason on her arm. I ignore the stares of all the women around us. “What are you looking at?”

She slaps me on the arm excitedly. “Did you see that? I’m pretty sure that Olivia is flirting with Jason.”

I watch the two of them across the room. It looks like Jason is flushed, but his face is grim. I knew he was uncomfortable about coming here today. “Maybe, but if so, she’s going to have her work cut out for her with him.”

She laughs, her eyes still on the couple across the room. “You don’t know Olivia.”

I thread our hands together and run a finger along the ring she’s wearing. “Have you picked a date yet?”

She turns to me. “About that...”

She looks unsure, and it automatically freaks me out. “You already said yes. I’m not letting you change your mind.”

She leans toward me and kisses me right here in front of everyone. “You’re so crazy. I’m not changing my mind, but I did pick a date.”

“Name it,” I tell her.

“The first Saturday in October.”

I think about today's date and then try to compute it. "Wait. That's next month."

She nods. "I don't want to wait. I don't want a big wedding. I just want to be your wife."

I lean toward her. This woman consumes my every thought, and I know that having my ring on her finger is going to give me some peace in knowing she's mine. "I want that too. You just tell me when and where and I'll be there. It will be the best day of my life."

She kisses me again, and it kills me that I can't kiss her the way I want to. When she pulls away, she whispers, "Our lives. It will be the best day of OUR lives."

Want to read Davis and Abby's extended epilogue? Oh, it's swoon worthy. Read it here: [Davis and Abby](#).

Read Jason and Olivia's story in [Dark Obsession](#)

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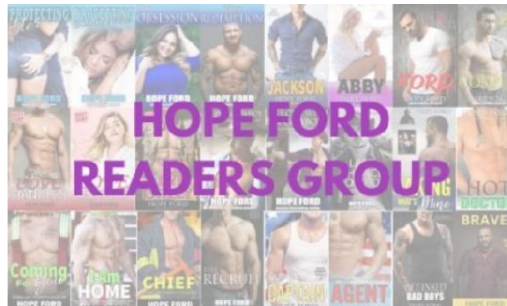
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