



EASIER
SAID
than DONE

a
LINDELL
novel

MARIE JAMES

Table of Contents

Easier Said Than Done

Series in the same world:

Lindell Novels

Synopsis

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Other Books in the Same World](#)

[Social Media Links](#)

**[OTHER BOOKS FROM MARIE
JAMES](#)**

Easier Said Than Done

A Lindell Novel

Easier Said Than Done

Copyright © 2024 Marie James

Editing by Marie James Betas & Ms. K Edits

EBooks are not transferable. All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded, or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Series in the same world:

(All Marie James books are standalone novels; Each one is about a new couple)

Cerberus MC

Blackbridge Security

Mission Mercenaries

Ravens Ruin

Hale Series

Lindell Novels

[Back Against the Wall](#)

[Easier Said than Done](#)

[With a Grain of Salt](#)

Synopsis

If you can't ask your best friend to get you pregnant then who can you ask?

Adalynn Tate made a promise to her childhood friend.

They vowed that they'd do everything together, including marrying their junior high crush and having all their babies at the same time.

Her friend has succeeded. She got the guy, and the first bun is in the oven.

Now it's Adalynn's turn to make her own dreams a reality.

When Adalynn's best guy friend comes over, he sees the pamphlets for her to have a baby on her own.

Cash does what any best friend would do – offers his free, platonic services instead of extra medical bills.

He doesn't know Adalynn has had a crush on him since junior high, something she's done her best to lock down deep as not to threaten their friendship.

Adalynn knows in this world you don't get to have it all: the baby, the man, the fairytale.

But Cash has other plans for her.

Chapter 1

Cash

I press my fingers into my eyes, wondering just how bad it could actually be if I applied just a little more pressure. Surely, the compassionate folks in our small town would give me a break then, right?

“No, Mr. Prichard. That’s not a good reason to call 911.”

“Listen here, Cash Tucker, I’m too old to take lip from you.”

I roll my lips between my teeth to keep from saying something that will have the entire damn town talking for the next several weeks.

“All I’m saying is calling the non-emergency number about this is probably better.”

“No one ever answers the non-emergency number.” Mr. Prichard huffs. “Margie is missing. That’s an emergency.”

“Margie always comes back home or someone spots her and posts in the online group,” I remind him.

“I don’t think I like your tone.”

I take another deep, fortifying breath. “Calling 911 because your peacock is missing isn’t appropriate. It ties up the county dispatcher. Now, the non-emergency number to the office is—”

“She’s a peahen,” he corrects. “And I know the number, but that still doesn’t negate the fact that she’s missing.”

“I’m sure your peahen will be back soon,” I assure him. “In the meantime, why don’t you head down to Wooden It Be Nice and grab a roll of chicken wire? If you cover the top of her run, she wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“Don’t call me when you have an emergency.” He huffs before hanging up.

The man has to know I'd never do that. If it were a true emergency, I'd call the sheriff's department.

Lindell hasn't had a police force for very long, but as the town-designated chief, I field a lot of ridiculousness. I wish I could say the calls from Bobby John Prichard are few and far between, but Margie sneaking out is a regular occurrence.

I guess I should be glad that nothing more serious is happening in town, but I'm catching shit from the county about the 911 calls. Although there are days I wish they'd charge Mr. Prichard for misuse of the emergency system they have in place the way they've threatened to, I know I'd never hear the end of it if they did.

Because it's easy to copy and paste the note I'm required to make about the phone call, I feel a little better about how far behind I am on paperwork. That is until I look at the spiral notebook sitting beside the phone. When I went to college and got a degree in criminal justice, before going through the police academy, I pictured myself fighting crime and putting half a dozen bad guys in jail every day. Maybe that would've been the case if I'd stayed in Houston where I did my internship, but here in Lindell, Texas, my day usually consists of calls just like the one that just ended. There are occasions when Mike Hodson, the sheriff, needs help out on the highway or there's a call just right outside of my jurisdiction. It's most definitely nothing like how I pictured my life when I was younger, but Lindell is the only place I've ever found that fully welcomed me.

As an orphaned child who wasn't adopted until eight years old, I've learned to take the care and concern where I can get it. It's very possible that I have lower expectations of everyone in my life, but that's another story for a different day. Right now, I need to focus on getting the mounds of paperwork done before the town starts waking up.

I'm pressing rough fingers into my eyelids and yawning when the chime above the door jangles. It takes blinking several times before Chandler Jacobs, the only other full-time cop the city has, comes into view. We have another reserve

officer, Hank West, but he usually only works when Chandler and I just can't make a shift.

"Brought breakfast," he says, holding up a familiar rectangular box. "Adalynn was looking good this morning."

I clench my jaw. I've grown used to this routine, so it's easier to keep my mouth shut.

"Weren't you needing a little time off?" I ask, the taunt suddenly making me feel like a complete asshole.

Chandler's dad is sick, and they have tests scheduled later this week. I know they're fearful that the man's cancer has returned, so even hinting that I'll take away his time-off request is a shitty move on my part.

My tease doesn't bother the man, mostly because he knows better. I've always been a very flexible guy. We depend on each other, and there may come a time when that dependence will be a life-or-death situation.

"I think she was disappointed that I'm the one who stopped in this morning."

"I saw her last night," I inform him. "Had dinner with her dad and stepmom."

I lift my hand to hide my yawn.

"Yeah? You seem tired. Have a little something something for dessert?" Chandler is waggling his eyebrows up and down animatedly.

"Cherry cobbler. It was delicious."

He frowns when I don't contribute to the gossip he's trying to get me to participate in.

He gives up when I narrow my eyes in challenge. I've had to tell the man more than once that Adalynn and I are great friends and nothing more. I'd never go so far as to say we're like siblings, because that would make some of my late-night thoughts incredibly awkward.

"Will there ever be a time that you tell that woman you're madly in love with her?" he asks, refusing to give up.

“Is there anything else you need, Officer Jacobs?”

He sighs, a frustrated sound and one I hear rather frequently around here. If I were to ever make any type of confession where Adalynn Tate was concerned, it most definitely wouldn't be to someone in the office.

“From the look of that stack of papers,” he says, pointing to the bane of my existence, “it looks like I'm on patrol today?”

“If you don't mind,” I tell him, knowing my position of authority means I could fully dictate what everyone does in the office, but I'm just not that type of boss. There are days when it's just not a good idea for one of us to be out of the office. Off days, days where we're distracted or have too much going on personally, don't do the community any good. On the off chance that something crazy in town does happen, we need to be a hundred percent focused.

“Sounds good.”

“Keep an eye out for Margie,” I grumble as he turns around to leave.

He waves at me over his head.

We're always on the lookout for Margie. If Prichard would do what we've requested, the damn bird wouldn't be able to give in to her wandering spirit three times a week.

Despite the office growing silent with Chandler's departure, he was here long enough to stir shit up in my head.

He's wrong about some things, but for the most part, he's hit the nail on the head where Adalynn is concerned. She's all I ever think about. She's utter perfection—from her long wavy red hair to the way her ass looks in her favorite pair of jeans. She's the star in every fantasy I've had for as long as I can remember. She's as sweet as pie and the most humble, generous person ever created.

But that's the rub, honestly.

Her wholesomeness is what makes me throw up a huge stop sign every time I allow the idea of taking things further

with her to sink into my head. She has to be the type that wants missionary sex on Saturday morning because she's just too busy to consider it any other day of the week, whereas I'm more of the wear my hand around her throat type of guy.

We just aren't compatible. There's no way she'd be into what turns my crank, and I know, even with as much as I care about the woman, her idea of a sexual relationship and mine would cause too many problems down the road.

Having even the slightest taste of her in that way would lead to the destruction of our friendship, and I'd never risk it. She's too important to me. She's my waking thought and the last image in my mind before I fall asleep each night. Hanging out with her and her family is how I spend all my free time.

She's the constant in my life, the first person to see me when I was younger who didn't decide that I was worth less than others because my birth mother didn't want me. She didn't see me as a bad decision like my adoptive parents did after they were finally able to conceive a biological child.

I was just Cash Tucker, the weird kid in class who didn't attempt to make friends. Although she's denied it more than once when I bring it up, I was no doubt a charity case for her. She saw a boy who had no friends, and that just wouldn't do. As she put it, everyone deserves friends. I bet she never imagined that I'd cling to her like debris floating in the ocean after the ship capsized, refusing to let go no matter how hard the waves pounded against me.

She claimed me and I claimed her right back. Not once have we ever crossed a line of more than just friends.

I'm not even on her radar in that way, despite what others say, and that's a good thing. The temptation would be too much to resist if I ever caught her looking at me with anything more than friendship in her eyes.

I mean, staying single for eternity while obsessed with my best friend isn't such a bad thing, is it? I'm sure I'll be able to survive it. What I won't be able to handle is her finding someone she's compatible with. I fully understand she

deserves that, but seeing her with someone else would make me insane.

Thankfully, she doesn't seem to have any desire to even date, so for now, I'm in the clear.

Chapter 2

Adalynn

“I thought I knew every one of your smiles,” I tell my closest female friend, Madison, as I point to the happiness on her face. “I’m not sure I’ve seen this one.”

“Chase and I—”

“Let me stop you right there,” I say, holding my hand up to silence her. “I don’t want to hear about it. The last time we chatted in here about what you and Chase were getting up to, it ended up online for the world to read.”

Madison scrunches her nose. Our privacy was invaded a couple of months ago, and a reporter recorded a conversation we had at my bakery about Madison’s relationship with Chase. That article, along with an unhealthy amount of miscommunication, led to a very difficult time for Madison and Chase. They’ve been back together for a little over a month now and are living together with Chase’s twin boys, Cale and Cole, thanks in no small part to the meddling of Madison’s parents and Chase’s father.

“I’m not going to share that kind of stuff here ever again,” Madison whispers, despite the two of us being the only ones currently in the bakery.

“Good,” I say, my lip twitching with humor when her smile doesn’t fade.

“I need you to jump Cash’s bones.”

I stare at her. “We are not talking about *that* either.”

She rolls her lips between her teeth, but it does nothing to ebb the smile she’s clearly trying to hide.

“I don’t even want to talk about it,” I remind her. “We’re just—”

“Friends,” she interrupts. “Blah, blah, blah. The two of you are so hot for each other, if I wore glasses, they’d fog up every time the two of you were in the same room.”

I pull a cleaning rag from the small bucket of sanitizer water and busy myself, wiping down the already clean back counter.

“You already did that,” Madison says, not one to ever let me off the hook. “But seriously, you need to sleep with him.”

With a deep breath of resignation—knowing short of just walking into the back and waiting until she leaves I’m not going to get out of this conversation—I decide to give in to her rather than waste my time trying to refocus her on something else. Madison has never been the type to get easily distracted once she sets her mind to a certain train of thought.

“And why do I need to jump his bones?” I ask, using her earlier terminology.

“You made me a promise.”

“I can’t recollect a single memory where I promised to jump anyone’s bones for you.”

“We always said that we’d end up with Chase and Cash,” she says, and she doesn’t have to explain further.

We spent countless hours in each other’s childhood rooms, planning our future with the boys we had crushes on, but that was too many years ago to count. By the end of eighth grade, Chase had insulted Madison to the point that she claimed she hated him for over ten years. I was so far encamped in the friend zone with Cash, I knew long ago I’d never have a chance with the man. There are some days I’m strong enough to accept that the relationship we have is the only one we’ll ever have. On occasion, I’m even strong enough to imagine finding someone else who could make me happy.

“Listen,” I tell her, dropping the cloth back into the tub of sanitizer. “I’m very happy that you and Chase worked through all of your issues and have ended up together, but there isn’t the same type of happily ever after between Cash and me. We’re friends, and I’d be foolish to think there could ever be anything more.”

She gives me a sad smile, and I think I hate it more than the hope she's always had when this subject comes up. I know what comes next. I know exactly the direction she'll take. She's not the only one who claims to be able to see the attraction on both our parts. There are many people who claim to be able to cut the chemistry between us with a knife. They've said it for years, but they're blind. I'm right in the middle of it, and I've never even felt a minor shift in the way he acts around me. He's been consistent since middle school. He's dated other people, and so have I.

He's never pounded on my door and insisted he's the one for me, and as many times as I've wanted to do that to him, I'd never embarrass myself that way. We're friends and allowing myself to hope for anything different is just a quick way to be even more disappointed. If anyone can claim anything about me, it's that I avoid pain, confrontation, and dependency like the literal plague.

“We vowed to be pregnant at the same time.”

It takes much longer than it should for a woman in her late twenties for her words to compute, but when they make it through all the grey matter in my head, I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face.

“You're having a baby?”

Tears begin to fill both our eyes as she nods. Hers, no doubt, because of how happy she is, and mine because once again I feel like I'm being left behind.

She left right after graduation. She had different plans for her life. I've never asked her about it, but I guessed a long time ago that she left because Chase did. Despite her claim of hating him, I think she wanted to be a worldly woman, that maybe in her mind that's the kind of woman he'd want if they ever reconnected. When both of their lives went up in flames and they ended up right back in this sleepy little town, it was their roots and not their life experiences in the city that they bonded over.

We stayed in touch as much as we could, but life always has a way of getting busy and coming between even the

closest of friends.

“I’m so happy for you,” I say with genuine excitement despite my own feelings of failure.

I rush around the counter and wrap her in a hug.

“When did you find out?”

“Last night,” she answers, her hands going to her lower belly. “Other than Chase, of course, you’re the first person I’ve told.”

“Your parents are going to flip with excitement!”

I watch as she chews the inside of her cheek. “I’m nervous to tell them.”

Lindell is a very small town, tucked into a mostly forgotten part of Texas, about an hour west of Austin. It’s a place that had remained mostly untouched by time, technology, and all the bad things that come with both of those. With old-fashioned ways comes old-fashioned ideals. I can see how she’s nervous about being a pregnant, unwed woman.

There will be people in town who have a certain opinion about it, but most people will look at a couple in love and think this is the greatest thing in the world. Chase, a former hockey star, has been seen as the town’s hero. Something he isn’t quick to acknowledge, despite the huge sign on the road into town announcing his success. The man is pretty humble, considering the fame he’s encountered in life. You can find him down at Wooden It Be Nice, his father’s hardware store, working five days a week like he doesn’t have a bank account with more zeros in it than any normal person could even fathom.

“They moved you into his house before Chase even asked you to,” I remind her. “They’ve already claimed the boys as their own grandchildren.”

She gives me a weak smile, but she hasn’t fully accepted that they’ll be ecstatic about her news.

I see it the second she switches gears, and I know my friend can't be dissuaded.

"So back to Cash."

"Not back to Cash," I tell her and make my way back around the counter. "That pact was in junior high."

"And I still got Chase. Now it's your turn to get Cash."

I do my best to shove down the jealousy I've fought since she disclosed that Chase and she were together. Those feelings aren't fair to her, and it's not right to be upset that someone else is happy.

"Maybe if you just put yourself out there," she suggests.

"It's not going to happen," I say, my tone a little firmer than it has been.

"Maybe get him drunk and jump him."

"Madison," I say, shaking my head and pinching the bridge of my nose. "That's illegal and morally repugnant."

"I think—"

"I'm well aware of what you think," I interrupt. "It's never going to happen. We're friends, and that's it."

"We're supposed to be pregnant together," she says, her lip a little too pouty for her age, but it makes me smile, nonetheless.

Putting myself out there to Cash is so dangerous, I only ever consider having the bravery to risk it in my head. I can't lose him. He's too vital to my life.

She snaps her fingers. "What about using a sperm bank?"

"That's the most ridiculous thing you've ever said."

I somehow manage to get her to shift her focus to baby names and plans for the nursery. She's an interior designer by trade, so this is the only topic that I've ever been able to change to in order to distract her.

She spends the next two hours discussing her plans, while I spend that time wondering if her last suggestion isn't as far-fetched as I had originally thought.

Chapter 3

Cash

Despite being told I'm family and that I can just walk in, I still lift my arm and press the doorbell on Adalynn's dad's porch and wait for someone to answer the door.

"This is getting old, man," Ronnie says when he pulls open the door.

We see each other so often, he just turns back around and walks inside with the front door wide open for me to enter.

Robin, Adalynn's stepmother, smiles at me when I enter the kitchen and lift the bottle of wine.

"That will go perfectly with the meal. How do you always know what kind to bring?"

I tap my forehead. "I'm psychic."

"If I were a conspiracy theorist, I'd say you had the house wiretapped," Gina, Adalynn's biological mother, says, a tone in her voice that says she's not a hundred percent sure that she's completely wrong.

"Don't tell all my secrets," I tell her with a wink.

Gina grins wide, her eyes lighting up.

As a child who was somewhat cast aside by my adoptive parents, I've always found the dynamic of these people something to strive for. Adalynn's parents are divorced. Both her mother and father remarried, but the two couples spend a lot of time together. No matter which house we're at for the very frequent dinners they have, the other couple is always here. I'd go so far as to say that Gina and Robin are best friends, as are their husbands Charlie and Donald.

They do everything together. So much so, that more than once Adalynn's brothers have suggested that they have a ménage thing going on. This always makes Adalynn blush and quickly shuts the conversation down. Her brothers are a little wild and crazy and have it in their minds that they'll eventually find a woman worth sharing and settling down

with. But Lindell isn't exactly the type of town that generates women interested in going public with a polyamorous relationship despite there being many that are willing to spend a night or two dabbling.

"Speaking of conspiracies," Gina begins.

"Not tonight, Mom," Adalynn says as she enters the room and immediately crosses it in my direction. "He knows to bring red wine because Robin always cooks beef. He brings white wine to your house because you're more likely to cook chicken."

"What have I told you about keeping my secrets?" I tease her, opening my arms for the hug that I know is coming.

Her laughter washes over me in a way that it never should, considering we're just friends, as I press my lips to her temple.

"I can't spend another evening talking about UFOs and government coverups," she says, taking a step back much too soon for my liking.

Gina frowns at her daughter, but Robin mouths *thank you*. They may be best friends, but where Gina is likely to suggest crystals and sage, Robin usually takes a more traditional approach to problem solving. Somehow, the two still manage to make their friendship work.

Dinner is informal, although it takes place around Robin and Donald's dining room table. It's the only place in the house big enough to seat eight.

Everyone gossips about the town and the goings-on that have happened since we last got together four or five days ago. The food, the most delicious homemade lasagna I've ever eaten, is consumed with gusto between stories that might have a little truth to them. This is so very routine for all of us. So much so that I can predict down to the count of clanks of forks on plates as to when the conversation will shift.

I know Adalynn knows it too because she starts to shift in her seat.

“Speaking of dating,” Gina says after we’ve worked our way through predicting when Walker, the owner of The Hairy Frog, the only bar in town, will start dating.

“Madison and Chase are expecting a baby,” Adalynn says, trying to thwart the conversation from circling back to her.

Smiles spread across every face at the table.

Robin and Gina begin a side conversation about baby showers and questioning whether they think it would be rude to host one but also ask if they can hold it in the couples’ home.

“It’s the best place for it, honestly,” Robin says.

“I agree,” Gina adds. “Donald and I had our bridal shower and wedding there a million moons ago.”

“That’s right,” Robin says. “Don’t you remember, Charlie?”

“I do,” he says after swallowing a bite of food.

Did I mention that Robin and Charlie were also once married? It’s like the couples got together one day and decided to switch partners. I like things a little kinky, but that’s still something I can’t wrap my head around.

“I told you,” Ronnie tells his twin. “She was fucking glowing.”

“Watch your mouth,” Adalynn gently chides her brother.

“Not at the table,” Robin adds, not concerned at all about correcting her stepson.

“Sorry,” Ronnie apologizes.

“She did seem hotter when we saw her last week,” Donnie says.

“That’s not a thing,” Adalynn says, her little nose scrunching up.

“That a woman is hotter when she’s pregnant?” Ronnie specifies.

“Totally a thing,” Donnie confirms. “Right, Cash?”

I raise my eyebrows. These assholes are always trying to get me to say shit in front of Adalynn. I don’t know if they’re trying to push me in her direction or trying to drive a wedge between us.

“I can’t say that I’ve ever been attracted to a pregnant woman.”

“Cash doesn’t ever want kids, remember?” Adalynn says. I know it isn’t a strike at my character, but for some reason, it sort of feels like it is.

She knows almost all of my deep, dark secrets, and I know I’ve shared with her my reasoning for not wanting children.

“Pregnant women just have this air of belonging to someone else,” I say in explanation. “It’s never dawned on me to find them attractive. They’re off-limits.”

Both guys snort, a sound of derision.

“Maybe in vanilla land,” Donnie mutters.

“We’re not going to talk of such things at the dinner table,” Adalynn says, her cheeks turning pink.

The flush there is another reminder that we’d never mix well. As quick as I am to say that sex isn’t everything in a relationship, it is a part of it. Long-lasting relationships have to be compatible on nearly every aspect for it to see long-term success.

It’s another hour before I get to my most favorite part of the night. I’m not taking away from the amazing food the Tates and Gibsons so generously share with me sometimes more than once a week, but the evenings I get to spend alone with Adalynn are the best time of my life.

“Sweet or salty?” Adalynn asks the second I walk into her house.

Coming here is different from going to her parents’ homes. I have a key to this place, and I use it readily. I don’t

know that I'd ever use it if I weren't expected, but so much of our lives overlap that it's never been an issue.

"I don't know that I can eat another thing," I say, pressing my hand to my stomach.

Her eyes dip lower on my body. Although there isn't a dirty thought in her head where I'm concerned, it still causes the threat of certain reactions.

"Nope," she says, her eyes drifting back up to mine. "We aren't doing that again. Salty or sweet?"

"Doing what?" I ask, walking closer to her but keeping her island countertop between us.

What I'd really like to say is that I'd like to lick a little of both off her body, but she'd probably slap me in the face and then add me to the prayer list at church because I'm such a pervert.

"You always do that. You say you don't want anything, but then you eat half of the snack I make. The guys were being too crude at dinner. I didn't eat much. I'm not sharing my snack tonight."

She takes a long breath, having said all of that in one go.

I can't tell her that I like sharing with her because it means at least a handful of times, I can brush my fingers along hers as I strategically reach into the bowl her snack is in, at the same time she reaches in.

"I can't pick," I tell her.

"Me neither," she says. "Salty-sweet it is then."

I let my eyes drop to parts on her body I have no business admiring as she lifts up on her toes to grab a bag of popcorn kernels from the cabinet before reaching for the canister of M&Ms she keeps on the counter.

"Air popped?" I ask when she pulls out a small little machine from under the counter. "I thought you never paid attention when your mom is spouting off conspiracy theory stuff?"

“Turns out that there may be some truth to that bagged popcorn having carcinogens in it. Can you grab the big bowl up there?”

I love it when the woman makes popcorn. Just like I’ve done a million times, I come around the counter and press my hand to her back as I reach over her head and grab the bowl she likes to use.

Like a well-oiled machine, we work around each other, her using her little air popper to make the popcorn while I measure out the exact amount of candies to be added on top. As a baker, she has a thing about rations and proper amounts. It’s one of those quirky things about her that I’ve easily adjusted to.

“Have you tried freeze drying these at the bakery?” I ask, popping a couple into my mouth.

She gives me a sad smile when she looks back at me. “The caramel ones do well, but not the plain.”

“That’s a shame,” I say, knowing the regular M&M’s are her favorite.

I pop a few more into my mouth, resisting the urge to lick at my lips as if I’m tasting the chocolate off hers.

Once the popcorn is done and the candies are added in, I carry the bowl and follow her to the couch.

We’re working our way through *The Walking Dead*, and I know of several more series that she’ll find a little frightening just because of the way she snuggles into my side and grips my shirt when the hordes of the dead are threatening the characters.

“Have you made any more progress on the fundraiser?” she asks, her hand brushing mine as we grab for a handful of popcorn.

“I haven’t had much time for any of it. As quiet as the town is, the paperwork and documentation are endless. Hayes offered to let Harper take over, so at least it’ll get done, but handing the police station’s part over, leaving the fire

department in control, seems like bad form when we split the proceeds.”

“I’d offer to help, but I don’t know that I have the time for it either.”

I wrap my arm tighter around her when she gasps at the reanimated woman getting closer to the boy with his leg caught on a vine.

“I know you’re busy. The bakery is your number one priority. It’s just pride keeping me from agreeing.”

“Don’t wait too long,” she warns. “It won’t be fair to Harper if she has to rush to make all the arrangements at the last minute.”

“How opposed are you to taking on the order for the chili supper?”

She scoffs. “Since when do you think I know how to cook?”

“You own—”

“A bakery,” she says, humor in her voice. “How many times have we talked about this? Making a meal and making a cake aren’t even close to being the same thing. I eat at my parents’ house every chance I get for a reason.”

I laugh, nearly missing another opportunity to brush my hand against hers. God, I feel like I’m back in high school again. That guy put himself out there. I took her to the eighth-grade formal, but once we got there, she made sure to tell everyone that we were just friends. I never made a move after that. At the time, she was a little too young. By the time our age difference no longer mattered, I was deep into the friend zone. It didn’t bother me nearly as much back then, but that “zone” has haunted me every single day since she graduated high school.

“Sorry,” I tell her.

“You might want to reach out to Riley Wilson. She has that catering company she’s trying to get off the ground. I bet she’d love to have her name attached to something like that.

You probably should be more worried about the fire versus police obstacle course after the way you ate tonight at dinner.”

“Get up,” I tell her, nudging at her side to get her off me. “Let me show you something.”

She looks skeptical when she shifts to the side and looks back at me.

“These abs,” I say, grabbing the hem of my shirt, “are better than any other set in town.”

“What are you doing?” she asks with a sharp laugh as she grabs my hand. “Don’t do that.”

I let my hand fall away. If I were a better man, I wouldn’t relish her hand still on my shirt so much. The redness in her cheeks makes me think of a dozen different ways I could make it brighter.

I clear my throat.

“I’m fit,” I tell her.

“I know you are,” she quickly agrees, placing the popcorn bowl on the table, the sign that she’s ready for the night to end. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t,” I assure her, scooting to the edge of the sofa.

I lean in closer to her, pressing my lips to her forehead before standing.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, buddy. See you then.”

As agreed upon, the lock on the door clicks into place the second after it closes.

Buddy.

Never have I ever been so offended by a word.

Chapter 4

Adalynn

Like every other time I spend snuggled up next to Cash Tucker, I tossed and turned all night last night. He leaves me restless and exhausted, but I can't seem to ever turn down an offer to hang out after dinner. We didn't even make it through an entire episode last night before he decided he needed to leave.

"Adalynn?"

"I'm so sorry," I say, snapping my attention back to Sage, running my hand over the bakery display case in an effort to distract her from how distracted I am this morning. "What were you saying?"

"I was wondering about creating a dine-in experience at That's Another Story," she says, her gentle smile telling me that my distraction is forgiven.

"That sounds amazing," I tell her, leaning in closer to get more details. "Which book were you thinking of doing?"

"I haven't made it that far yet, but I'm open for suggestions. Since it's so early in the planning stages, I was hoping you could help me out."

"I can curate an extensive list. What genre were you wanting?"

She shakes her head, her smile as sweet as can be.

The two of us should probably be best friends. I'm an avid reader, spending more time than I probably should, reading in one of the little nooks she has in her store, and she owns the place. We're a match made in heaven honestly, but we're also both young business owners and that requires a lot of time and dedication. I like spending my time in the place she needs free time from.

"I was hoping you could cook."

"Oh, were you doing *Chocolat*?" I ask, unable to hide the excitement from my voice. "Joanne Harris also has a

cookbook that would pair nicely with it.”

Sage shakes her head. “Are you good at making chocolate? I was thinking something a little more substantial.”

“Cakes?”

“A full meal.”

“I don’t cook food.” I smile through my frustration. Do people not realize that the two don’t always go hand in hand? If I had a dollar for every time I’ve had to explain the differences... “I bake. I’d love to make baked goods for your event, but if you need something more than spaghetti sauce warmed on the stove and frozen meatballs, I think your best bet would be Riley Wilson. She has an amazing catering company, and her food is to die for.”

“Do you happen to have—”

I point to the card holder just to her left. “Right there.”

“You are a lifesaver. Oh, and your books are in. I’ve put them behind the counter. They’re ready for pick up whenever you get a chance.”

“Perfect,” I tell her, trying to run the rest of my day through my mind, to see if I’ll have time to swing by before they close.

Sage steps away from the counter just as Walker walks through the door. They nod at each other, both having lived here all their lives, but they don’t speak to one another.

“You two gossiping about monster co—”

“Walker Conroy!” I snap. “Don’t even say it.”

He chuckles as he bends a little to peruse what I have in the display case.

Walker is friends with my brothers, which means he was at our house a lot growing up before he left for the military. More than once he picked up a book I’d left lying around and made fun of me for reading nonsense. I still get embarrassed thinking about it. He does his best to remind me all the time

about it, but, honestly, he only does it when there are no witnesses. I guess I should be grateful for that at least.

“I’m going to spit on your cupcake,” I warn him, but he just chuckles.

He knows I’d never do such a thing.

“How are the boys doing with that new girlfriend?”

I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes at him.

“You tell me,” I say, wondering how we made it through a meal last night without the boys mentioning a woman in their lives. Usually, they’re incredibly quick to share if they start dating someone new.

He shakes his head. “Not my place to speak about.”

I take a deep breath. “You’re the one who brought her up. Tell me what you know.”

He stands. “No.”

“What’s her name?”

He shakes his head.

“Is she local?”

He shrugs.

“Walker,” I growl in warning.

“Have you and Cash finally stopped circling around each other?”

“Did you want a single or a six-pack today?”

He chuckles, knowing full well that’s the quickest way to shut down any conversation he doesn’t want to have with me.

Unlike Cash, Walker was my brothers’ friend first, so I can see him as just another one of the guys. I can rely on him like I could Ronnie or Donnie.

The difference is, Cash was my friend first and, as well as he and the boys get along, at the end of the day, he’s my friend, not theirs. It makes it difficult for me to put him into

that category, although I've tried so many times because it would make things clearer in my head.

"I want to say a single, but I know I'm going to have serious FOMO the second it's gone. Let's do a six-pack."

"Preferences?"

"Surprise me," he says. I fight the urge to give him the ugliest cupcakes I have, which isn't that horrible, considering I take the ugly ones and turn them into cake pops before I even fill the display case.

It's honestly hateful of the guy to bring up a woman I know nothing about and then shut down the topic of conversation, but the man owes me nothing. His loyalty is to my brothers.

That kind part of me that wants everyone to see me in a good light won't even let me pick one of the cookies and cream cupcakes because I know he doesn't like that flavor.

I give him three creamsicle cupcakes because they're his favorite, a buttered pecan, and two key lime cupcakes because that's always his second pick when we run out of his top one.

I carry the box to the counter, grinning down at the new logo. The scalloped circle is adorable, with tiny little cupcakes on it.

"No discount?" he asks when the total pops on the screen.

"Discount?"

"The family discount?"

"Family would answer my questions," I say, changing the price to include the twenty-percent discount he's been getting since I opened the store.

I give it to a lot of people. Okay, I'm one of those people who want Lindell to stay as fresh and untouched by the outside world as possible, so I only charge full price to people from out of town. I know it's horrible, and I'll probably have to answer for it on judgment day, but until then, I'll stay petty.

He narrows his eyes at me, the information staying locked behind his lips, so I promptly change the price back. He pays without further discussion. It's not like the man can get such deliciousness anywhere else in town. We don't exactly run a monopoly, but business owners around here work under the unspoken rule that we aren't competition to the other. The closest thing Walker would be able to get to one of my cupcakes would be a prepackaged snack cake down at the corner grocery store, and he knows it.

"You're mean, little Tate," he says before grabbing his box of treats and leaving my bakery.

I busy myself cleaning and wiping things down in the dining room.

The bell above the door chimes, and a second later, "Was that awkward?"

I smile at Madison as she walks inside, a conversation on her tongue rather than wasting time with a hello.

"Was what awkward?" I ask as I wipe down a menu announcing the new flavors I plan to have next month.

"I was in the car on the phone and I saw Sage walk out and then Walker."

"They didn't even speak to each other."

"Doesn't surprise me," Madison says, taking her regular seat at the long counter.

"Care to fill me in?" I ask, mildly annoyed Walker didn't share any news about my brothers' new love interest.

"You don't remember?"

I take a deep breath. Why do I feel like I'm on the outside of every conversation today?

"I don't," I tell her, grabbing an orange creamsicle cupcake from the display case and placing it on a plate for her before taking up my regular spot on the opposite side of the counter from her.

"Thank you. They dated in high school."

“What is it about people getting trapped in high school? People grow up, you know that, right? The people we liked then aren’t necessarily the people we like now.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Bad day?”

I give her the best smile I can manage. “Didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Dinner with your parents?” I nod. “Cash come over to watch some show you pretended to be fearful of so you could sniff his shirt all night and not seem creepy?”

“I don’t pretend. The *Walking Dead* is scary.”

I chew the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning.

“You got into trouble for having *Carrie* as one of the pick-of-the-month for the book club.”

“It’s a great book. One of the best coming of age stories —”

“We were twelve,” she deadpans.

I blink in her direction. “Exactly. We were right around a relatable age. Puberty can be a struggle for many people.”

“You gave Margaret Hinkle nightmares.”

“I didn’t give her anything. Some people don’t handle truths—”

“The point is scary shows don’t scare you. You want to snuggle up to Cash on the couch—”

I hold my hand up. “I’m not talking about this.”

“If you just threw him down on the floor and swallowed his cock—”

“Madison Kelly!”

Her outrageous laughter tells me she got the exact reaction she was looking for.

Her glee makes me smile. I think she’s the only one I can discuss sex with on any level and not turn into a tomato.

“Did he smell good?” she asks.

“Amazing, as always,” I answer truthfully.

“He totally knows you’re not scared,” she says, and my cheeks heat from the implication.

“He doesn’t.”

She nods. “He does. Don’t you remember him advocating with you when there was talk about shutting the entire book club down?”

I shake my head, not because I don’t remember, but because how could I ever forget. Cash was already in high school when I got into trouble with the middle school teachers because Margaret couldn’t handle horror stories. He managed to get a ton of people to sign a petition to keep our book club active.

He’s always been my champion and standing up for what he believes in has never been a struggle. It’s also one of the reasons I’m certain the man doesn’t see me the way everyone seems to think he does. He’s not the type to stand in the shadows. He goes after what he wants, and I have years of experience of him not saying a word about it to me.

“I’m sorry,” Madison says, real shame in her tone.

“For what?”

Tears start to form in her eyes but she quickly dashes them away.

“I’m sorry,” she says again, waving her hand in front of her face. “These hormones. Did I ruin TV night for you?”

“No,” I tell her, but yeah, she kind of did.

If he knows I’m not afraid of the show, then why in the world has he allowed me to do it for so long?

Chapter 5

Cash

I yawn into the crook of my elbow, shutting the patrol car door with my other hand. I miss the days of getting five hours of sleep and still managing to wake up feeling like I could take on the world. I got plenty of sleep last night, but I know it's still going to take me another half hour or so to be fully functional.

I could've stayed in bed for a half an hour longer, but that would mean missing out on seeing Adalynn before my shift, and that just won't do.

The front door to her bakery is unlocked which makes me flex my jaw a little in irritation. The bell above the door jangles, announcing my arrival, but if I were someone that meant her harm, it wouldn't matter. As her friend, I know the back door sticks so badly that she can rarely even get the thing open. She usually has to bring her daily trash out the front door and carry it around behind the building to the dumpster in the back. It's one of the many problems this building has. I'm sure it's been here over a hundred years, and other than the beautification things Adalynn did to it when she bought it, it hasn't been repaired much.

Adalynn isn't in the front of the store, so I make my way around the counter to search for her in the back.

I dip my head and look into the humming freeze dryer to see what she's working on today. She mentioned last week that the community took to her packaged candies without pause, and that she's been having a hard time keeping some things in stock. The Skittles on three of the five trays she has have already split, looking like little colorful round sandwiches. The other two trays have chunks of something I don't recognize, but I know it has to be something sweet. I helped her set up the machine while she watched tutorials online. I recall one of them advising against mixing savory and sweet as well as raw and cooked items.

As always, the place is meticulously clean. She's a very organized person, so the immaculate countertops make it easy to notice the pamphlets stacked on one of the prep tables.

My heart stops in my chest when I get close enough to read the title on the top one—*IVF: A Step-by-Step Guide*.

I blink, but the information doesn't change.

I've always known that Adalynn wanted to have children, just like I've known I can't see myself as a father. With the life I've had, I wouldn't wish that sort of thing on anyone. I don't know if abandonment is a hereditary trait, but I'd never take that kind of chance.

It's just one more reason we wouldn't make a good couple. I can't give her the things she's always wanted in life, but these innocuous brochures feel like a sharp jab into my back.

She hasn't once mentioned wanting to get pregnant this way. It feels like a form of betrayal because we've always told each other everything... well, mostly everything. She'd probably gasp and ask me to leave if she were privy to some of the thoughts I have about her.

"You're early today."

I spin to face her, the pink flush to her cheeks from being inside her walk-in cooler making me lose a little more of my sanity.

"IVF?" I ask, my tone more accusatory than it has any right to be.

Her lips form a flat line as she walks to another prep table. She doesn't face me again until she places the batch of icing on the table and pulls off the lid.

I know her routine enough to know that she made the base buttercream icing yesterday, and she'll color and flavor it this morning to match whatever treats she has on the menu.

"It's probably not going to happen," she says, sadness filling her eyes.

I want to reach out to her when she walks closer, but I take a step to the side so she can grab several smaller bowls from the shelf on the wall behind where I'm standing.

"You didn't mention being infertile. I'm so sorry, Ads."

She scoffs as she turns back to her work.

She has a routine. It wouldn't matter about the topic we were discussing, she'd be working either way. She doesn't keep her back to me because she's avoiding the subject. She has a certain amount of time to get everything ready for the day. The deal is that I can be here, I just can't get in the way.

"Want to explain that weird noise you just made?"

I fight the urge to cross my arms over my chest and take an indignant stance.

"I haven't had any tests done, but I don't think I'm infertile."

I stare at the back of her head, confusion making me tilt my head. "IVF is for infertility, right?"

"Or women who want to get pregnant without a man."

The news hits me like a semi-truck skidding uncontrollably on black ice.

Without a man.

I never pictured Adalynn Tate as the type of woman who wanted to be a single parent. She's more of the white picket fence with a yard full of kids, waiting for her husband to get home so they can all sit down at the table and talk about their day type of woman.

Maybe I've gotten it all wrong. Maybe her reason for not dating much is different from the fantasies in my head that tell me every once in a while that she wants me and wouldn't settle for anyone else.

"Are you a lesbian?"

The icing spatula clanks onto the table when it falls from her hand, but she doesn't pay any attention to the mint green mess she's made before turning back around to face me.

“Excuse me?”

I don't repeat myself because I know it's a rhetorical question.

“Do you honestly think that a woman has to be a lesbian in order to want IVF?”

I hold my hands up in mock surrender. “Don't bite my head off. I'm just asking questions here.”

“I was looking into IVF because I want a baby. I'm not dating anyone. If I went about getting pregnant the normal way, it would be years before it would be appropriate, with the whole dating-marriage timeline.”

“You said it probably won't happen. Why?”

She takes a deep breath as she turns back around. The way she starts whipping the icing in the bowl is an indication of her annoyance.

“It's expensive.”

“How expensive?”

I know she sank a lot of her savings into opening this bakery, and as popular as her cupcakes and other sweet treats are, she doesn't charge enough to get rich off the townsfolk. Even charging that little extra to the tourists doesn't make much of a difference.

“The range is between nine to twenty grand, depending on where you have it done.”

I choke on a cough. That's a crazy amount of money. I know for a fact that if she did do it, even on the low end, it would leave her incapable of paying for anything else.

“And that's why,” she says, reacting to my response, “I said it probably won't happen.”

“I could help you pay for it,” I offer, the words like sandpaper on my tongue.

I'd do anything for this woman, even if it means watching another man's baby grow inside of her.

Adalynn is meant to be a mother, and I know without question that she would be the best at it.

She turns in my direction, but instead of agreeing, she's giving me that soft smile. I recognize it as the one that will come with a thanks but no thanks. She gives it often, always feeling a little guilty when someone tries to give her something she doesn't want to take. It can range from seconds of mac and cheese at dinner or an offer to fix something that's broken.

She has a heart of gold, and she's the type of woman who never wants to disappoint anyone.

"I can't ask that of you."

"I'm offering. It's different."

She frowns, her eyes dropping to the spatula in her hands. "Still. I—"

"Don't like owing people," I interrupt because I know what she was going to say. "But I'm offering. I know you'd never ask."

"You're serious?"

I nod, another flutter of disappointment in my chest because the look on her face says she's considering it. That tells me just how much she wants this.

"Just think about it," I tell her, before looking down at my watch. "I have to get to work. Still on for dinner tonight?"

She nods as I step closer and press my lips to her temple.

I don't look back at her like I normally do because I need to escape. The thought of her going through with it makes my skin crawl, but my feelings are irrelevant. I'd do anything for that woman, even if it means paying for another man's seed to be deposited in her body.

Chapter 6

Adalynn

Dinner at my mom and stepdad's house was weird. Conversation flowed just like it always does. My brothers just grinned at me when I asked them about the new girl they were dating rather than spilling the tea. It annoyed me because they're always so quick to tell everyone about someone they're dating.

"She must be really special," Dad had said before shoveling a forkful of fettuccine into his mouth.

The boys looked at each other—that twin thing where they have full conversations with one look going back and forth between them—but they didn't confirm nor deny any of it.

Everything else was completely routine from the way Cash rang the doorbell to the way he helped me set the table. Nothing was different from any other time, but it still felt different. Maybe I was reading too much into it, but he didn't once nudge my leg with his. I felt like I didn't get as many smiles thrown my way. The air between us was stilted, all because I stupidly tossed those IVF brochures on the table and got right to work because I was running ten minutes late this morning. My morning routine is very regimented.

I don't have much time to dwell over it right now because he still asked before he left whether we were going to hang out at his house or mine when dinner was over. Besides, I spent the entire day trying to analyze the looks I saw on his face while we were having the conversation about it.

I take a deep breath and walk into the kitchen when I hear his truck pull up outside of my house.

"I meant to give these to you this morning."

My fake smile turns into a real one when I see the small package in his hand.

"These are my absolute favorite," I say, reaching for the cherry sours in his hand. "Thank you."

“You don’t have to thank me,” he says.

“I know you can’t get these in town any longer.”

“I grabbed them when I went to Austin the other day,” he says with a shrug. “No big deal.”

They used to carry the entire line of candy from this company, but they weren’t selling enough and the vendor decided it wasn’t worth driving all the way out here for only a handful of sales. It’s a real shame too because I also really like the circus peanut marshmallow candy and the apricot rings.

“I’m not sharing these,” I tell him, and the smile I get in return is the one I was missing at dinner.

Maybe he had a bad day, but I know better than to ask. Cash keeps a lot of the police work he does close to his chest. When I asked him once why he doesn’t discuss those things with me, he just shrugged and told me I didn’t need that kind of stuff in my head. Often, I have to read about the hard stuff in the Lindell Gazette. It usually includes farm accidents and wrecks out on the highway that the sheriff calls and asks him to assist with.

“You don’t have to share those candies, but the last time I was here, I recall there being ice cream in your freezer.”

I grin at him. Ice cream wasn’t even on our radar for snacks when we watched television until I tried my hand at making a few flavors for the ice cream social the town had. I’m always capable of pivoting to fit myself into different slots in order to stay relevant. If there’s a niche I can fill that will bring in more business, then I’m willing to put in the extra work to do it.

Cash calls it hustling.

“I no longer have that ice cream in my freezer,” I tell him, scrunching my nose. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It was yours to eat.”

I roll my lips between my teeth before responding. “I didn’t exactly eat it.”

“I swear, Adalynn Rose Tate, if you threw that ice cream out because it was too tempting to eat, I swear I’ll—”

“I didn’t throw it out,” I assure him. “I put it in the freeze dryer.”

He blinks at me as if I’m speaking a different language.

I turn and grab the bag I set there earlier from the counter.

“I saw online that people were doing it with ice cream sandwiches, and since I didn’t have any of those, I figured I’d experiment.” I open the zipper on the top of the bag and hold it out to him. “I made the ice cream myself at home, so I can’t sell it at the bakery. Give it a try.”

He makes a disgusted look, but it doesn’t stop him from reaching into the bag to pull out one of the pink clumps.

He pops the thing in his mouth, and surprise lights his eyes up as he chews.

“That’s so weird,” he says when he’s done. “It tastes exactly the same, but the texture is completely different.”

I chuckle when he reaches into the bag for a second piece.

“It’s good, right?”

“Delicious.”

“So,” I say, knowing we need to finish the conversation we started this morning before he had to go to work. “I think I found a way not to go broke and still get pregnant.”

He coughs, choking on the strawberry ice cream.

“Do you need some water?”

He waves me off, covering his mouth with his other hand as he works to clear his throat.

“They can get a little dry,” I say. “Sorry about that. I should’ve warned you.”

When he stops coughing, I hand over the bag and grab a soda from the fridge. I haven’t fully committed to the getting

pregnant thing, but I've done lots of research in order to help me make that decision. I know if I go through with it, there are certain lifestyle changes I'll have to make in order to increase my chances as well as to make my body safer for the child I want to have.

Cash follows me out of the room and sits down beside me on the sofa.

“What show are we watching tonight?” he asks. “Another episode of *The Walking Dead*?”

I shake my head as I reach over to the side table and grab my tablet. “I want you to help me pick out a sperm donor.”

He blinks at me as if I'm talking in cursive and wasn't taught how to write it in school.

“What?” he finally manages.

“I've done a little more research, and although IVF requires sperm too, I figured I could try IUI first. It's literally a fraction of the cost.”

“IUI?” he says in a questioning tone, but he continues before I can explain. “Instead of having an inseminated egg implanted, you're going to have sperm directly squirted into your uterus?”

“First of all,” I say, holding up my finger. “Don't ever say squirted to me again. Secondly, how in the world do you know the difference between in vitro fertilization and intrauterine insemination?”

His eyes dart away from me, and I know when he speaks, he's lying. “I watched a show on it once.”

“Cash,” I say, giving him a knowing look.

He shrugs. “I did a little research in my downtime today. So sue me.”

“Will you just go through these profiles with me?”

He scoots closer so he can read the screen of my tablet, and I do my best to ignore the jolt of electric current I feel when his hip presses against mine.

“Houston?” he asks as he reads the website. “Wouldn’t Austin be better since it’s closer?”

“This clinic has better reviews,” I tell him. “I started looking earlier, but I wanted your opinion on the ones I picked out already.”

He makes a weird noise in his throat as I click on the first profile.

“No pictures?” he asks.

“They only have descriptions. I think it’s a confidentiality thing or something.”

“It says he’s a construction worker.”

His tone tells me he thinks the guy is a bad choice right off the bat.

“I figured a strong man would make strong babies,” I explain.

“Maybe go for a doctor or lawyer or something?”

I look over at him, his proximity making him so close I can feel the warmth of his breath on my face when he exhales.

I look away immediately before I get caught staring at his mouth.

“I thought about that, but I worry about them growing up and wanting to leave Lindell.”

“The horror,” he says, and I can tell he’s mocking me.

I smack at his chest, but he catches my hand before I can pull it away, pressing his lips to my palm as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Let me be clear. The man has never kissed my palm before. It leaves me a little stupid and confused.

“You never left town either,” I remind him, my throat thick and dry, making it difficult to get the words out as smoothly as I’d like.

Did he just drop his eyes to my mouth?

I pull my hand away so I can click to the next profile, unable to resist the urge to shift my weight.

“I have everything I ever wanted right here,” he says, and in my fantasies, his declaration would include me. “In town.”

The clarification hurts my feelings, and it’s just one more thing I don’t have the right to feel.

“What about this one?” I ask, trying to divert our attention back to the task at hand before I say things or do things that would put a crack right down between the two of us.

Relief washes over me when he looks at the screen, and the burden of acting the way he expects lifts a little.

“Dark hair and dark eyes?” he reads. “I took you for the type of woman to like blue eyes and blond hair.”

I scoff.

“Donor number sixty-four ninety-two,” he mumbles.

“Do you think that many men actually donated or do you think they started at like five thousand?”

I feel him shrug, but I still can’t look in his direction. The warmth of his body right up against mine threatens to make me sweat, but I wouldn’t want to be any other place.

“I have no idea how it works,” he says. “What’s so special about this guy?”

I point to the bio. “It says he’s a small-town guy.”

“That’s it? That’s enough to pick him? It says he’s a student.”

“It doesn’t say how old the donation is, but I read an article that says if sperm is stored right, it can be done indefinitely without issue. So he could have donated fifty years ago or something.”

“I don’t think this sort of thing existed fifty years ago,” he mutters. “But do you really want to get pregnant by a grandpa?”

I take a deep breath, an attempt to not let irritation settle inside of me.

“Would you fu—have sex with someone that old?”

I clear my throat. “I’m not having sex with anyone. The sperm is just as viable many years later as it was the day it was collected. It’s not grandpa sperm. It says right here that he was nineteen at the time of collection.”

“Fine,” he says, a hint of agitation in his tone. “Who else have you picked out?”

“Only those two so far, but I want a down-home kind of guy.”

“Because you want to trap the child here?”

I clench my jaw. Cash and I don’t fight very often, but there are times he just rubs me the wrong way. Instead of wrapping my hands around his throat and squeezing, I close out the tabs on my tablets and place it back on the side table.

“You don’t have to help me with this if it annoys you,” I tell him.

I can’t expect him to understand. He didn’t have the same upbringing as I did. He’s lived in Lindell as long as I can remember but when he left to attend college at Sam Houston State University, his adoptive parents moved away. They wanted their biological kids to go to a more prestigious high school, and Lindell didn’t have that to offer.

I remember being heartbroken that he’d move away and just knew we’d drift apart despite him telling me it would never happen. He finished college, and right after he completed the police academy and his field training, he was right back in Lindell.

“It doesn’t annoy me,” he says, but when I look over at him, he seems relieved not to have to be bored with helping me, even though, for me, this is life changing.

I know the man doesn’t want kids, but I never thought that choice of his would make him so grumpy that he’d get attitude with me because I’ve decided to have one.

“I’m really tired,” I lie, knowing I’m going to toss and turn even more tonight than I would’ve if I’d just snuggled up next to him and pretended to be afraid of flesh-eating zombies.

He presses his lips to my forehead like he always does before standing. He doesn’t argue to stay. He simply tells me he’ll see me soon before leaving.

Chapter 7

Cash

There aren't many times I show up for dinner with Adalynn's family that I wish I had declined. Sometimes around the holidays, I get a little lost in my own feelings, and seeing all these happy, smiling, loving people makes me remember just how little I have in that regard. But I shouldn't feel that way as I climb out of my truck on a random Wednesday to have dinner.

I can't help the surprised look on my face when Adalynn opens the door before I can even knock.

"Hey," she says, stepping out on the porch and pulling the door closed behind her.

The stoop isn't very big, and she has to look up to make eye contact with me.

I can't even count the number of times I pictured the two of us standing just like this. It started on a break I had from college when I came back to town to celebrate her eighteenth birthday. It was the day I finally gave myself permission to see her in a different light, as if she was more mature and more accessible since she was legally an adult. In those fantasies, we'd kiss, and I'd swallow the gasp of surprise on her lips. I'd smile against her mouth before gripping a handful of her hair and angling her body perfectly against my own.

It was that flash of need that made me go back to college and break up with the girlfriend I had at the time.

"Hey," I say, my feet frozen. As much as I'd like to make that fantasy a reality, I know that I can't. I can't allow my sexual desires to take over my head, especially not right before sitting down to a meal with her parents.

"I wanted to see how you were."

"I'm fine," I tell her. "What's going on?"

She looks nervous as she steps from one foot to the other, shifting her weight a little. "I wanted to ask you not to

mention the pregnancy thing to my family.”

“I wouldn’t,” I assure her, wondering when she lost faith in my ability to keep her secrets.

Her parents still don’t know about the little butterfly tattoo she got on her hip her senior year in high school, just like I’ll never forget the creaminess of her skin when she pulled her shorts down to show me. It’s right in that spot that would never be seen unless she was completely naked. Even her bathing suit covers it up, something I’m a little ashamed to know.

She nods in my direction, relief washing over her before turning back around and guiding us into the house.

We settle around the table after Adalynn and I set the plates, napkins, and silverware out.

I know it’s more me than the food that makes the chicken taste dry and flavorless in my mouth. In all the years he’s been grilling, Charlie has never ruined a piece of meat he’s cooked.

After dinner, Adalynn suggests my house for a change, but I decline, reminding her that she has to get up earlier than I do. It makes sense for me to go to her place, so she can go to bed sooner. In all honesty, I need to be able to escape if it gets weird like it did last week.

The day after she got annoyed with my lack of help with picking out a donor, things were right back to normal. I’ve seen her a half dozen times since then, and the subject has never been brought up again.

So I don’t know why I ask her about it nearly the second I walk into her house.

“What?” she asks from the kitchen.

“Did you decide on a donor?”

She frowns at me when I step around the corner.

The girl isn’t a fan of people yelling from two different rooms to have a conversation.

If you respect someone, you face them when you speak, she has said so many times.

“I figured you didn’t want to talk about that.”

I don’t, but I can’t keep going without knowing what her decision is.

“You’re my best friend. Of course I want to know what’s going on in your life.”

She frowns, and it makes me wonder for a flash if the referral of her being my best friend is what’s causing her such a reaction. Madison Kelly, her female best friend from school, recently moved back home, so maybe I’ve been demoted.

I stand a little taller, ready to take the correction even though the thought of it makes part of me die inside.

“I did pick a donor.”

I tilt my head to the side when she doesn’t give further details.

“Who?” I ask after a long moment of silence.

“I picked the grandpa.” Her lips curl up in a smile. She’s so damn cute I just want to kiss it right off her lips.

“Number sixty-four ninety-two,” I say.

“You remembered the number?”

I shrug, wondering if she’s going to figure out that there’s a reason that guy sounds a lot like me, one I haven’t been proud of since I walked into that clinic in Houston so many years ago.

“Have you considered not using a donor?” I ask when she starts to look like she isn’t going to let me off the hook without answering her question.

“There isn’t exactly a line of guys waiting outside my door to jump my bones,” she mutters, her eyes downcast on the watermelon she’s cutting up.

I’d shoot every one that ever tried.

“Why don’t you let me do it?”

Her eyes snap up to mine. I swear if there was a hole big enough, I'd climb inside it and never come out.

I hate when intrusive thoughts spill out of me unchecked and unfiltered.

“What?”

I have two choices—laugh it off like I was joking or double down. Laughing it off is the only viable option.

“I can get you pregnant.”

“Cash,” she says in a way that hurts more than it probably should.

“The guy you picked sounds exactly like me,” I say, ignoring the cut she just made to my ego. “Let me do it.”

“Is it you?” she asks.

“What? No, of course not.” If there was ever a time to lie, now is it, with the tone of her voice and the disgust I can hear in it. “I don't want kids. I'd never donate sperm. That's literally the exact opposite of what I'd want.”

Why I keep the lie going, I'll never understand, but the words are out there. I can't count a single other time I've lied to her. It settles inside of me like poison, like a cancer that threatens to eat me up from the inside out.

“You don't want kids, but you're willing to have one with me?” She shakes her head a little, confusion wrinkling that spot between her eyes.

She's positively adorable with her pink, pouty lips, and that stray piece of fiery red hair on the left side by her ear that she always has trouble taming.

“Get you pregnant,” I correct. “Is that the deal?”

I'm trying not to press too hard. I don't want to seem too eager.

“You wanted to save the money,” I hedge, wondering if she can read me like a book or if this is one of those times she doesn't read more into what I'm saying.

“We’d still have to use the clinic I found.”

Now it’s my turn to be confused. “Use the clinic?”

“For the insemination.”

I suck in a deep breath, realizing we might be on the same track, but we’re hundreds of miles apart and moving in opposite directions.

“There’s a free way,” I say, wishing my brain-to-mouth filter was working a little better right now.

She shakes her head, her cheeks flaming.

“You aren’t suggesting—”

“Sex, Adalynn. I’m saying you can get pregnant the old-fashioned way.”

She immediately shakes her head again, and that sting of rejection feels like the hundredth crack of a whip against my skin.

She seems stunned into silence, but that doesn’t stop my head from imagining her placing a loving hand over her belly where my baby grew.

She might have picked my donor number, but there were things I left out. She’s worried about picking someone with too high of aspirations in life. Although it hits another chord that she’s judged that donor and decided he’s the type to stick close to home, I’m glad she did pick that one.

If she goes through with this and uses the donor, then I won’t drive myself crazy thinking about another man’s baby being inside of her.

“Or I can go to the clinic with you,” I counter when she doesn’t look less appalled.

She takes in a deep breath, but she doesn’t immediately say anything.

“I’ll get the show queued up while you finish cutting fruit,” I tell her before walking out of the room.

Chapter 8

Adalynn

“I don’t think you understand,” I tell Madison.

“I understand completely. The man has offered to father your children. It’s not complicated.”

“Child, singular, not children,” I correct. “And it’s the most complicated thing in the world.”

“I think you’re looking at it the wrong way. You get to have sex with the man you’ve always wanted, and you don’t even have to poke holes in the condom to have his baby.”

I glare at her. “I would never do that.”

My words come out on a growl.

“Are you telling me you never had that thought before? You never pictured sleeping with him and accidentally getting pregnant or making sure you got pregnant?”

“Never,” I lie because it happened in a dream once, and I’m not responsible for that. It’s not the same as thinking of it while awake or making a plan for it. “Plus, we aren’t going to have sex. He’ll go to the clinic and—”

“Jack off into a cup? Come on, Ads, what a waste.”

“Don’t say,” I lean in and lower my voice, “jack off into a cup. It’s gross.”

“Yes. It’s gross. That’s why you should throw that man down on the bed and jump on his co—”

“Madison!”

Her laughter fills the bakery, and I’m glad no one else is in here right now. She always comes by for a visit in the middle of the afternoon when there’s a lull. It ensures that we have enough time to gossip without being overheard.

“I say go with what the man offered. You’ll get a few orgasms and a baby.”

“And then what? Go right back to being besties?” I scoff. “Do you really think I’d be able to do that? To see him holding our child and not feel like I’m missing out on something?”

Her face grows serious.

“On second thought, it’s a horrible idea.”

I deflate a little with her words. “Why is that?”

“You could never go back. The man doesn’t want a family. He’s just offering you a solution to your problem.”

I thought as much last night when I tossed and turned until the sun started to peek out from the horizon.

“So go with the donor?”

A wicked smile crosses her face as she shakes her head.

“Give him the best sex of his life and make him want what you want.”

I close my eyes and point my face up to the vaulted ceiling.

“You’ve got to stop it with this idea you have about him secretly being in love with me.”

“It’s only a secret to you and Cash.”

I drop my eyes back to her. “I think that if Cash felt that way for me, he’d tell me. The man is an open book.”

“Just give it a go. I can guarantee that he’ll get one taste of you and will never let you go.”

Such things are easy for her to imagine. Madison is pregnant and not only in love with but loved in return by the man she’s always pictured herself living out her happiest days with. Plus, she doesn’t know Cash the way I do.

When the man says that he doesn’t want kids, he means it. When he says he’ll give me what I want with no expectations, that is the truth on both sides. He’s not the type of guy who changes his mind in the middle of doing something.

“The clinic is the best way to go,” I say, resolute.

“With Cash’s sperm?”

I shake my head. “The donor.”

“I say it’s going to be a lifelong regret.”

“I wouldn’t ever regret having a baby.”

“Not the baby, Adalynn. You’ll regret not having that experience with Cash. Maybe you won’t get pregnant the first month. You could have sex with him and not have to worry about seeing him hold your baby. You can do the IUI the next month.”

“That’s deceptive,” I mutter.

“I’m not telling you to do anything to keep it from happening,” she clarifies. “But the chances of getting pregnant the first month is slim, right? Your research told you that it takes most couples several months.”

I nod, swallowing the ball in my throat that’s still wanting to argue with her.

“So have great sex with Cash. You’ll always wonder what it was like if you never do it. Now’s your chance. Who knows, maybe he’ll climb in your bed and never leave.”

“Maybe,” I tell her, but I know it can’t happen.

Even if Cash decided we were good in bed together, our goals in life don’t lineup. He doesn’t want kids, and I’ve always wanted to be a mother. The line between the two of us is like a steel-covered concrete wall, and nothing will have the power to break it. It would ruin us. Our friendship would never survive it. Of that, I’m certain. Losing him, risking that friendship isn’t something I could do knowing the consequences.

I have no doubt it’ll be great sex, but the aftermath wouldn’t be worth it.

“Seriously,” Madison continues. “Save the money and jump his bones. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

I know I will, but I'd regret it even more if there was fallout from us getting together that way.

I know myself. I know I could be convinced not to have children, to think that a life with him without kids would be enough, but I know I'll end up resenting him because of it.

There's absolutely no way this could happen and things end up working out.

It's not going to stop my heart and brain from working together to convince me that I can have my cake and eat it too, either.

"Do you want another cupcake?" I ask rather than continuing the conversation.

Madison looks a little sad, but she dips her head.

After I grab her another treat from the display case, she changes the subject. I'm grateful that she can see I'm at my limit of being pressured.

The woman is living her own fantasy, but she has to understand she's the exception to the rule. Not everyone will beat the odds and end up exactly where they want to be. They end up where they're meant to go, and there isn't a scenario that I can formulate in my head where Cash and I end up happily together with a bunch of kids running around.

Chapter 9

Cash

“I still can’t find it,” I grumble, getting even more annoyed when Chandler invades my space and comes around my desk.

“Right there,” he says, pulling open the drawer to the left.

“Did you hide it?” I accuse.

“Really?” He huffs a humorless laugh. “You don’t remember saying something along the lines of *fuck this job and the horse it rode in on* yesterday? Because that’s when you shoved the notebook in there like not having it open on your desk meant the work didn’t have to be done.”

“If your granny heard you talking like that, Chandler Jacobs.”

I jerk my eyes up just as Chandler spins around, both of us smiling to see Adalynn standing there.

I’m smiling because she’s the most beautiful woman in the world. Chandler better be smiling because she’s holding one of the packages that she uses for a full dozen of her cupcakes.

“Do you have any of the—”

“Chocolate chip cookie dough? Yes,” she says and hands him the box. “Don’t eat Cash’s though.”

Chandler looks like a small, giddy child with a pep in his step when he crosses my office and takes the box.

“Close the door behind you,” I tell him when he walks past her. “And you heard her. Don’t eat the vanilla with chocolate icing.”

I could kill him for the way he thrusts his hips like he fully expects that we’re going to do something like that in here. I resolve, instead, to put him on roadkill duty for the next month instead because I’d never confront him in front of her.

Adalynn waits for the door to click closed before she steps closer and takes a seat in the chair across from my desk.

“New dress?” I ask, knowing the answer already. I’ve cataloged every dress the woman has ever worn from my favorite to my least favorite.

This one, however, is very likely going to end up in a new category. I’m still working it through my mind to decide if I’m going to label it dresses I love to hate or dresses I hate to love when she looks down at the patterned fabric with a smile.

It looks similar to the dress Judy Garland wore in *The Wizard of Oz*, only where the white part of the dress was for the movie, the fabric is cutaway, her milky smooth skin on display.

Right now, in my office, I fucking love it on her. If she were to wear it to The Hairy Frog around a bunch of drunks who are trying to gather the courage to approach her, my opinion would be the opposite.

Take those sparkly red shoes the actress wore and paint her lips that very same color... What I wouldn’t give to see a ring of it around my—

“Cash?”

“Hmm?” I ask, snapping my eyes from her left collarbone to her eyes.

Thank God there’s a desk between the two of us because I don’t think she’d be very impressed if I had to explain the erection I’m now sporting.

“Did you hear a word I said?”

“Sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s been a long day.”

It’s not exactly a lie. The workload hasn’t been heavy but my mind has been.

“I think I’m going to take you up on your offer.”

My heart kicks in my chest, and I try to get it to calm down because I know Adalynn. She’d never agree to what I offered. She has to be talking about something else.

“What’s that?” I ask, and my breath catches when her cheeks flame nearly as red as her hair.

“You’re really going to make me say it?” she asks, her voice low as if she’s afraid Chandler has his ear pressed to the door.

I have no doubt my officer couldn’t hear a thing over the chewing of the cupcakes she brought.

“I’m honestly stumped, Ads. What are you talking about?”

“The umm... donation... of the umm... You know.” She points to the bottom half of my body, and I swear that damn thing jolts in my jeans. “I figured it would be best.”

“Oh,” I say, trying to act like my cock didn’t just thicken further. I can’t recall a single time before just now that she’s referenced the thing. “That.”

“Yes, *that*,” she says, her lips forming a flat line as if she’s disappointed about something.

“So, you want me to go to the clinic with you?” I click on my computer. “We’d have to schedule it between—”

“I think...” she begins but then she turns mute.

“You think what? Next month or? I mean, I don’t know what your cycle is like.”

She makes a sound like she’s choking on something, but instead of fighting through it, she tilts her eyes up to the ceiling. It’s a sign that she’s looking for strength to say something she feels like she needs more than normal courage for.

I’m all fucking ears right now, hopeful that she has a different idea of the way she wants this to go.

“I was thinking that we could do it, you know... the way that saves money.”

I bite my bottom lip for two reasons. One, I don’t want to smile because I know it will give her the wrong idea. She’ll

think I'm laughing at her. Two, I'm seconds away from yipping for joy.

"Sex? You want to have sex with me?"

Her eyes widen. "No!"

I deflate like a balloon.

"I mean, yes, but to get pregnant. Not like have... you know."

I fight the urge to tell her that she needs to be able to say it if that's what we're going to do, but I have to quickly remind myself that this isn't going to be a wild time. I'll be there to give her what she needs. This isn't about me. Well, it's not supposed to be about me, but I know I'm going to have a hell of a time. I just have to keep enough control to not utterly devastate her with the way I like things.

"So, we have sex the normal way?" I clarify.

"I think there needs to be rules."

Of course you do, I think, but on the outside, all she sees is a smile.

"Come on, pull them out."

"What?"

"I know you have a piece of paper shoved in your pocket. Let's hear the rules."

She glares at me. "Good to know you think I'm predictable."

I open my mouth to argue, but she pulls her phone from a small clutch.

"I typed them into my phone," she says, as if that makes any damn difference.

I continue to fight my smile as she clears her throat.

"Before you begin, tell me why this way instead of going to the clinic."

"To save money," she answers quickly, a little too quickly, and it piques my interest.

“That’s all? We can do the whole turkey baster. We don’t have to have sex.”

I swear if I just shot myself in the foot for saying that...

“I looked that up and there’s a better chance of getting pregnant if you umm... you know.”

I blink at her, refusing to let her umm her way out of this.

“Orgasm,” she says on a thick swallow.

“So, you’re more likely to get pregnant if you come? Why not take the turkey baster and insert it after or during while you masturbate?”

She makes a choking noise, her eyes darting down to her phone screen.

I swear on everything holy, if the woman tells me she doesn’t masturbate, I’m going to come in my pants at trying to avoid telling her I could teach her.

“I considered that,” she says after a long pause, and somehow I manage to conceal my moan under a hum of understanding.

“Research says the chances are higher with intercourse.”

I want to ask about her confidence in my ability to make her come, but she’d likely bolt from the room.

“That makes sense,” I quickly agree. Feeding my own need for my ego might ruin this entire situation. “Okay, the rules.”

She clears her throat again before speaking, but instead of looking at her phone, she locks eyes with me. “Let me get through the list without interruptions and then we can discuss or add things if you’d like.”

She waits for me to nod in agreement.

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath. “We only have intercourse when I’m ovulating, and no other time. If I don’t get pregnant the first month, then we wait until I’m ovulating again.”

Sleeping with this woman for more than a month?

Is it horrible that I hope she has a difficult time getting pregnant?

“Nothing can change. We still have to be friends. We keep our routines.”

“Except instead of watching zombies we’re going to be ___”

“When I’m ovulating. Now, stop interrupting.” She frowns at me before dropping her eyes back to her phone, huffing when she has to unlock it again because it went dark. “There will be no kissing, no excessive touching. I expect you to keep track of my cycle on a connected app because just saying the word cycle embarrasses me. So I’ll need you to know what days we should watch TV and what days we should... you know.”

I nod in understanding. I knew not to expect the kind of shit that gets my rocks off, but this insert tab A into slot B shit sort of sucks.

No kissing? She can’t be serious. Does anyone have sex and not kiss?

“And when it’s over, I need you to not linger. I think it would be too awkward. We’re in agreement?”

“Are those all the rules?”

“So far, but I reserve the right to add more if situations come up that I didn’t think about.”

Add more, not take some away.

This is not what I had in mind at all. What I wanted was to dick her down so good that she was not only incapable of walking for a couple hours but also that she never wanted to leave my bed.

Don’t linger when it’s over? Just fuck her and leave?

I should back out now. I should tell her that this isn’t going to work for me, but I have to accept this isn’t for me.

My head can't decipher between being good enough to be the father of her baby but not good enough to kiss or hold.

It leaves my stomach sour, but I nod anyway.

“Agreed.”

“Oh, and one more thing. You'll need to get tested and a physical, and have them do maybe some genetic testing.”

I frown. Is she worried my family line is shit, and she's afraid I'll give her a baby with problems? Hell, what if it is true? It's not like I'd know because my adoption was closed. My birth mother never wanted to be found after she gave me up.

“Okay,” I tell her, more in an effort to just end this conversation.

“I'll send you a link for the app. There's a share feature which will link you directly to my account.”

“Perfect,” I tell her, my attempt at a smile falling a little short.

“Umm,” she says as she stands, her cheeks flame red from this entire conversation. “My calendar says not this week, but next week, so that blood work—”

“Needs to be done quickly. I'll head to the clinic after work.”

“Can I request that you go to one out of town? I think they might be faster than Dr. Millway.”

“Of course,” I tell her, but I wonder if she isn't worried people will find out what our plan is.

Am I enough to be her baby's father but not enough for people to know we had sex to make it happen?

Chapter 10

Adalynn

“I don’t know why you’re trying to deny it. I know what sex prep looks like.”

“Madison!” I screech, my cheeks heating as I glare at her.

We’re sitting in a nail salon getting pedicures. I don’t know the women here but that doesn’t make it any less embarrassing.

“That’s not what this is.”

“Liar,” she says, and the woman massaging my calf chuckles. Thankfully, she doesn’t make eye contact.

I don’t know why I’ve always been embarrassed with sex talk. I’ve just always felt like it was a conversation meant to be had in private, between partners, not an open-forum discussion with anyone who wanted to join.

“I’m just glad you decided against going to the clinic. Cash is going to rock your world.”

Nerves make me speak. “I gave him rules.”

“Rules in the bedroom?” the woman sitting at my feet asks. “Kinky.”

“What kind of rules?” Madison asks. The tone of her voice tells me that she knows me well enough to know they aren’t kinky rules.

“No excessive touching. No kissing, no—”

“No kissing? Adalynn, you can’t be serious.”

“I can’t,” I tell her, feeling like I’m on the verge of tears. “It makes it too personal.”

“Adalynn,” she says with sadness. “This may not be the best idea.”

“Orgasms are always a good idea,” the other woman says, her laughter a tinkling sound that on any other day would

probably make me smile.

“It’s decided,” I tell her, giving the other woman a fake smile.

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” my friend says.

I shake my head, but I can’t speak.

There’s no world where I get to have Cash as mine forever. I rejected the idea of doing this with him because of how I knew it would make me feel. I’m fully onboard with the idea that knowing what I’m missing is going to be worse than not knowing, but at the same time, I know I’ll swim in regret for the rest of my life if I don’t.

I want Cash Tucker to be the father of my children. I’ve wanted that since I was in junior high and spent my weekends tearing apart my mother’s magazines and making numerous vision boards.

If the dream wedding and little house with the wraparound porch isn’t going to be part of my future, then I can accept that.

Carrying another man’s child? Just the thought makes my skin crawl.

The man is willing to step over that friendship barrier and do this for me, and I need to let it happen.

I know it could change our friendship, but I also know how dedicated I am to doing my best to keep that from happening.

The only caveat is that we have to go back to normal, or what our new normal would be, because a baby certainly changes things up.

I know there are more parts of the conversation we need to have, but I specifically didn’t bring those up last week because I didn’t want him to change his mind. Talking about getting pregnant and speaking of an actual baby are two very different concepts. I wanted him to stay focused on the act instead of freaking out about a kid being around. I have no

doubt he'd tell me no, despite it being his suggestion to begin with.

"If you get pregnant this month," Madison says, switching gears. "Our babies will only be like three or four months apart."

"Exciting, right?"

"What if one is a boy and one is a girl and they grow up best friends that fall in love with each other?" she asks.

It doesn't feel like she means it as an insult, but it also sort of feels like a jab at my current situation.

"That would be great," I tell her, dropping my eyes down to the nail tech when she pulls the plug on the foot bath.

"I hope you don't mind wings for lunch," Madison says, her ability to shift subjects when it's something she wants to do utterly uncanny. "I've been craving them for over a week."

"Wings sound great," I tell her.

I lied about this not being sex prep because it totally is. I don't want Cash to look at me and not like what he sees.

I'm so self-conscious, especially after the way he glared at me when I went into his office last week in my new dress. I've even flirted with the idea of doing this fully clothed except for the parts that need to be exposed, but that felt a little too *Handmaid's Tale* for my liking.

What do I do if that's his expectation?

I never even considered it until just now.

Do I strip down naked?

Answer the door in nothing but a robe?

Could I handle being that close to him and not stripping him naked?

My skin starts to heat, my palms growing damp with a nervous sweat.

I gave a list of rules, but there are probably a million more that we need to put in place. I hate that I can't seem to

have certain conversations because we really need to line out our expectations.

My cell phone chimes with a text. I pick it up from the tray beside the massage chair I'm in, as the tech dries my feet, before placing those little foam things between my toes so she can paint them.

Cash: We still on for tonight?

I take a deep breath before responding. I asked him to track on the app. We haven't discussed this conversation once since I left his office. It was part of the rules. He shouldn't be texting me right now about this... anything but this.

Me: Yes.

Cash: I have Chandler covering my lunch. I should be there about seven.

Covering his lunch.

I try to keep in mind that I'm the one that made this transactional. I requested that he doesn't linger after the deed is done. It still hurts my feelings that he didn't argue any of my points.

Me: See you then.

Madison is frowning when I look back over at her.

"What?" I ask, knowing she's going to speak her mind even if I don't ask.

"Have you considered actually sitting down with the man and telling him how you feel?"

"A million times, and in my head it never works out the way I want it to."

"The two of you have been circling each other for years. It's nonsense."

"You hated Chase for ten years for ruffling your hair," I remind her.

"He saw me as a child when I was completely head over heels for him. I don't think Cash has ever looked at you the

way Chase looked at me that day. You've never been his kid sister or the weird girl next door."

"Don't," I tell her. "You're making it sound like Cash is a pervert."

"He actually showed up for our eighth-grade dance, don't you remember?"

How could I ever forget? It was the first night he kissed my temple. The immature thirteen-year-old held onto the memory of those warm lips against her skin for many years. Only he never did it again until after I graduated high school.

When I joined him at Sam Houston for school, he had a girlfriend. We spent a lot of time together there, but he acted more like a protective force than anything else. We only had a year together before he graduated and went on to the police academy.

We visited as often as his job in Houston allowed. He did an internship in Houston and stayed there until I graduated. It wasn't long after I came back to town. Four years away from Lindell seemed like a short amount of time, but it was long enough to know home was where I always wanted to be.

By the time he came back, the girlfriend was gone, which was a relief. I don't know if I could've stayed here if he brought someone back home with him.

I've been lucky this long that he hasn't found someone else. I know the day will come, but maybe when it does, I'll already have a part of him. It's honestly more than I ever should've allowed myself to want. I know I turned him down outright when he first offered, but the idea dug inside of me until I was dreaming of a half of a dozen little Cashes running around, their laughter filling the house.

Those fantasies of course ended with him coming home, and pressing his lips to my temple before whispering all the things he wanted to do to me once we got the kids in bed.

I woke up flushed and aroused. Despite being alone in my house, I was a little embarrassed.

It was that need that kept me away for over a week, but I knew it was pointless. There was no point in trying to keep avoiding him. The man is entwined into every aspect of my life.

“The point I’m trying to make is that Chase and Cash are two very different people.”

“Cash doesn’t want kids,” I tell her. I see the pause, the way she opens her mouth to speak, but my words derail her.

“Really?” she asks. “I don’t really see Cash as the type of guy that wouldn’t want—”

“He doesn’t. I know he doesn’t, so there’s no sense in getting my hopes up that whatever happens between the two of us is going to lead to more, because it won’t. We don’t want the same things out of life, and that makes us incompatible.”

It hurts my heart in a way I never thought imaginable to admit that out loud.

Madison frowns in my direction, but she doesn’t say another word. I’m not going to explain to her why Cash feels that way. Those secrets were confidences that he shared with me. I’d never share her secrets with him.

After leaving the nail salon, we head to lunch, but there feels like there’s a distance between the two of us now that wasn’t there before.

I know we’ll get past whatever it is, but it makes me have second thoughts about tonight with Cash.

Will things get so weird between the two of us that we do a lot more than just avoid each other for a few days?

What if it totally destroys our friendship?

I vow to not let that happen. If we stick to the rules, then we’ll be fine.

I’m certain of it.

Chapter 11

Cash

It's closer to eight when I'm finally able to take a lunch break and head over to Adalynn's house. I feel that same urge to knock that I do at her parents' houses, but I know that would be incredibly weird. Besides, what if she's waiting in the bedroom for me already?

I don't want to make this awkward. Hell, with as many times as I've pictured us doing this, it shouldn't be awkward at all.

My cock is already thickening when I use my key to open the door and enter the house.

I can't even say that I didn't have expectations walking inside for the first time, knowing how the evening was going to end. In my head, there were candles and soft music playing. I pictured Adalynn naked on the bed waiting for me—different fantasies have her either touching herself or gripping the sheets in order to resist doing so—or even better, on her knees with her head bowed.

None of that is what I'm greeted with. Adalynn is in her kitchen, closing the oven door, when I step into view. Instead of candles and soft music, every light is on and the television is blaring with an excessive number of beeps to censor cuss words as an angry chef makes other chefs feel like shit by telling them their food is awful.

"Ads?" I say when she keeps her back to me as she walks toward the sink.

"Oh, hey," she says over her shoulder as she begins washing her hands. "How was work?"

How was work?

I feel like I've crossed over into some other realm, some different plane of reality.

"It's fine. Chandler is covering my lunch," I remind her.

What's the chance she forgot what we were supposed to be doing tonight?

Is something I've been obsessing over just another day to her?

Then I see the tremble in her hands that she's trying to hide as she reaches for a dish towel.

"You're baking?"

She looks from me to the oven.

"Robin cleaned out her freezer and found a pre-made lasagna. We have an hour and a half before it's done. Have you eaten?"

I lick my lips, but don't say what I'm thinking.

"I only have an hour for lunch," I remind her.

"Yes. That's right. Okay, then. Well," she says, and I sort of like her nervousness. "Let's get started then. Shall we?"

Shall we?

Maybe I have stepped through some sort of time portal.

I follow her from the room, my eyes locked right where they normally are when she's walking away. Her ass looks phenomenal.

"You can put your gun belt and stuff over on the dresser. I laid down a towel, so it doesn't scratch the surface." She points in the general direction of the dresser. "I'm going to go get ready."

I don't tug at my belt until she closes herself into the bathroom. I have no idea what getting ready entails, but I swear I'll nut if she walks out of the bathroom naked.

My heart is pounding, my need for her thickening my cock to a full erection. I don't know what her expectations are, but I strip to my skin, resisting the burn in my gut that tells me I need to stroke a hand down my length to calm myself. I avoid touching my dick at all. There will be no taking the edge off tonight. Every breath will be an exercise in self-control.

I shift my weight from one leg to the other until I start to feel awkward.

She takes forever in the bathroom. So long, in fact, that I have to wonder if I need to call Chandler and let him know I'm going to need longer than an hour for my break.

I step closer to the door and listen, but I hear nothing. The water isn't running, and she doesn't seem to be walking around in the room.

"Ads?" I say, my voice catching in my throat. "Everything okay in there?"

"You can do this," she says, but her voice is a whisper and not meant for me.

It feels intrusive, like I've violated her privacy, but it's also a slap in the face.

Does this woman actually have to psych herself up to have sex with me?

Before I can get lost trying to figure out the answer to that question, the doorknob turns and she steps into the room.

Five seconds ago, I was ready to call this whole thing off with a promise to myself that I could get over being offended by what I overheard, but the second she steps into the bedroom, every thought is derailed.

I've seen this woman in a bikini I don't know how many times, but the sight of her standing in front of me in a soft-looking robe, the hem of it flirting with her upper thighs, leaves me forgetting how to breathe.

My eyes trail up her silky-smooth legs to her waist where the tie is cinched. An image of her pregnant flashes in my mind, conjuring up what she might look like wearing this same thing then. It would gap at her throat, the swells of her breasts exposed. In my fantasy, the roundness of her belly would make it impossible to keep the thing closed at the bottom.

"Are you ready?" she asks, but she can't seem to look my way.

I'd be offended if her face wasn't bright red. I'm comfortable enough in my skin that I somehow managed to forget that I'm standing in the middle of her bedroom butt ass naked.

"Ready," I tell her, taking a step back as she inches closer because I can tell she's heading to the bed.

I watch as she bends a little to pull back the blankets, and I'm close to getting lost in the way her robe rides up her ass a few more inches. Shadows cast by the overhead light make it impossible to view more of her body. I both love and hate the mystery of it.

"You can use that," she says, pointing to something on the bedside table, but my attention is a hundred percent on the towel she has laid out under the bed cover.

She prepared her room for this. I don't know if that's commendable or what. Adalynn is so goal-oriented that it shouldn't surprise me. She gets laser-focused when she's on a mission, and usually there's very little that can deter her. It's one of the main reasons I offered to do his. If she set her mind to having a baby, then she'd have one whether I was involved or not.

"Huh?" I say stupidly, watching her climb into the bed without pulling her robe off.

"The Pre-Seed."

"Pre-what?"

"It's lubrication approved for fertility."

"It makes you more fertile?" I ask, looking at the blue-and-white package with disgust.

"It's pH balanced so it won't interfere with your umm... sperm."

"It's required?" I ask, still feeling stupid.

"Since there won't be any umm, you know... foreplay... I won't be umm... you'll need to use it."

I blink at her because she has to be speaking a different language right now.

No foreplay?

I know she didn't want kissing or excessive touching, but I thought for sure she'd either change her mind or I would at least be able to get my mouth on other parts of her body.

She's drawing a line in the sand, making more rules without calling them rules.

I should probably be ashamed that my cock hasn't flagged at all with her declaration, but my body and my head aren't always on the same track.

"Are you nervous?"

"No," she says, a little too fast to make her answer believable as she lies down in the bed and pulls the covers up to her chin.

She still can't look at me, but I know there's a good chance that running my hand down my cock might not be received the way I'd like it to be. And then, it hits me like a ton of bricks.

"Adalynn," I snap, but she doesn't look over at me until I kneel beside the bed, my lower half out of sight. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Her eyes widen as she sits bolt upright in the bed, her eyes narrowing on me.

I'm a weak man because when my eyes catch a quick glimpse of skin, I drop my gaze to it.

"Jesus," I whisper, catching just the very edge of her dark pink nipple as her robe opens.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she demands, her hands working to close her robe as if she feels like she has to shore herself up against me.

"I don't think this is how this should happen," I manage after swallowing several times.

“*This?*” she says, her voice a little weaker than before.
“What do you mean this?”

“I think you’ll regret losing your virginity this way.”

I give her a sad smile, wanting to reach out to her and place a calming hand on her arm, but I’m naked and she’s naked under that robe. I swear skin-to-skin contact right now would have me backpedaling so fast I’d trip and crack my head open.

“Virginity?” Her nose twitches right before a cackle escapes her perfect lips. “You think I’m a virgin?”

“You’re not?”

“Cash, I’m almost twenty-nine. I lost my virginity in high school.”

Something akin to a white-hot poker needles through my chest.

“With who?” I growl.

There wasn’t a guy who was worthy of her at the high school. I knew every single one of those little shits. Not to mention, they were all warned to stay the fuck away from her, not only by me but also her twin brothers.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says, her fist clenching her robe even tighter. “Are we doing this or not?”

It’s rare that Adalynn gets defensive, but I know when she does, she’s close to giving up.

“Yeah, Ads. We’re doing this,” I say against my better judgment.

We’re supposed to stay friends. We’re supposed to go back to normal after this is said and done, but I don’t know how that’s possible.

“Can you hand me the remote?” she asks, pointing to the bedside table.

I oblige, grabbing that stupid bottle of lube as well.

Just as I get the bottle open, pulling the seal off, and the top screwed back on, she presses a button that casts the room in darkness, leaving only hints of light in the room from her ensuite.

I want to complain because I can't see shit, but I have to remind myself that this is for her, not me. Despite the way I feel and the tightness in my chest, it hasn't made my dick flag at all. I know there should be some shame in that, but I can't seem to feel any of it right now.

I slather my cock with pH balanced fucking lube because I'm sure there would be a rule about running my lubed slick fingers over her slit. As annoyed as it makes me, I don't want her to feel violated in any way.

"Jesus," I mutter, unable to even think shit like that without my cock flexing in my hand.

"Is something wrong?"

So many things, baby.

"No, just... prepping."

"Are you having a hard time getting... ready? You can watch some dirty videos if you need to."

Fuck me sideways. How can she possibly think that I'd need something like that? She's practically naked. When I pull back the covers, she easily spreads her legs so I can settle in between them.

"I'm good," I assure her. "Do you want to guide me or do you want me to do it?"

"I umm... I think you should do it."

"Lift this leg," I tell her, patting the leg to my left since my left hand is the one not covered in lube.

She swallows back a whimper when I brush my fingers over her body, but it's the way she rolls her head to the side with her eyes squeezed shut that makes me pause. Is she fighting a good feeling or trying to choke down a bad one?

I press forward, moving my hand out of the way as I sink inside of her. I clamp my lips between my teeth to keep from cussing.

“Relax,” I urge when her entire body tenses up.

Pulling back, I don't waste a second pushing forward again.

“Up,” I say, indicating her other leg. With both legs angled up, calves hot on my sides, it's utter fucking perfection.

But she still has her eyes closed, still has her face turned so there's no chance for me to brush my lips against hers. Despite her rules, it feels like that's what I should be doing. Her hands should be on my back, scratching at my skin instead of fisting the towel under her ass.

Knowing all of this and feeling like there's something completely off about this entire thing doesn't matter to my body.

That tingle low in my spine started before I even got inside of her. I'd apologize for being so close to the edge, but I get the feeling it's exactly what she wants.

Prim-and-proper Adalynn extends to the bedroom, but I don't know that I have a right to be disappointed in that. This was never supposed to be about pleasure for either of us.

“I'm going to come,” I warn, causing her body to tense even further. It does nothing to stave off my orgasm.

“Okay,” she says.

Chapter 12

Adalynn

This is supposed to be different, better than any other guy I've hooked up with. I've always pictured Cash as my soulmate. Despite what I said to Madison, I was really expecting sparks to fly. I was expecting him to pull my robe open and throw out every rule I put in place because he just couldn't resist seeing me naked.

The rules were created because I felt like they needed to be said. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable.

I fantasized about his lips all over my body, his tongue swiping at my clit while I writhe on the bed.

What I didn't expect is him having the biggest penis I've ever felt, only for him to shove it in me a couple times before he came. It's like high school all over again. I know there's no sense in even trying to reason with it like I did back then.

Is it supposed to be a compliment because yeah, kudos to me, I guess, but having an orgasm myself would be cool too, and that was honestly one of the main reasons I agreed to this in the first place.

I feel the pulse of him inside of me and worry about his level of breathlessness when he pulls back. Honestly, it couldn't have been much of a workout. We've only been here for a few minutes.

Bad at sex.

It's not something I ever considered for him.

I expected it to be explosive, addictive, something I would crave long after he's gone.

Right now, at this moment, I just want him out of me.

The regret starts to settle inside of me before he even pulls back.

"Can you hand me a pillow?" I ask, emotion threatening to bubble out.

My eyes are already stinging with tears of disappointment.

It's not his fault. We never should've done this to begin with, and I think a part of me knew it too. I know wanting something to go one way and it actually happening are two very different things, and tonight proves it.

Cash hands me a pillow before climbing off the bed.

I feel like a fool as I shove the thing under my hips. I read online that elevating the hips may help the sperm reach its goal, and I'll be damned if I ruin a friendship and miss out on the chance of getting pregnant all in one night.

Cash doesn't speak as he walks toward the bathroom. I resist the urge and fail miserably when I try not to watch his ass flex as he goes. The limited light coming in from the hallway makes the sight of him mysterious and sexy, but the sting of our encounter is still stronger.

I get lost in thought for a moment, trying not to dwell in the hand I've been dealt, but Cash comes back into the room much too soon.

The information on the internet says I need to keep my hips elevated for fifteen to thirty minutes. As an overachiever, I know I'll probably stay like this for over an hour.

He doesn't speak as he picks up his clothes and begins to dress.

"You umm... touched me. Did you wash your hands?"

"Yes," he says, sounding a little annoyed. "I used the hand soap, not one of those fancy soaps in there."

I grind my teeth at the tone of his voice. It sounds like he's mad at me for some reason.

"I mean, before you came here, did you wash your hands?"

"Yes, Adalynn. I wouldn't touch you with dirty hands."

He mutters something unintelligible under his breath, but I don't ask for clarification.

“This can’t happen again,” I say, finally able to gather the courage to put my thoughts into words.

“Okay.”

I needed him to agree, but I honestly thought it would take him a little longer.

“I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I tell him, turning my head to the side when he leans over and presses his lips to my temple. We’ve parted this way hundreds of times, but when he grabs his gun belt from my dresser and walks out of my room, it feels like I’m stuck under water without the ability to take a breath.

What have we done?

Tonight was supposed to be magical. We were supposed to look into each other’s eyes and share a moment. We were supposed to confess our feelings, the ones everyone else claims to see but we’ve been ignorant of.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

The first tear falls as the sound of the front door opening and closing reaches me. The second, third, and fourth follow shortly.

In my head, I imagine him still in the house and coming back to me, insisting that he can do better. My fantasy would have him begging to let him prove it to me.

Sexually incompatible.

I never thought that would be on my life’s bingo card where Cash was concerned.

It’s supposed to be perfect, the best I’ve ever had.

I fight the urge to blame either one of us. Sometimes things just don’t line up, but even I’m getting irritated by myself thinking these things.

Maybe he was upset that I wasn’t a virgin. Maybe he sees me as this sweet innocent girl who—

I jolt when my phone rings, the screen broadcasting light across the ceiling.

When I reach for it and see that it's Madison calling, I second-guess my initial instinct to answer it. I know why she's calling. It's nearly nine o'clock, and she knows Cash was coming at seven. She wants the nitty-gritty details.

I sigh in relief when the call goes to voicemail, but then it immediately starts ringing again, telling me that she'll keep calling until I answer.

"Hello," I say after the call connects.

"What are you doing?" she asks, her voice light and airy, her tone salacious.

"Fixing to go to bed."

Silence fills the line. I know what she wants, but I just can't tell her. Maybe if some time passes, I can sink back into the fantasies that he's utterly perfect in every way. Putting any truths out there will make that impossible.

"Tell me all the details," she insists.

"I couldn't go through with it," I lie. "It would just be too weird, you know?"

Madison sighs on the other end of the line.

"Adalynn," she grumbles. "How did he take it?"

"He umm... I did it by text. I figured it would be too weird to do it face-to-face."

"You mean you'd jump his bones if he showed up there all horned up and ready for action?"

I huff. "Something like that. I'll talk with you later," I tell her, faking a yawn. "I have an early day tomorrow."

I hang up before she can try and give me more unsolicited advice.

I should've started a timer for this hip prop thing, but I didn't. I wait another twenty minutes before climbing off the bed. There's nothing sexy about waddling to the bathroom

with a towel smooshed between my legs, but I guess it's on par with how the rest of the night was going.

As if the night isn't bad enough, my smoke alarm is going off when I get out of the shower.

I forgot about the lasagna and burned it to a crisp.

It's after eleven when I finally get to bed. It's after two in the morning when I cry myself to sleep.

Chapter 13

Cash

I know she probably thinks I lied last night when I skipped her family meal, but Chandler needed some time off, and I offered to take his shift instead of calling in our reserve officer.

Technically, we could both be off at the same time and the county would cover for us, but that would mean fielding a call with the sheriff bitching at me. I've had enough disappointment in the last couple of days.

None of that matters. The issue right now is how awkward it's going to be when we see each other again. I guess, in a way, I am avoiding her.

I knew this would happen. I knew that we wouldn't match up in the bedroom, but I let hopes, wishes, and dreams guide me into saying yes to this wild-ass plan of hers. She regretted it before it even started, I think, and it makes me a horrible person for not pulling the plug.

I'm trying to figure out what I'll say to her the next time we meet when fate puts a test right in front of me with her car being parked outside of That's Another Story, the local bookstore owned and operated by Sage Douglas.

I could easily just drive on by, but that's not what we do. I'm off work, and with it being so late in the afternoon, she's closed the bakery for the day. We don't have many days where our schedules line up. We make time for each other in the evenings, but there's seldom a time we see each other before the sun goes down.

I pull my truck up across the street, the angled lines of the parking area dictating where I can park.

I know exactly where she likes to hang out in the store, but that doesn't stop Sage from pausing her conversation at the register with another customer to point me in that direction, as if she knows exactly why I'm here. She's right, of course, but I hate being seen as predictable.

The far back corner of the store has turned into what Adalynn has called a perfect reading oasis more than once. She loves it here so much, she tried to turn her spare bedroom into a little reading nook, but she said it just didn't give off the same vibe. I've spent countless hours unsuccessfully trying to find a candle that smells like a bookstore after she complained that her reading area at home was lacking that very thing.

The sight of her doesn't shock me. She's sitting in a high-backed chair, legs crossed, with a book held out in front of her. I spend a moment just watching her. It's something I don't get to do very often because more times than not, she knows I'm close long before I come into her line of sight.

Right now she's so entranced with the story she's reading that I think an alarm could go off and she wouldn't even notice.

Her cheeks are flushed, but the room isn't warm. It's a little on the cool side, honestly.

I drop my eyes to the front of the book but it's too far away for me to read the title.

The night before last, she looked unimpressed. She couldn't even make eye contact with me when before then, she always looked in my direction. The look she has in her eyes right now as her pretty pink tongue sneaks out to wet her lips is what I was hoping to see when I stood in front of her naked.

She's turned on. Whatever she's reading is making her hot.

I vow a lifetime of torture and cold showers to my cock when it threatens to voice his own opinion of how she looks right now.

After turning the page, she lifts her hand to her chest, her fingers toying with the tiny locket there. It was a gift from me a handful of birthdays ago. As far as I know, the only time it hasn't been hanging around her neck was the time it got snagged in her hair and the chain broke.

She's never opened the locket because I purposely glued the damn thing shut all those years ago. I needed to tell her

how I felt but didn't have the courage to risk losing her with the confession. It brings me peace every time I look at the small piece of jewelry hanging in the dip in her throat.

I could stand here all day and just watch her, but she looks up when someone else walks by.

Her eyes widen at the sight of me standing there, and I allow myself to believe that her smile is real when her lips curl up in the corners.

"Hey," she says as I walk closer.

I keep my eyes on her even though I can see she's trying to hide the book by putting it down by her hip.

Her cheeks flame redder. She's embarrassed by what she was reading. I dart my eyes down, taking note of the title on the spine of the thick book before looking back at her.

"I saw your car outside," I tell her, hitching my thumb over my shoulder to indicate the parking area out front. "Though I'd swing in and see what you were up to. Rather silly now that I think about it, considering this is a bookstore."

She gives me a weak smile. "Nothing I had at home fit what I was looking for. I read the blurb and just got sucked in. Sage is probably up there wondering if I'm going to read the whole thing here."

"What are you reading?" I ask, making a bet with myself that she won't tell me the exact details.

She waves her hand in front of her. "Just a silly romance."

She means sex. It's a sex book. I'd bet my life savings on it.

I could probably sit in the chair across from her and visit for a while, but, for the first time in as long as I can remember, there's a weird void between the two of us. I knew this was a possibility and was even more certain of it when I left her house the other night, but it stings a little to be experiencing it.

"Yeah, so," I say, grinning at her. "I'll let you get back to reading."

“See you later,” she says instead of asking me to stay or offering to hang out.

The destruction to our friendship has already begun.

There aren't many things I regret in life after becoming friends with her. I stopped regretting being born which was a feeling that plagued me for a very long time as a child. She made everything better. She made the sun warmer and the nights not so lonely with just the prospect of being able to see her once it rose again.

I lift my hand in a weird little wave before turning back around and walking away.

My truck is already as hot as the sun when I climb back inside, but I don't waste the energy to roll down the windows. My house is only a couple of minutes away, and if I'm being honest with myself, I probably deserve the short-lived torture.

I knew before it happened that I shouldn't have gone through with it, and now things are going to be insanely weird.

Sitting inside my truck, outside my house, I pull up the title of the book she was reading. The synopsis doesn't give much away, but as always, the customers leaving the reviews give a lot of information. So much so, I'm sure the author isn't impressed with the spoilers.

I have to download a different app to read it once I buy it. By the time I get to the second chapter, there's more than the heat of the Texas sun making the inside of my truck hot.

It's... filthy. I wouldn't go so far as to call it degradation, but the male character in this book is rather aggressive in the way he talks to his client. Did I mention the man is a Dom for hire, and the women he encounters are literally paying him to do these things to them?

I pull at the collar of my shirt, trying to get a little air to my suddenly warm chest.

“Get on your knees and open that pretty fucking mouth of yours,” he growls, a sinister little smile forming on his lips as she obeys, opening wide so he can slide the cum-slick tip of his cock along her tongue.

“I swear to God,” I curse as I read that line.

Is this what she read that made her fingers caress that necklace? Is she wishing it were me that said those things to her?

If either of those things could possibly be true, then I went about the other night the wrong way.

This could possibly change so many things.

Chapter 14

Adalynn

Sunday mornings are like a tornado that comes from out of nowhere. Things are calm until about eight thirty, then the pre-church rush happens. The rush is over in less than an hour because people stop by on their way to Sunday school. Then it's silent until about three in the afternoon when people are looking for an after lunch sweet treat.

There have been times I've left and then come back, but I've found that the lull in the day is a great time to work on trying new recipes and perfecting ones from the week before. I always make the most popular flavors, but I try my best to cycle through new ones every other week. It keeps traffic through the store a little steadier. We have some in town willing to try anything and others who get here early on Tuesdays before their favorites sell out.

I take lots of pictures when I prep my new flavors to use later in the week, to entice people into stopping by, and honestly, I hate that part of the job. I could live happily ever after if all I had to do was bake. I learned long ago that just having something available isn't enough to get someone to buy it. They need to see it several times. They want to hear people talking about it. They want suggestions and recommendations. It's why I ask nearly every customer who places a custom order if I can tag them in the town group, thanking them for their purchase. Most agree, and more often than not, they comment, raving about how wonderful their treats were. Word of mouth is so very important for a small business, and I'm grateful for everyone that suggests Fondante's Inferno over a bigger bakery in the city.

I make custom cakes as well, but the clientele around here are pretty old-school. Some of the younger couples are quick to agree to an order when given a price quote, but a lot kind of scrunch up their noses and either ask for just cupcakes or say they can make it for less by buying boxed mixes from the local grocery store. I'm changing people's mindsets, making sure they value my time, but it's a very slow endeavor.

Madison volunteered me to make her wedding and groom's cakes, and I told her I'd be offended if she picked someone else. I grin thinking about my friend as I package her orange creamsicle cupcakes. She's one of the ones who sends me a text and puts in an order before operating hours to ensure she doesn't miss out.

After setting her order to the side, I head to the back, figuring I have half an hour before the store opens. That's enough time to get the batch of strawberry cream cheese icing started that I need for a new recipe I found online.

I relish the cool temps in the walk-in cooler for a moment because the back kitchen is already getting warm from the cupcakes in the oven. The ventilation in this old building isn't that great. I only had so much money to get the store up and running, and my customers' comfort came first.

I startle as I step out of the cooler and see someone standing there, nearly dropping the butter I grabbed from there.

“Cash?”

His eyes dart up the length of me, and I feel his attention like feathers brushing my skin. Goosebumps travel down my arms and legs, and I fight the urge to straighten my dress.

He doesn't speak as he walks closer.

Feral.

It's the only way to describe the look in his eyes as he pulls the packs of butter from my hands and places them on the table beside us.

I clench my hands in fists at my side as his eyes continue to run down my body.

“What's going—”

I whimper when he reaches up and grips a handful of my hair.

He isn't hurting me, but it surprises me.

I'm trembling by the time he leans in and whispers in my ear.

"I know you have rules."

His breath is warm on my neck, and I fight every instinct that's telling me to lean into it.

"I don't fucking like rules."

The cuss word does something right in the center of me, making it nearly impossible to keep my knees from buckling. He normally would hedge that kind of talk, so I know his use of it now is intentional.

"This mouth," he says, pulling my hair until my head is leaned back.

He brushes his thumb over my bottom lip.

"Is mine to do with as I please."

I don't bother trying to close my mouth after that.

"Now get on your knees and open that pretty fucking mouth of yours."

I slow blink at him, my brain taking a minute to figure out what is going on.

I don't know this man. This man is abrasive and uncouth.

My body begs me to get to know him better.

His grip on my hair loosens but doesn't fully release me when I start to lower myself to my knees.

He looks surprised that I'm obeying, and that's the kind of power I love. He issued the command, unsure if I was going to argue with him or actually do it.

He uses his free hand to pull open his belt, unbutton his uniform slacks, and lower his zipper.

I keep my eyes angled up at him. I was all out of sorts the other night so I couldn't even look at him. I knew if I did, I'd break my own rules. I knew if I looked at his mouth, I'd have to kiss him. If I didn't grip the towel I placed on the bed

for easy cleanup, I'd dig my nails into his flesh. I'd break every one of the rules I put in place.

"Wider," he urges, his own mouth hanging open as if he has very little control of his body as he runs the tip of himself over my tongue.

"Know how easily I could choke you with my cock?"

My eyes widen even further when I realize exactly what's going on.

I tried to hide the book I was reading yesterday when he found me at the bookstore. This very scene was playing out when I noticed him standing there. I was in the middle of picturing him in place of the male character in the book, and here he is, as if those fantasies have turned into a reality. I was flustered to the point that I can't even recall what conversation took place yesterday. Right now, all I have to do is obey his commands, and I know he's going to give me everything I wanted from him that night.

"But I'm not going to do that."

Another phrase from that scene in the book.

"I'm going to fill that sweet pussy of yours with my cock and then my seed. I'm going to put so many babies in that body of yours."

So yesterday was the first time I discovered that it's very possible that I have a breeding kink. Maybe it's my current situation and the whole planned-to-get-pregnant-by-my-best friend that led me in that direction, but honestly, I'm not sorry I sought out that sort of book yesterday. I posted anonymously in an online group for recommendations, and I was not disappointed at all.

It brought me here. Instead of focusing and worrying about the aftermath, I let myself fully sink into this moment, a recreation of the fantasy I allowed myself after a disappointing first encounter.

"It's what you want, right?" he asks, his grip tightening, an indication that he wants me to stand.

I feel shaky on my feet as I do so.

“Tell me, Adalynn. Is it what you want?”

I nod, swallowing because my mouth is very dry from panting for this man.

“Say it.”

“I want it.”

He shakes his head, a sinister smile on his plush lips. My gaze locks there for a long moment.

“Oh, sweet baby. That would be breaking another rule, wouldn't it?”

“Please,” I beg.

“Give me what I want, and I'll return the favor.”

“I want you to fill my sweet pussy with your cock.” I swallow, those dirty words awkward but also somehow freeing on my tongue. “And then your cum. Put babies in my body, Cash.”

“I like the correction,” he praises, his lips trailing my neck.

It feels spectacular, but my throat isn't where my body wants his lips.

“Cash,” I groan when he releases my hair and wraps his arms all the way around me.

I feel the heat of his erection through my sundress, and it makes me ache in a way I never thought I'd feel.

How is this the same man from the other night?

Instead of pressing his mouth to mine, he lowers himself, his hands traveling down my body as he squats in front of me.

He sucks in a deep breath as he lifts the hem of my dress.

“That, sweet girl, is the prettiest pussy I've ever seen,” he praises as he pulls my panties to the side.

I suck in a ragged breath when he swipes his tongue there.

“Mmm,” he groans. “Looks like we won’t be needing that fucking Pre-Seed this time.”

I swear every muscle inside of me clenches, but I don’t have very long to focus on it because he slips a long, thick finger inside of me as he stands.

“Pull those panties down, baby.”

He chuckles when I rush to obey, hating that he has to pull his finger from me in order for me to do so.

“Tuck them into my pocket,” he orders once I stand with them hanging from my fingers.

I press my free hand to his chest as I push the thin fabric into his pocket. It feels dirty, a filthy act to give him something so personal of mine. It’s also exactly what happened in the book he caught me reading yesterday.

“There are better places than your bakery to make you come,” he says, his voice full of gravel and need. “We’ll get our chance at all of them.”

Where did this man come from?

I nod in understanding, my legs trembling with arousal, my desire pooling between my legs. It’s a promise I know, just from the look in his eyes, that he’ll keep.

I squeal when he picks me up like I weigh nothing before urging my legs around his waist.

He doesn’t let me stay that way. Instead, he forces my legs open as he moves his arms under them so the backs of my knees are resting on his forearms.

I should probably feel embarrassed when he looks down at me and the way I’m splayed open for him, but I’m too turned on to worry about any of that right now.

“So fucking pink and perfect. When we have more time, I’m going to eat this pussy for hours. Tell me that’s what you want.”

“I want you to eat my pussy.”

He bites his bottom lip as he flexes back and lines himself up perfectly to my entrance. I hold my breath, anticipation making my heart race.

“I love filthy words on your lips, baby. I’ve always wondered what it would sound like, what that obscenity would taste like.”

He presses forward, entering me at the same time his mouth descends on mine.

I inhale a gasp, the two sensations almost too much.

Although I didn’t risk it the other night, now I don’t hesitate to wrap my arms around him and try to pull him closer.

I don’t know if it’s the difference in him or the position, but there’s no doubt in my mind the third time he pulls back and shoves into me that the other night was a fluke. This man knows exactly what he’s doing.

We aren’t a minute into this and my body is already threatening to fall over the edge.

“Cash,” I moan, and I swear I feel a tremor run through his body.

The sound of his hips smacking against my body fills the air. I know I’m going to have to scrub every single inch of this kitchen, but the effort will be well worth it.

“Fuck,” he grunts. “Play with that pussy, Ads.”

He shrugs off my arms when I don’t immediately release him.

“Now.”

I obey rather than telling him that I don’t need to touch myself. He’s going to make me come without it, but there’s nothing wrong with a little heightened sensation.

“Eyes open,” he growls. “Don’t fucking look away from me when I’m inside of you.”

I snap my eyes to him and slide my fingers over my clit at the same time. The result is electric, and my body clenches

around him.

His jaw unhinges as my body starts to pulse around him. That devilish smile spreads across his entire face, and I revel in it. In all the years we've been friends, I've never seen this look. I think I might love it the most.

He's still powering in and out of me, my body taking him willingly now. I have no doubt I'll be sore when it's over.

Overwhelmed with sensation, I pull my slick fingers from between my legs and press them to his lips.

He groans as he opens his mouth, licking my fingers before shoving forward one last time and pulsing inside of me.

I did nothing but let him have my body, but it has still left me panting for breath.

He presses his forehead against mine, his own breathing just as ragged.

“Fuck, that was perfect.”

I nod my head against his in agreement.

“I need my panties,” I whisper, loving the way his cheeks rise with his smile.

He steps back, groaning as he locks his eyes between my legs.

Now that it's over, I'm more capable of feeling embarrassed, but then he reaches down, capturing the semen making a trail down my leg, and he presses it back into me.

“Don't want any of that escaping,” he says, taking a little extra time to dip that finger into me twice more before stepping back.

He pulls my panties from his pocket, looking down at them as if there's something wrong.

“What?” I ask when he drops down and holds them open for me to step into.

“I was planning on keeping these.”

Another rush of gooseflesh covers my skin.

That isn't something he's supposed to say. We aren't hooking up for any other reason than to get pregnant. It didn't work the way I thought it should the other night, so this is his correction. I can admit when I'm wrong, but I can't allow my mind to read any more into it.

As soon as my panties are back up around my hips, I turn to wash my hands, feeling another rush of warmth coat my skin when I look back at him and see him with his finger in his mouth.

I've only ever read in books where a man was okay with tasting his own cum, but Lord alive, the sight of him doing it makes me want to head out front and lock the door so we can have the day to act out every scene in the book he clearly went home and read last night. There's something in chapter nineteen that really piqued my interest.

I take a deep breath and step away from the sink so he can wash up. Instead of sticking around for the awkward part, I grab an apron, pull it over my head, and turn to go to the front of the bakery.

"Chase!" I screech when I see Madison's fiancé standing in front of the display case.

"Adalynn," he says, his eyes going to my hair.

I lift my hand to the mess of waves, but I have no doubt it looks crazy with the way Cash was fisting it not long ago.

"I swear, Adalynn, that mouth of yours is—"

Cash runs right into my back, his hands going to my hips before he notices Chase standing right in front of us.

My cheeks have got to be as red as my hair.

"Fu-freak," Cash says. Just when I think I can't get any more embarrassed, Cash finishes buckling his belt right in front of Chase. "I'll umm... see you later."

This may be the first time in years that Cash walks away from me without pressing his lips to my forehead or temple. It's crazy that I realize it with everything that has happened this morning.

I do my best to straighten my spine, but the action tugs on my lower parts, reminding me what I was doing a few moments ago.

“I’m not explaining myself to you, Chase Woodson.”

“I didn’t say a word,” he returns.

The silence is heavy between the two of us.

“If you tell Madison, I’ll hate you forever.”

“You might want to get a jump on that, Ads. I don’t keep secrets from her.”

I pull in an irritated breath, but honestly, I’d expect nothing less from a man who claims he’s had the love of his life right next door his entire life.

“Well, that’s a sign of a healthy relationship, I guess.”

“It’s no big deal,” he says in a tone that tells me he still isn’t letting me off the hook with what he walked in and discovered. “We’ve known you guys were going to end up together for a while now.”

I clear my throat, refusing to even let thoughts like that settle inside of me. They’re dangerous and have the power to make me want things I could never have.

I straighten my back once again.

“We aren’t together. But if you can’t ask your best friend to get you pregnant, then who can you ask?”

A slow smile spreads across his face, and he stays silent for the longest time before asking for Madison’s cupcakes.

He tells me it only takes him seven minutes to get home, but he’ll take the long way around so it gives me ten minutes.

It only takes me four to decide to make the call, but I’m still on the phone with her, listening to her cackle about my bad sex ordeal then the good sex ordeal, when Chase gets back home with her cupcakes.

I finally hang up with her when a car pulls up outside of the bakery. Relaying the stories left me so flustered and

embarrassed that I feel the need to repent for my sins when Reverend Holloway steps inside and asks me if I'm ill.

Chapter 15

Cash

Have I ever in my entire life had better sex?

There isn't a time I can recall that even comes close.

What happened earlier today was how the other night was supposed to go. It was the realization of every fantasy I've let run through my head. Even more so if I'm being honest with myself.

I knew the risk. I knew that she could've easily called me a pervert and told me to never darken her door again, but luck was on my side this time. For once, things seem to be looking up.

God, the clench of her pussy, the way her lips quivered against mine when we kissed. The way she clung to me as if she couldn't imagine ever having to let me go.

I'm on cloud nine right up until the call I get from the sheriff.

"Hey, Mike," I say, answering the phone with a chipperness I've never felt before.

"Chief," he says, and I sober immediately.

If this were a personal call or just one where he wants to shoot the shit, he'd call me Cash.

Addressing me by my title tells me that it's not only work related, it's not good news. It's never good news though. Sheriff Hodson is a no-nonsense kind of guy. He doesn't call when he's bored, and more often than not, he's the type of man who would spend half a day figuring something out on his own rather than making a phone call that would cut his workload in half.

I gear up to argue for Old Man Prichard because, honestly, he's probably getting senile, and there's a very unlikely chance he'll stop calling 911 about that damned peacock. *Peahen*, I mentally correct.

“We’ve got a fatality MVC out on the highway. I’m hoping you could assist.”

“East or west?” I ask, already standing from my desk and reaching into the small footlocker against the wall for the go-bag I keep there for such occasions.

“East,” he says. “Cash, it’s bad, man.”

“I’m on my way.”

There’s a certain amount of grief that comes along with showing up on the scene of an accident and not knowing who’s involved. Your mind races with flashes of every person you know and care for.

There’s also a certain amount of shame that comes along with the relief I feel when I realize that the family of four that didn’t make it aren’t from Lindell.

Guilt for thoughts I couldn’t control bounce around inside my head as I work traffic for Mike Hodson while he deals with the state police when they arrive. There’s certain protocol when dealing with such things, but it never gets easier. I’ve seen Mike refer to a list more than once to make sure that everything is taken care of, his hands trembling as he reads down the thing.

All accidents are horrible. There’s no discrimination when it’s flesh against metal. The metal wins every time. I’m a firm believer that all life is precious, but it hurts a little more when young people and children are involved.

I can’t even speak to Hayes when he pulls up in one of the smaller fire trucks the town has to spray off the road.

By the time the scene is cleared, I feel like I’ve run a hundred miles in the midday sun without a drink of water, although Dr. Millway sent one of his nurses to the scene with a cooler full of iced down water and a couple of sandwiches for all of us. I couldn’t stomach the food, but I guzzled several of the bottles of water.

I’m late getting to the bar where Adalynn is always waiting for me when I have late shifts. I try to get there early because I know she always has to get to the bakery early to

prepare for the before-work rush. We do our best to keep the same schedule even though the bakery isn't opened on Mondays.

I want to fall to my knees in relief when I pull up and see her car in the parking lot. There are days I feel as if I need her more than others, although that ache for her never fully goes away. Over the years, I've learned to get it down to a mostly low hum, one that vibrates just under the surface of my skin. This morning made it hum a little more forcefully, but right now, after the day I've had, nearly forces my feet into a run after I park and climb out of my patrol unit.

The bar isn't busy. Most people are home, getting ready for the start of a new week, but I don't know that I'd change how I act if it was packed wall-to-wall.

I turn in the direction of the table she's always sitting at and arrow in her direction.

She stands, her face a mask of understanding. It doesn't surprise me that she's already heard about the accident. We'd been out there for hours working the scene. I'm sure people in town were talking about it not long after it happened. Such conversations are quick to spread in a small town.

I pull her to my chest, and she doesn't hesitate to wrap her arms around me. What happened this morning has no bearing on this moment. My need for her is different at the moment. I need to feel her heart beating against my chest. I need her warm breath fluttering over my skin. I need to know that she's alive and well.

She'd be here for me just like this even if I had gone straight to work instead of stopping by the bakery. This isn't about that.

"Are you okay?" she asks when I finally manage to untangle myself from her.

I stare at her lips, something I've always fought against. It always felt like a confession I wasn't ready to make because I knew the fallout would be more than I could handle.

I nod but can't seem to find the words to lie to her. Adalynn never grills me about work. She knows that if there's something going on at the office or in town that I'm comfortable talking about, then I'll bring it up. There are a lot of things I do in my day that have no real bearing on my life. It's routine or boring. Some things are funny and I can't wait to tell her, but days like today need to be filed away. Shifts like the one I've had are the types of days that end careers. They're the ones that make you wake up in the middle of the night sweating and begging for relief. They have the potential to harden you or break you.

I lean into her touch when she presses her palm to my cheek. She knows I'm not a hundred percent, but she won't argue with me about it.

"How about breakfast?" I ask.

Her eyes drop to my mouth before she speaks, and it sends a thrill of possibility up my spine.

"Why not a late dinner?"

Her voice is low. If I weren't watching her lips form the words, they would've gotten lost in the guitar solo blaring from the jukebox or among the chatter circulating around us.

"I'm still in my window of fertilization," she says with an even lower tone, her cheeks still pink as if she's embarrassed to have this conversation with me, even after what happened this morning.

I nod, giving her a weak smile of understanding.

What I need from her right now isn't what she needs from me, and I have to be okay with that. Just because this morning changed everything for me doesn't mean I get to project those wishes onto her. I have to quit letting my mind conjure up things and situations that will put me in a different position in her life. She wants a baby, and I've offered that to her. I can't let my head get tangled up in this because it's only going to leave me broken.

"I have to finish my shift, and it'll probably be morning time before the paperwork is done. I can meet you at the Brew

and Chew for breakfast. Say seven?”

She takes a step back from me as if she’s only now realizing where we are and that there are at least a dozen witnesses surrounding us.

“I think we should meet at my house. Research shows that multiple...” she swallows as she pauses, “deposits create an optimal situation for fertilization.”

I’m not an unintelligent man. I know what this is between the two of us. If it was two days ago, I would back out of all of it, but this morning happened. I hate that I’m the only one who felt that connection, but I guess I should be used to things being one-sided where she’s concerned.

“Breakfast at your house,” I tell her, doing my best not to let my true emotions show.

I hate being the man who will always have to settle, the man who needs to find a way to just be grateful for what parts of her I do get to have.

She runs her hand down my arm, catching my fingertips in a light squeeze before she walks away.

Maybe it’s the day I’ve had casting shadows over this current situation, but I can’t seem to make myself turn and watch her walk toward the door. A true gentleman would escort her to her car, but I know I’d never be able to resist pulling her back to my chest. For her, it would be leading to something different, one of those *deposits* she mentioned.

I shudder just thinking the word.

With a deep breath, I look around the bar, recognizing almost everyone in here by name. The rest I’ve seen around town on occasion. No one seems to be paying any attention to me, but there’s still that voice in my head that’s trying to convince me that I’m on display, that anyone that sees me knows how unworthy I am.

“Hard day?”

I do my best to pin a smile on my face, but Walker still frowns when I turn in his direction.

“Horrible,” I tell him with a deep inhale. “And now I have to do the paperwork.”

“That poor family,” he says. “I can’t even imagine.”

“Pretty bad shit,” I say, scraping my hand over the top of my head.

The man says he can’t imagine what I went through today, but he did three tours in Iraq. I know he’s seen his fair share of trauma and violence. If anything, what the man has gone through is much worse than what I dealt with today. The maliciousness and pain he’s witnessed was intentional, not an accident because someone didn’t heed the suggested speed around a sharp curve.

“Want a beer?”

Technically my shift is over. The sheriff’s department is fielding calls for Lindell right now, a sort of thank you from Sheriff Hodson for our help today.

“I appreciate it, man,” I tell him with a clap on the back. “But I’m still in my cruiser.”

He gives me a nod of understanding. There are a lot of leniencies this town gives everyone, but it would only take one person in a bad mood, to see me sipping a beer at the bar in uniform, to make a huge stink about what the city is paying for, arguing that it’s definitely not okay with the police chief getting drunk at the local watering hole.

“Next one’s on me though,” he says, nodding at me before walking back behind the bar.

I get several more nods, several of the townsfolk lifting their beers in camaraderie in my direction. Maybe it’s a thank you of sorts. Maybe they’re grateful that there are people like me and Hayes Campbell in town who answer these calls because it’s our job instead of theirs.

I nod at Mac Hammer, a guy who owns a local construction company, when he catches my eye as I leave the bar. Mac was on the volunteer fire department until the town decided it needed full-time paid employees after a delay in responding to a house fire. The close call of losing the teen

and the two kids she was babysitting was enough to push the town into voting for creating positions at the firehouse where there would no longer be delays. It still isn't a perfect system during the drier months of the year, when people think it's a good idea to throw lit cigarettes out their windows while driving through town.

I should do exactly what I told Adalynn I had to do tonight, but the thought of sitting at my desk, working through the abundance of paperwork, makes my eyes want to cross.

The deep breaths I take once I drop back down into my cruiser do nothing to decrease the pressure I'm feeling. I know I don't have the weight of the world on my shoulders. I live a pretty decent life. I also know that wanting, wishing, and hoping are futile and there's no sense in being upset over the things I don't have. Wanting something doesn't change its availability and accessibility.

I put the SUV into drive and head straight for my house. As much as I'd like to call Adalynn and lay down the law, I know I can't. I would never compromise what we have that way. What I need to do is learn to be grateful for the pieces of herself she does give me. Wanting more is only going to leave me disappointed and alone.

Chapter 16

Adalynn

“The doorbell?” I ask once I pull the front door open.
“Really?”

“Were you still asleep?”

I shake my head as I step to the side so he can enter the house.

It’s awkward now between us, and that’s the very last thing I wanted.

“For you,” he says, holding up a bright blue bag of powdered donuts.

My mouth waters at the sight of them. I know I own a bakery, and I can make the most decadent desserts. I should be ashamed for indulging in the overprocessed things in his hand, but they’re my guilty pleasure. He knows I wouldn’t be caught dead buying them because it doesn’t take much for the gossip mill to start churning. I usually grab them anytime I have to run to Austin to bulk buy ingredients for the bakery.

“Have I told you how much I love you?” I ask, taking the bag when he hands it over to me. “Do you want some?”

His nose scrunches just like it always does, because unlike me, Cash is a smart man and knows just how unhealthy these things are.

“You’re going to eat them right now?” he asks, a hint of disappointment in his tone.

I look up at him, my fingers already wrapping around the first piece of powdered deliciousness.

Right, the sex. That’s what this was about.

“It can wait,” I tell him, pulling my empty hand from the package.

I feel the warmth of his body against mine the second I turn to place the package on the side table. A shudder of anticipation runs up the backs of my legs, and the worry I felt

when I got out of bed and didn't pull on pajama bottoms becomes a distant memory. Before we started this get-me-pregnant plan, I'd never open my front door in nothing but an oversized t-shirt and panties. This morning it felt so naughty.

As he runs his hand up my hip, pulling the thin fabric of the t-shirt with it, I feel like I made the right call.

"I dreamed about you last night," he says, his voice a whisper in my ear.

I lift my head when a finger under my chin urges me to do so. Yesterday, at the bakery, things happened so quickly, but even as his finger trails down my neck, our gazes locked on each other, I know that today is going to be so much better.

He didn't say much yesterday other than to make demands that he somehow knew I'd obey. A shiver threatens to make me lose my balance, but the look in his eyes tells me that he'd never let me fall. If he wanted me on my knees, he'd put me there and not a second sooner.

The first night we came together was a fluke of errors and mistakes. For some reason, he wasn't being true to himself, and it showed in how he touched me.

"You're different," I whisper, his eyes pinned on the heat I feel rising in my cheeks. I hate my inability to control that part of myself. It's as if my secrets are on full display.

I shouldn't have said anything. There are some things that shouldn't be said out loud.

"I'm listening to your body rather than your mouth."

His eyes dip to my lips, and on instinct, I run my tongue over them.

"What is my body telling you?"

A slow, mischievous smile turns up the corners of his mouth, and his reaction is enough to tell me that this meeting is going to be just as good, if not better, than the one we had yesterday morning.

"It wants to be filled with my cock," he says, his voice full of gravel and promise. "That your pussy can't wait to

come all over me.”

I swallow the thickness threatening to lodge in my throat.

The man wouldn't normally use such language around me. I know he cusses and speaks in a way with others that he never would with me, and it sort of thrills me that he's so confident, he doesn't curb that part of him in this moment.

“Is that what your body is telling me?”

My face is hot, and I know it has to be bright red, but it's less from embarrassment and more from need.

I nod, my teeth digging into my lower lip. He makes a sound of chastisement when I attempt to look away from him, his hand coming up to my throat. He doesn't squeeze me there. Just the collar he makes with his fingers and palm is enough to send a wave of arousal up my spine.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he commands as he turns me to face him.

Instinctively, I take a step back when his eyes drop to my body. It's not that I don't want him to look at me. It just feels natural to give him a little space.

He moves when I do until my back is pressed to the wall, making an escape impossible. Getting away from him is the very last thing on my mind as his hand trails down my shoulder, his skilled fingers finding the peak of my nipple.

I hiss, the sound a mix of pleasure and pain, the combination delicious and addictive.

“Jesus,” he groans as he takes a step back, his eyes running over the length of me. “Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you look right now?”

I press my hands to the mess of red curls all over my head. I showered last night before bed and couldn't manage to muster the energy to blow-dry it. With today being my off day, I knew I'd have time this morning to get it under control before leaving the house.

He isn't looking at my face when I drop my eyes back down to him. His gaze is locked on my legs as he slowly lifts the hem of my sleep shirt. The hunger I see in his eyes is unfamiliar, something I've never seen when he looks at me. I had worried that he was only doing this because it was something that I wanted. The look on his face last night when I suggested he come home with me was powerful enough to make me cry in the shower. I felt like I was forcing him into something he didn't want. The last thing I want to do is coerce someone into having sex with me. It left me feeling dirty, depraved, and abusive. I'd made up my mind before falling asleep that I was going to put an end to all of it and apologize for coercing him into it.

There isn't a hint of that look from last night in his eyes as he urges me to take the hem of my shirt.

"Pull it completely off," he tells me.

I obey without a second thought, pulling the gray t-shirt over my head.

He sucks in a breath, making me realize that he hasn't seen this part of me. I think there was a moment when he might've caught a glimpse of a nipple, but right now, as my t-shirt flutters to the floor at my feet, he's seeing both breasts for the first time.

"Drop the panties, Adalynn. I don't want a stitch of clothing on you when I make you come."

"Cash," I whisper as I push the thin fabric from my hips and let it slide down my legs to pool at my feet.

The phrase came from the second book in the series. The man has continued the storyline, and I can't wait to find out when he makes it to the third book.

"Are you wet?"

I nod, because I'm so slick I can feel the cool air kissing the slickness between my legs. It's a heady sensation, something I both love and sort of hate. I know the warmth of his body there would be ten times better than the anticipation I'm struggling with right now.

“Tell me what you need.”

I thought repeating his words yesterday was difficult. It has nothing on coming up with my own requests.

I swallow and take a deep breath, taking inspiration from the book we’ve clearly both been reading.

“I want your cock driving inside of me until my pussy aches.”

His smile grows wider. “I love it when that prim-and-proper mouth of yours says such dirty things.”

A hint of pride threatens to fill my chest. I want him to find me as desirable as I do him.

“I want to feel you inside of me long after you’re gone,” I continue. Saying the things the character said in the book is easier than him knowing that her words are exactly the same as mine would be. The dissociation is helpful because I could never tell him that there’s so much truth in them.

“You promise to let me know when the ache wanes?” he asks as he steps in closer to me, his breath warm on my bare skin with his next promise. “I’ll drop everything I’m doing to put it there again.”

I groan in relief when he rolls his hips against me, his thickness hot on my lower stomach.

His tongue traces a line up my throat, his teeth nipping at my ear. It somehow has the power to make me shudder in his embrace.

“Cash,” I say, his name a plea of need on my lips.

“Gonna fuck you hard,” he warns as his hands urge me to turn around.

I swear if this man bends me over and takes me from behind, I’ll lose my mind.

His palm on my upper back, urging me to lean toward the console table in my small entryway sends a wave of excitement over every inch of my body.

But he doesn't immediately press inside of me. I expect a hand on my hip, but what I get is his hot breath against the most sensitive part of my body. I only have half a second to understand what's happening before he runs his tongue all the way from my clit to my tailbone.

“Cash!”

He moans his response, a sound of unadulterated pleasure as he dives back in for more.

“The sweetest fucking pussy,” he mutters, his breath and words a little muffled by the angle of his mouth.

I'm on the tips of my toes, my body screaming at me to unclench and just let go.

My stomach tightens and my muscles tense in preparation for what's to come.

“You need to let go,” Cash demands.

I swear the man has a direct line to my orgasm, and him just wanting it somehow makes it happen. My breath is caught in my throat. If I weren't in the middle of the most intense orgasm of my life, I might actually feel a little embarrassed by the noises coming from my throat.

“Sweet fucking Christ,” he groans, his lips trailing up my spine as he stands, his skilled fingers teasing my clit and prolonging my orgasm.

The rasp of his zipper sounds like a gunshot in the quiet of the house, and somehow, it's the sexiest thing I can imagine right now.

I scream his name again when he pushes inside of me, my body tight and still trying to resist his intrusion. It's the most glorious thing I've ever felt in my life.

The pressure of him inside of me makes a wave of gooseflesh over the right half of my body before the sensation travels to the other side.

His hands are brutal on my breasts, his fingers curling to cup them as he presses slowly inside of me. This is the difference from what was in the book. The male character in

the story pounded into her until he came. Cash seems to be taking civil liberties and has decided to take his time. It's both torturous and miraculous at the same time. If someone were to quiz me, I think I'd vote for Cash's approach.

He grunts when he pushes all the way inside, one hand dropping to my hip, the other coming up to my throat to urge me to stand. My back is arched, my butt out as his breath warms my cheek.

"I swear I dream of this pussy at night, Adalynn. Had to fist my own cock in the shower like a fucking teenager this morning just to take the edge off. You make me fucking crazy."

I bite my lip to keep from smiling because that wasn't in the book, but kudos to him for the improv. It really livens the situation.

"Can you come again?"

I nod my answer because, honestly, I think my body is just waiting for his command.

"Mmm."

His growl of pleasure lights me on fire, and I swear I'll be nothing but ash and embers when we're done. I also know I'll thank him for setting me on fire in such a way I never knew was possible.

When his hand slips around my hip and finds that sensitive part of me, I whimper with both need and fear. I know he's going to give me exactly what I want, but I also know that I may not be able to remain standing when he does.

"Cash."

"It's mine, Ads. Give it to me."

I'm incapable of making noise. My mouth hangs open, my body doing his bidding.

When his teeth dig into my shoulder, I can't muster the same level of concern I felt earlier about my safety.

Thankfully, Cash is more mindful and holds on to me as he orgasms. There's a very real chance I'll have bruises where his fingers dig into my flesh, and I know how my body will respond later when I see them in the mirror.

"Jesus, baby. That's it. Fuck, I love it when you come on my cock."

I'm seconds away from begging for more when he steps back.

Disappointment doesn't have time to settle inside of me before he's lifting me from my feet and carrying me through my house like a bride.

He's gentle as he lowers me down to my unmade bed. I try my best to hide my smile when he reaches to the other side, grabbing my extra pillow, before urging me to raise my hips.

It's kind and considerate, but it's also a slap in the face, the reality of what this is. I can't believe I lost sight of that even for a second.

He gives me a gentle smile as he pulls the covers up over my body.

"Going to wash up," he says, hitching his thumb over his shoulder before turning and disappearing into my bathroom.

I hate the wave of relief I feel once he's gone. I know we have to transition back to just friends, and I think that would be impossible to do if he were still standing in front of me.

I close my eyes, my breath still a little ragged from the two orgasms.

"Are you going to take a nap?"

I open my eyes, hating how put together and unaffected he seems.

I have to remember what this is really about, but I don't think it will hurt if I imagine him being mine. That what happened between us is something we always do right before he heads into a shift at the police station.

“I might,” I tell him. “You going to make it to dinner tomorrow night?”

He gives me a small smile, and I pretend that it reaches his eyes because the fantasy him would be elated to spend another evening with my overly nosy family.

“Your mom or dad’s?”

“Dad’s,” I tell him.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he says, walking closer.

I clench the blanket in my hands when he leans down to press his lips to my temple. If I don’t, then I run the risk of ruining everything by wrapping my arms around him and begging him to spend the day in bed with me.

“See you soon,” he says, but he doesn’t stay long enough for me to reply before walking out of the room.

Chapter 17

Cash

As if the world is stacked against us, I wasn't able to see Adalynn at the bar last night. I texted her early to let her know that I wouldn't be able to make it. I don't want her wasting her time waiting for me when I know I won't be able to be there. Not only does it increase the chances that some other dude better suited for her would approach, but knowing she wasn't at home safe in bed would keep me from being able to do my job.

Last night that wouldn't have mattered because we were stuck trying to wrangle a small herd of fucking goats that got out of a downed fence. The bad thing about using old tree branches as fences is that they rot and break more often than using metal t-posts or treated lumber. The old, rustic look is appealing to tourists who travel to town in search of a lazy day, but it's a true pain in the ass for everyone else.

It was well after midnight before I made it home. I then, somehow, managed to sleep through my alarm this morning, meaning I didn't have time to go see Adalynn at the bakery before she opened for business. It's probably for the best, considering the dream I had last night of licking her secret recipe buttercream off her tits. I knew I wouldn't be able to smell vanilla in the air and resist. It was bad enough that we got busted the other day by Chase. Our luck would have the new kindergarten teacher hearing her moans of pleasure when she came to pick up sugar cookies for her class or something.

I have to think of stats from the last World Series to shift my focus from my dreams to the current situation, something I wouldn't know if it weren't for Ronnie and Donnie talking about it incessantly earlier this year.

I clear my throat as I lift my hand to press the doorbell.

Once again, the door opens, revealing Adalynn rather than one of the guys.

"Hey," I tell her, my eyes having a mind of their own as they run down the length of her.

I've seen this flower-patterned dress at least a half dozen times, but it's like I now have permission to fully take her in.

Her legs seem longer, the hem seeming shorter. I still haven't had much of an opportunity to run my tongue over every inch of her, but it's high up on my list of things I need to do.

"Hi," she says just before her teeth dig into her lower lip.

I know she must sense my arousal when her cheeks flush that sexy shade of pink.

"I was hoping—"

"Whatever you're hoping to do, maybe get out of the entryway to do it," Donnie says, making me freeze.

"I was hoping for Italian," I say as I step to the side to let the guys enter.

I can't really consider myself a very good cop, seeing as how easy they just walked up on us.

Adalynn gives me a private smile before turning back and heading toward the dining room.

The guys are in a sour-ass mood, and it drags everyone else's down long before the meal is over.

Both their mother and father ask them what's wrong, but they aren't in the sharing mood. They both grumble under their breaths when Adalynn asks them point blank if it's about the new woman in their lives.

"There's no woman," Donnie grumbles, his eyes darting to his brother.

They both look sad, as if they recently had their dreams shattered or their balloon of hope was popped.

No one presses them further, but despite trying to change the subject, it all falls flat.

No one asks us to stay when Adalynn and I let them know we're leaving. We don't get any side commentary about wanting time alone like we normally would, and that makes me question what her parents know. The guys head out at the

same time we do, which is also unusual. The growl of Donnie's truck pulling away from the curb gives us an opportunity to smile at each other before she ducks inside her car.

I follow her taillights all the way to her house, my cock thickening in anticipation with every quarter mile of distance we close.

I watch her from the driver's seat of my truck as she climbs out of her car. I know if I get close to her before she gets inside that the neighbors will be gossiping about us over coffee before the sun comes up tomorrow.

I don't bother knocking or using the doorbell like I did the other night. I open her door and step inside, locking it behind me.

I arrow toward her bedroom, finding her lighting a candle on her bedside table.

"Hippie Jones had a new shipment," she says, as she makes her way around the bed to light a different one on the other bedside table.

Her bedroom is symmetrical. Mine, on the other hand, doesn't have two bedside tables because I'm the only one in the room. Her having two tells me that she has plans to spend her life with someone, eventually. The idea of it makes my stomach turn.

I shake my head, trying to rid it of those thoughts. Maybe I'm reading too much into it. Maybe her bedroom suite just happened to come with two, whereas I piece and parted mine together from items I snagged on social media "for sale" pages.

"That one," she says, pointing to her bedside. "It's vanilla and this one is sandalwood. Jones swears that they'll smell like the sexiest thing you've ever had in your nose when combined together."

Her voice dips to imitate Stanley Jones, the owner of The Devil's Lettuce, a local gift shop that is known for selling off-the-wall shit.

“Why didn’t he just order one candle with both?” I ask, trying to pay attention to her words rather than staring at the backs of her thighs as she bends over to relight the second candle when the wick doesn’t catch the first time.

“Because then he’d only sell one candle,” she says, her smile bright when she turns back to face me. “We almost got busted by the guys.”

“I think they’re so stuck in whatever they have going on, that they didn’t even notice.”

“I hate that they’re going through something and don’t want to talk about it.”

I hate that her brothers were even brought up. Adalynn is the type of woman who feels the innate need to fix everything. She wants everyone around her to be happy. If there’s a way to bring someone out of their sad mood, then she feels like it’s her responsibility to do just that.

“Do you want to go track them down?” I ask.

It’s the last thing I want to do, but her needs have always come first.

Her eyes dart to the bedroom door at my back before coming back to me.

She shakes her head, and the sensation of her picking spending time with me over her brothers lances me with hope I probably have no business feeling.

“Tonight is the last night in my fertility window.”

And just as quickly that bubble of hope is popped. She’s not picking me over them. She’s picking herself, and that’s a shift in the right direction.

I do my best to shift gears, but, honestly, the idea of having the opportunity to get inside of her again isn’t much of a hardship. I crave this woman constantly. It’s the not hoping for more than what she’s willing to give that’s the struggle for me.

“You need to come on my cock, baby?” I ask, stepping closer to her.

I instantly grow obsessed with the way the candlelight flashes across her face.

The next hour is spent worshipping her body. I pray, even though it would leave her disappointed, that she actually doesn't get pregnant because that would mean this ends rather than giving me another chance to have my mouth on her skin again next month.

When it's over, we're both breathless and panting. My skin is covered with a sheen of sweat, but I don't get the chance to revel in it much. I help her with the pillow under her hips, wishing I could command her to open her legs so I can see the part of me left inside of her, but I know that would be taking things much too far.

Once the thrill of the orgasms subsides, we're meant to go back to being friends, and I hate myself a little for even agreeing to it.

After getting cleaned up and coming back into the bedroom, I lean over, my lips headed toward her temple, but her hand presses to my cheek, guiding my mouth to hers.

I moan, the pleasure of kissing her something I hope to never get used to. It sends another thrill of need through my body.

"Thank you for being such a good friend," she whispers once we break apart.

It would've been less painful if she stabbed me in the eye or poured the hot wax from the still burning candles over an open wound.

"Anything for you," I tell her honestly before brushing my lips against her temple and leaving her alone in the bed.

I know there's nothing but truth in my words. The woman would only have to hint that it is what she wants, and I'd gladly peel my skin from my body with nothing more than a rusty knife and a pair of kitchen tongs. I'm willing to give her anything she ever wanted, regardless of how damaging it is to me.

It isn't until this entire situation arose that I realized there would come a time that she would ask for more from me than I should be willing to give. I don't even know if she realizes she's doing it. I certainly haven't hinted at her requests being too much, and, honestly, it never feels that way until I'm expected to walk away empty-handed.

Chapter 18

Adalynn

I lost count of how many times over the years that I've waited for Cash at the bar, but despite the numerous times I've done it, it never lessens the thrill I get when that door opens and he steps inside.

The man has always appealed to me, but there's just something about the way he looks in his uniform that does something to my body. I feel a little grateful that he caught me reading what he did rather than all the hot cop books I can't seem to get enough of. I would never mention my fantasies about him using his cuffs on me, but those scenes in books always rev me up in the best way. I'd die of embarrassment if he caught me reading one of those books.

There's a hint of confusion that threatens to take over when that normal thrill I feel when he walks inside the bar doubles tonight because he's in what he calls street clothes rather than that crisp uniform he normally enters in.

"You're not working?" I ask when he steps in close.

I place my hand on his forearm when he leans in close and presses his lips to my temple.

I breathe in the scent of him, the masculine smell always pleasant. I've considered buying myself a bottle of his cologne and spraying it on my pillow before going to bed, but I figured that would be taking things a little too far.

"I called in a favor," he says, his eyes darting to the hint of cleavage my dress reveals before they lift back up to my eyes. "Chandler is taking the late shift tonight."

A slow smile spreads across my face because there has to be a reason he took the evening off.

"You've been working so hard, I figured you needed a little fun," he says. "I invited Madison and Chase out for a drink."

His eyes dart down to my glass of soda.

“I can’t drink,” I tell him, feeling a little disappointed that it’s something I have to remind him of.

He swallows, his eyes darting away from me.

I let myself think that he was here and not working because he wanted to slip away and spend some time alone, but it seems that’s the last thing he wants.

“But I’ll let you buy me another Diet Coke,” I say with the best smile I can manage. “This one is watered down.”

“Do you want anything to eat?” he asks, his feet already turning to carry him toward the bar.

“No, thank you.”

I look up at the ceiling in an effort to get my head where it needs to be. Thinking the man wanted to touch me when he wasn’t being forced to during my ovulation window was asking too much.

“If you don’t want to hang out with us tonight, then just say that.”

My smile is back in place when I look toward Madison’s voice, but the frown lines at the corners of her eyes tells me that she knows it’s my fake one.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, stepping forward and taking my hand.

“Nothing,” I lie, knowing if I even try to talk about it, I’ll probably cry. “How’s my godchild?”

“Trying to kill me,” she says, placing her hand on her still flat stomach. “I swear I can wake up and puke and then want to eat everything in the house. It’s the weirdest damn thing. Where’s Cash?”

“At the bar, getting a drink. Where’s Chase?”

“Same,” she says, pulling out one of the chairs at the table so she can sit. “I’m exhausted.”

“I read that’s one of the first signs of pregnancy.”

“Are you tired?” She looks from my face to my stomach.

“I’m always tired,” I tell her honestly. “But that has more to do with getting up before the sun rises.”

“Cash shouldn’t have you waiting at the bar so late every night.”

“He doesn’t,” I say, unable to keep the defensiveness out of my voice.

If Cash had a clue how tired I was all the time, he’d probably put an end to it. He’s just that type of guy. But I live for the nights I get to see him. If being a little tired is the result, then I’m okay with it.

“What are you going to do if you’re pregnant? Can’t exactly wait to see him in the bar with a baby.”

I know I didn’t say anything out loud, but Madison has always had an uncanny way of reading my mind.

“I don’t know,” I tell her. Honestly, I think having Cash’s baby only looked good on paper.

The man doesn’t want children. He doesn’t want the responsibility, so I have no doubt that it will drive a wedge between the two of us, but isn’t that what would happen, eventually, anyway?

There would come a day that he’d find someone he couldn’t live without, and I’d become a distant memory. He’d fight it, of course, because I know he values our friendship, but I don’t know a woman alive who would be okay with him spending so much time with me. I know if he were mine, I’d lose my mind at just the mention of another woman.

“I think we’re going to do something,” Cash says as he walks up, making whatever Madison was about to say stay with her.

“What do you mean?” I ask, grateful for the diversion.

There will come a time when I have to make some very hard decisions. There will be consequences for choosing to live in the moment rather than worrying about the future, but tonight isn’t the right time for any of it.

“Claire,” he says, angling his head toward the woman at the bar.

“What about her?” Madison asks, all of our attention turning to the woman standing at the bar.

“I overheard her talking to one of the other women about her being here to get an application.”

“And?” Madison asks, her tone defensive.

“And she has a baby. She doesn’t need to be working at the bar,” Cash says. I can see from the glint in Madison’s eyes that she’s taking him the wrong way.

“What she does in her free time is none of your business.”

Cash looks confused, and I feel the need to step in.

“I think what he’s saying is that she shouldn’t have to take a second job to care for her kid,” I tell Madison, making Cash’s brow furrow.

“What did you think I meant?” he asks, his tone defensive enough to make Chase take notice.

“Hold on,” Chase says, taking a step forward.

“Wait,” Madison says, pressing her hand to Chase’s chest as if she thinks her man is about to throw a punch. “What did you mean?” she asks Cash.

He points to me as if to verify what I said. “We need to help her. She told the woman she was exhausted, and that she needed an application. I don’t think she wants to work here, but there’s a need to work here.”

“Corbin can only pay her so much at the vet’s office. If she’s struggling to make ends meet, then we need to help her,” I add.

Both Madison and Chase nod their heads in agreement, and Madison gives Cash a small smile of apology.

“She’s not going to fall for the same thing as last time,” I tell everyone.

“What did you do last time?” Madison asks, reminding me that she and Chase haven’t been back in town for even a year yet.

“When she first came to town, we could see her struggling. Jason Brecken offered her one of his duplexes at a discounted rate,” Cash explains.

“We set up a giveaway at the grocery store, but of course it was rigged for her. She won a hundred dollars a week in free groceries for life,” I add. “But a hundred dollars doesn’t feed two people.”

“I can’t believe Marlene was that generous,” Madison says with her nose scrunched.

Madison has had a bad taste in her mouth since elementary school when Marlene followed her around the store, thinking she was going to steal some candy.

“It’s paid from a town fund,” Cash says. “But it won’t work again. The woman is too smart. She got lucky too many times.”

“What’s her story?” Chase asks.

“She was married to Hux Kennedy,” Madison says, her voice low and sad.

“Aww shit,” Chase says.

“Shoot,” Cash corrects.

“Sorry,” the former hockey player says, but his eyes are still on the woman across the bar.

We all watch as Walker comes back up to her and hands her an application. She leaves immediately after.

“I know she gets some help from the Kennedys, but they can only do so much,” I explain.

Hux Kennedy was several years younger than us in school. He might’ve been a freshman the year Madison and I graduated, but everyone in town knows his name. He’s considered one of the hometown heroes. He lost his life not long after joining the Army. Claire showed up pregnant with

nowhere else to go. Hux's parents didn't even know he was married, much less that he left behind a pregnant wife. The Kennedys love Larkin, their granddaughter, more than anything because she's a part of their son, but they've always struggled to open their hearts up to Claire.

Noticing us all looking in that direction, Walker serves another drink before making his way in our direction.

"What's up?" he asks. "Did the new waitress give you regular instead of diet?"

He looks at the drink Cash set down next to my first one.

"I'm sure it's fine," I tell him, even though I haven't had the chance to pick it up to try it yet. "Was Claire here looking for a job?"

He shrugs. "She asked for an application, so yeah, I guess."

"You need to talk to her."

Walker stares at Madison like she's grown a second head since he walked up.

"What?"

"She's struggling," Madison says.

"I pay a living wage," he says defensively, drawing Chase's attention once again.

I swear the guy is a damn bulldog when it comes to Madison.

"She shouldn't have to take a second job to take care of her kid," Cash mutters.

"And what am I supposed to do about that?" Walker asks, sounding genuinely confused. "She's not going to take cash. The woman is too prideful."

"We just need to know what she's lacking, so we can fill the need," I explain.

Walker looks at every one of us before speaking again. "And because I was in the military, everyone automatically

thinks that I'm on the same wavelength as her?"

He sighs when no one speaks.

"I'll talk to her," he grumbles. "But I'm not making any promises."

"Before she starts to work here," I say. "She's got such little time to herself."

"Maybe find out why she's taking a second job during the interview," Madison suggests.

"We don't exactly do interviews here, Mads."

"Then now is the time to start," she says with a quick dip of her head as if her word is gospel.

He takes a deep breath, but instead of arguing, he simply nods and walks away.

"Maybe we just have another fundraiser after the cop/fireman one," Chase suggests.

"She isn't going to just accept that," Cash reminds him.

"Maybe she will. It's rude not to accept a gift someone gives you."

"It's how I ended up with that ugly plate collection," I remind them.

Both Cash and Madison cringe, but Chase has never been in my house. He hasn't seen the ugly plates lining the top of my kitchen cabinets.

"Your Aunt Mable isn't dead yet?" Madison asks.

"Madison!" I snap, but, honestly, I can't blame her. I told her once the only reason the plates are on display is because the woman is still alive. They will come down the second I can no longer be chastised for being ungrateful.

My friend grins at me, not a hint of regret for speaking her mind in her pretty features.

"We'll figure something out," Chase says. "In the meantime, I think I need a dance with my fiancée."

Madison takes his hand when it's offered as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Cash and I watch them walk toward the dance floor, the fast tempo of the song playing from the jukebox not deterring them from dancing close, both of them hearing something else as they hold each other.

A wave of green envy washes over me.

"What are you waiting for?" Cash asks. I don't even try to fight the smile when I look over and see his proffered hand. "Let's dance."

I let him pull me out on the dance floor, and as my luck would have it, the song changes less than a minute in, a slower one echoing through the bar. Cash doesn't miss a beat, pulling me against him. As much as I want it, I'm also very aware of everyone around us and what they might be thinking with us dancing so very close together.

"Stop," Cash says, urging my face up to look him in the eye. "Forget everything just for a few minutes."

I nod, knowing that if he commands it, then it's what I'll do. If he isn't worried about people gossiping, then I shouldn't be either.

"That's better," he whispers, pulling me even tighter against his chest.

I sink into the man, letting him lead me slowly around the dance floor.

"The only thing I want you thinking about is how wet your pussy is going to be when I get you home and how loud you're going to scream my name before the night is over."

I nearly melt into the floor with his words. I know without even looking into a mirror that my face is flame red, wondering if anyone nearby heard what he just said.

Without him knowing it, he's giving me everything I ever wanted—to be in his arms in public, with his undivided attention. I let myself swim in the fantasy of it, pretending to be his, pretending that our lives are intertwined in the same

ways that Madison and Chase's are. I daydream about planning our wedding rather than helping Madison pick flowers and the theme for her own that's coming up soon.

I want to live in this moment forever rather than thinking of what will happen if I get a positive pregnancy test in a couple of weeks. I knew the second we crossed that line that it was the beginning of the end of us, and I hate that I wasn't strong enough to fight those needs and desires. I lit the match that will burn our friendship to the ground, and unfortunately, Cash added gasoline to it when he offered to get me pregnant.

"What if your schedule was wrong?" he asks when the song switches again.

"What do you mean?"

"What if the window is different? I think we need to keep going just in case."

He isn't saying anything I don't want to hear. I knew where his mind was at when he pulled me closer and I could feel the start of an erection press against me, but this is already a very dangerous situation. We had a deadline. We both need to get some distance from each other, not that it would make the sting of it hurt any less.

I open my mouth to tell him just that.

"My place or yours?" is what I say instead.

Chapter 19

Cash

“I swear,” I groan, tugging a fistful of her hair to pull her mouth off my cock.

“So swear,” she says, her voice a tease that settles inside of me.

“I know you don’t want me coming in your mouth,” I challenge, but she’s probably right about being outside of her fertility window. I just wanted the woman in my bed. I needed memories of her there. I don’t doubt my own virility nor the strength of my sperm. If she’s pregnant now, then my window of spending time with her this way is ending very soon.

Instead of arguing or agreeing, she simply runs her tongue over her cherry-red lips, her eyes dropping down to the hand I have gripping the root of my shaft to keep myself from exploding on her face.

“I think you know where I’m coming,” I tell her.

She blinks up at me, all innocent and lost looking, for a brief second before a hint of deviousness crosses her features.

“Deep inside of me?” Her voice is soft yet laced with the naughtiness I know she’s more than capable of.

“Get on my fucking bed,” I growl, releasing her hair and taking a step back so she can stand.

We didn’t waste a second going at each other once we got inside my house. Unlike hers, my front door puts us right in the middle of my living room. Our clothes are scattered all over the place. Her dress is in a ball on the couch because that’s where it landed right before I pressed her to her back and lifted her hips up on the arm of the couch so I could get a taste of that delicious pussy of hers. My jeans are near the entry to the hallway, both of my shoes tangled in the bottom of them because I couldn’t be bothered to pull them off separately.

I drop my eyes to her heart-shaped, perfect ass, as she walks down the hall. The last time she was in my room, I didn't want her there. I had the flu, and she brought me electrolyte water and some soup. She never once gave me shit about being a weak-ass man who could hardly get out of bed to go to the bathroom. She took care of me like I was precious to her.

“On the bed, Ads,” I growl when she stops short and just stares down at it. “Now is not the time to lecture me about not making it every day.”

Her face is a mask of seriousness when she turns back around to look at me.

“It's just... You know... have you washed the sheets since the last time you...”

I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't.

“Last time I what?”

“Had someone over,” she says after the longest pause ever.

“Had someone over?” I growl, my anger starting to become real. “I haven't fucked anyone in this house, much less this bed.”

She nods, her cheeks that favorite color of mine, but I don't know if it's because she's happy to hear what I had to say or if she's realizing how fucking pitiful I am. We don't have these types of conversations. We don't talk about dating other people or how we spend our time when we aren't together. It's like a silent agreement because it's possible she knows just how much it would crush me to hear about a guy she might be seeing.

“Do you take them to—”

I press my lips to hers, letting our tongues fight, in an effort to shut her up. I know how sad it is that I haven't been with anyone else in years. I don't want her sympathy or, worse yet, her questioning why I don't date. She might not understand that if I can't have her, then I don't want anyone else. I'd rather fuck my hand than pretend with anyone else.

She opens her mouth, a possible protest on her lips, but it turns into a whimper when I slide two fingers inside of her.

She gasps, her hands clinging to me as she rolls her hips, brushing her clit against my hand.

She's a completely different woman when she's turned on, and I feel like an idiot for thinking the person she shows everyone else was going to be the same person she was in the bedroom.

I want to let myself believe she's only ever been like this with me, but I also know how dangerous those types of thoughts are.

"I want you to lick your own cum from my cock," I say against her lips. "Think you can do that for me?"

She nods, her enthusiasm making her head dip quickly.

I lick at her lips one last time before urging her back toward my messy bed. Had I known before I left this morning that we were going to end up here tonight, I might've made the damn thing, but I sort of like her seeing this real part of me. I'm never going to be the man she expects, and I sort of feel like I'm winning when she doesn't argue further about the disarray in my room. It's as if she's accepting me for who I am and being okay with it. I know it's as close as I'll get to her fully accepting me.

"Spread those thighs, baby. Let me in."

She digs her teeth into her lip as she opens herself for me. I haven't even offered to turn off the lights in the room. If she's allowed to dictate this stuff at her house, then the same goes for me at mine.

"Further," I urge, watching with rapt attention as she lifts her legs, pressing her feet into my mattress. It angles her hips up a little and I war between wanting to do what I promised and getting another taste of her.

"Dip those little fingers inside, baby. I want to see them glisten."

She hesitates, just like I knew she would, but when I wait her out, she eventually moves her fingers toward her center.

Once again, I have to fist my own cock because the sight of her touching herself is almost enough to send me over the edge.

“That’s it. A little deeper.”

She moans as she obeys, her eyes fluttering closed as she lets herself get lost in the way it feels. God, how I wish it was my tongue on her flesh and not her fingers.

“Adalynn,” I groan, loving how her throat works on a swallow as her eyes open once again. “Keep touching yourself that way, and I may end up painting your skin like I warned you about in the living room.”

I want to suck on her pouty lip when she sticks it out.

“You said I was going to lick my own cum off you.”

She doesn’t repeat my words verbatim, but they’re no less sexy coming from her lips.

I climb over her, the warmth of her body washing over me as she immediately lifts her knees, resting them against my sides as I line myself up.

“I swear you make me fucking weak,” I growl, as I press the first bare inch inside of her.

Her fingers curl, the bluntness of the tips making it no less painful as she digs them into me. A flash of having them tattooed into my skin hits me, but I shove it down. Doing so would only raise questions I could never explain the next time we’re at her dad’s house for a pool party and barbecue.

“Cash,” she moans, my name on her lips already breathless and telling.

I cup the back of her head, making sure her eyes are on me as I press as deep into her as her body allows. It feels like heaven, the way she watches me as I bring us both pleasure. It feels like a promise, like a vow, like maybe things have shifted. Maybe this could work. Maybe I am worthy of her.

“Cash, please,” she begs, her hips circling under me. “Make me come for you.”

God, I swear, she could’ve said anything else and I might’ve been fine, but “for you” hits me low in the gut. As if her pleasure is a gift. God, it feels like a fucking gift.

I refuse to miss out on this moment despite the promise I made of how the night was going to go. The second her body pulses in orgasm, mine also begins.

I keep my eyes locked on hers, our lips barely touching as I roll my hips and unleash inside of her. The orgasm is so strong it leaves me weak and shaking, to the point that I have to roll away in an effort not to crush her.

My eyes flutter closed, my heart threatening to stop with how hard it’s pounding. Physically, it takes no effort to make love to her, but it never fails that my heart races the entire time, as if I’m sprinting a marathon rather than pacing myself.

She shifts in the bed, no doubt trying to get comfortable or reaching for a pillow, but then I feel the warmth of her breath on my skin a second before hot lips wrap around my cock. I swear another rope of cum coats her tongue with how unexpected her attention is.

“Jesus, fuck,” I grumble, reaching down and gripping her head as she pulls me deep into her throat.

She’s grinning when she finally pulls off me, and my own lips curl up as she situates herself to the side of me. Tonight has been too much for me not to pull her to my chest.

Heart to heart, our pulses pound for another ten minutes, neither of us saying anything that would ruin this entire situation.

We both know the truth. Neither one of us need to voice it right now.

Chapter 20

Adalynn

When I say I slept like the dead, I mean it, but waking up completely refreshed with drool dried on my chin isn't exactly how I envisioned my first overnight at Cash's house.

I refuse to swim in the disappointment that threatens when I look over and notice his side of the bed is empty. I swear I'll lose my mind if he comes in and tells me that he was giving me space overnight, that he felt like I would want him to get out of bed and let me sleep alone.

I know it's not true because I woke up hours ago and his arms were around me. I can honestly say it was the happiest moment of my life.

I rush to his bathroom, using the toilet because my bladder is screaming at me. I stare at the sink and the single toothbrush lying beside the plain tube of mint toothpaste. The man is simple, and I think that's one of the things I love the most about him. Without thinking about it too much, I squirt toothpaste on the brush and scrub my teeth and tongue. I don't spend as much time as I probably would at home, but there's an urgency swimming inside of me that's insisting I get back in the bed and wait for him.

I'm barely back under the covers when his shadow blocks the light from the hallway. The scent of freshly brewed coffee hits my nose as he inches closer. Pretending to be asleep seems like manipulation, so I don't even bother. Besides, if things go my way, he'll know I was awake when he presses his lips to mine.

"You slept hard," he says, placing a mug of coffee on the bedside table. "I thought I was going to have to drag you out from under the covers."

I allow my eyes to roam over his back when he sits on the edge of the bed, the light from the hallway illuminating only portions of the ridges and dips of his muscles, leaving a lot of it in shadows. The mystery is beyond sexy, and it makes me consider taking the day for myself. I feel if I stay right here

then we can pretend like the night never ended. If I don't get out of the bed, then we don't have to go back to being friends. We can be Cash and Adalynn, two lovers who can't keep their hands and mouths off each other.

"Your house is so cold," I tell him honestly.

I reveled in his warmth a lot last night.

His hand trails up my arm, leaving a swell of goosebumps along the path.

I don't speak as his eyes roam over my body. I'm not exposed, having pulled the blanket back up to my chin after brushing my teeth, something I'm regretting right now. When I'm naked, he seems incapable of looking away, and I love that level of attention from him. I crave it and could possibly just lie here for the remainder of my days if I was all that he could focus on.

"What time do you go in today?" I ask, my voice an octave higher than normal.

Embarrassment threatens to heat my cheeks when his lips twitched with a smile.

"Not as early as you," he says, his voice soft and husky as usual.

Jesus. Has he always used that bedroom voice on me? It's smokey and rough, each syllable feeling like a caress on my skin.

"I was thinking about skipping," I say, licking at my dry lips and wishing he'd lean closer so we could kiss.

The soft smile he gives me tells me everything I need to know. He isn't here to entice me or ask me to change my schedule for him. Clearly, he's more responsible than I am, or maybe he isn't even tempted at all. Maybe he wants me gone and is just too much of a gentleman to say it out loud.

I sit up in a rush, feeling like a fool for even considering things I know better than to think.

The covers pool around my waist, but before I can crawl off the bed to grab my clothes, his hand sweeps down, carving

a path from my collarbone to my peaked nipple. I barely clamp my mouth closed in time when he pinches the tip with just enough force to awaken every other cell in my body.

“I’d take you up on that offer if you didn’t have that class tonight.”

I blink at him, my brain struggling to come back online long enough to understand what he’s referring to.

“Class? Oh crap.”

“Yeah, oh crap,” he responds. “If you called in sick today, you couldn’t do the class, and half the town would be on your doorstep, bringing you lemon-lime soda, crackers, and chicken noodle soup because they wouldn’t want you to close two days in a row.”

“But I’m not home.” I clamp my lips between my teeth, hating that the words escaped unchecked. I sound like a desperate horndog right now.

His smile widens, his fingers tracing over my rib cage, and I swear my back arches into his touch. I’m fixated on those traveling fingers of his.

“How many people were signed up for your class?”

I deflate with the question.

“A dozen,” I answer, knowing I could never disappoint that many people.

As much as I’d like to stay in bed with him, getting tangled in his sheets for hours and hours, I know I can’t. I’m too responsible for that, too much of a people pleaser. Most days, I don’t hate that aspect of my personality, but being considerate of others seems more like a flaw than a redeemable quality right now.

His chuckle grabs ahold of me, preventing me from standing fully as I attempt to climb past him.

“You’ll trip over that lip,” he says, his hand brushing over my face.

Before my body understands what he's doing, he clamps my chin between his thumb and forefinger so he can guide my mouth to his.

The kiss is patient and slow, giving me the chance for my brain and body to get on the same wavelength.

I grant his tongue entrance the second he presses it forward. A surge of arousal hits me like a tsunami when he groans, the vibration moving through me like an electrical current.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I attempt to settle on to him, my body aching with need as much as it's aching from the time we've spent together this last week.

"That's dangerous," he says, his lips brushing mine as he speaks. "We'll never leave this room."

He grips my hips, moving me to stand rather than letting me straddle his legs.

I know it isn't meant as a rejection, but you'd never be able to convince my body that it isn't.

"I'm supposed to be the reasonable one," I say, that pout he mentioned earlier growing.

He brushes his thumb over my cheek before pressing a too-chaste kiss to my lips as he stands.

"We'll see each other soon," he promises. "You're already going to be late."

I glance over his shoulder at the clock on his bedside table, that feeling of dread settling inside of me. Worry threatens to take over.

"Nope," he tells me, his finger curling under my chin and directing me to look at him. "You're not going to freak out. You're going to go grab a quick shower. You keep a change of clothes at the bakery for situations like this."

I scoff.

"I keep clothes at the bakery in case of a baking mishap. I do not keep clothes there because I woke up late after

spending the night with..." I swallow, not sure what to call him at first. "My friend."

His cheek twitches, but before I can evaluate what it means, he gives me another one of his charming smiles.

"Shower. I have a bag of powdered donuts waiting for you to snack on during your drive to the bakery."

I do as I'm instructed, but as much as I tried to use mind control to pull him into the shower with me, Cash stayed away, only sliding past me for his own shower after I was dried and fully dressed in last night's clothing.

I can't recall a single time I've ever felt awkward leaving his house, but my eyes are darting up and down the street, trying to see if his nosy neighbors are peeking at me from behind their sheer curtains as I climb into my car.

There's honestly nothing I can do about it now. If someone spots me, I have no doubt either one of my parents or one of my brothers will call me before I make it to the bakery.

My phone remains silent, but I know my whereabouts will not go without explanation the second I turn onto Main Street and see Madison standing outside of her car.

Her smile is wide and knowing when I park and climb out of my car and face her.

I don't say a word. I simply walk toward the front door of my bakery with my keys in hand and start to count in my head.

I make it to nine before she speaks up.

"You didn't come from home."

"I didn't," I tell her, giving her nothing more.

Her sigh is purposely loud, but my night was so incredibly fantastic that it doesn't have the power to annoy me.

I don't know how she does it, but her silence once we get inside makes me want to give her all the details. I don't want to sit and chat quietly. I want to climb the rusty fire escape on the outside of the building and shout from the

rooftop that I'm head over heels in love with Cash Tucker. After the night we spent together, I think he might possibly feel something more than friendship for me too.

"You had a good night," she says, her tone assessing, her lips curled up into a huge smile.

"A great night," I amend.

"Good. Maybe you're pregnant already!"

"I think I'm falling in love with him."

"Falling?" She scoffs. "You've been in love with that man since before the great sex. Hell, you were in love before the bad sex."

I can't do much more than smile at her with agreement.

Chapter 21

Cash

I can't think of a time since Adalynn graduated high school that I didn't crave her. Hell, some part of my deviant mind wanted her before I ever should've. I never acted on those desires, and I spent many hours criticizing myself for it. It didn't change anything. Her smile has always had the power to bring me back to life, no matter how hard of a day I had or the level of disappointment I might've been feeling in my adoptive parents. It didn't matter if I had let self-recrimination settle so deep inside of me that I alone couldn't separate the happy parts of me from the miserable parts. Just that gleam in her eyes telling me that she had my back no matter what was enough to pull me back into the light.

I'm certain any therapist worth their salt could take one look at what we have and deem it unhealthy. I probably shouldn't rely on her so much, but it's not like I can change any of it. Our lives are so entwined with each other's that my day doesn't feel complete until I have the chance to lock eyes with her.

I got that this morning in my bedroom. I know that I'll picture her sitting up in my bed, my covers sliding down her silky skin, a million times before I die. Despite seeing her earlier, I still crave her all day long. I spend the first half of the day at the office, trying to catch up on the never-ending paperwork and questioning why I ever thought police work was going to be fun and entertaining. The other half was spent patrolling town and waiting for a call to come in that might have me doing actual work rather than wasting the taxpayers' money on gas.

I sweat through one uniform helping Mayor Abraham Fisher get a couple cows back in his fence, and all I can think about is Adalynn when I head back to the office to change.

The woman is an absolute goddess. I don't hesitate to head to the bakery the second Chandler gets on shift to relieve me.

I know she's been looking forward to having the baking class for weeks. She charged a small fee for supplies, but it was too little if you ask me. The expense of what she's providing outweighed what the people paid, but I'd never tell her that. She's an astute businesswoman, and her reasoning was that the people would have so much fun that they'd tell others and her next class would be bigger.

The line of cars out in front of the bakery when I pull up tells me that her first class was a success and she probably won't be able to increase the class size next time. She has a hard time telling people no, and as much as I love that generous, giving part of her, sometimes it gets her in over her head.

A round of hellos catch me right at the door the second I pull it open and step inside. More than a dozen women, some with children, grin in my direction. I hold a hand up in a wave, encompassing all of them.

I recognize nearly everyone here. Although I'm not exactly one to feel awkward, the knowing way Madison Kelly watches me as I walk toward the display case makes me wonder if I shouldn't just turn around and leave.

From the glint in her eyes, I know that Adalynn has told her about what we're doing or Chase said something to her after he caught me coming out from the back the other day, zipping up my pants.

I can admit the speck of jealousy I felt when Madison came back to town a couple months ago. Adalynn and she were extremely close in school, and they fell right back together as if ten years hadn't separated them. It's how true friendships are supposed to be, but at the same time, I had the majority of Adalynn's time for years. I never had to check with her to see if she had plans. If our off days lined up, we spent them together. It was always a given. Now, she makes plans with Madison, and I've felt the sting of loss from that more times than I'm comfortable with.

I don't exactly begrudge Adalynn her friendship with Madison, but I had just gotten so used to being the one she

came to when she needed to talk. She still meets me at the bar on nights I have to work late. We still sit at her parents' table every time they have a dinner. I still end up on her couch, trying to watch a movie rather than staring at her all night. This week, however, all of that changed because we crossed a line we can never step back over, but the guilt I've tried so hard to ignore fades completely when Adalynn steps out from the back, noticing me. Her smile is wide, her eyes taking the briefest of seconds to run down my chest. I swear if they dip any lower, I'm going to be in a very awkward situation, considering the mixed company right now.

"These?" Adalynn asks, handing a bottle of sprinkles over to Madison.

I watch as the woman frowns. "I was hoping for rainbow sprinkles. Is chocolate all you have?"

"There might be some in the back," Adalynn says, her eyes still sparkling, although they've lost a little of their shine.

"Maybe Cash knows where they are back there?" Madison offers. "I bet he can help you find them."

"Why would I know where—"

Madison glares at me, and suddenly I feel like an idiot for not catching on.

"I want rainbow sprinkles, too!"

I look to my left and grin at Justin, Kristina Alexander's son. There's hope in his eyes as he watches me.

"Will you help her find them?"

"Yeah, Cash. Will you help her?" Madison prods, her tone filled with humor.

"Anything for you, little buddy," I tell the boy with a quick grin.

I look back at Madison, finding her grinning from ear to ear.

"Subtle," I mutter to her before making my way around the cash register.

Adalynn is several feet ahead of me and fuck my life, if watching her walk away isn't one of the finer things life has to offer me.

"You've been gossiping about me," I say to Adalynn, catching her by the hips the second the doors swing closed behind us.

I love the way she leans her head back on my shoulder, making it so easy to run my lips up her neck.

She's sweet with a pinch of salt, and I know it's because she's spent a lot of time in the back of the bakery, making tonight possible for the people enjoying themselves with their baking class. The air conditioner isn't that great back here. Add in the ovens being on most of the day, and there's no chance to stay cool.

"I haven't," she says, but the twitch in her cheek tells me that she's fibbing.

I ignore the lie and run my hand down the front of her apron until I catch the hem of her dress. Pulling it up a few inches, I press my palm to the inside of her thigh.

"Keep fibbing and I might have to punish you," I whisper against her neck.

A shudder of need runs through her body, making me smile against her throat.

"I might have to bend you over the counter and spank your ass. Think you could be quiet?"

She shakes her head, answering me honestly, but she doesn't ask me not to. I know it's what she wants. The things I've read in that book I caught her reading has opened my eyes to a lot of things. A few I never thought I'd be into until Adalynn was the female lead in those images in my mind. I think I could do just about anything with her and it would leave me rock hard and begging for more.

"Maybe I should just choke you with my cock so you won't be able to make noises," I suggest.

“Cash,” she groans, as if the thought of pleasing me turns her on just as much as it would if she were on the receiving end of the pleasure I have to offer. I swell inside my jeans, not wasting a second to roll my hips to let her know just how much she affects me.

How in the hell did I get so lucky with her?

“Do you think Reverend Holloway’s wife will come to your rescue if she hears you gagging?”

A salacious grin spreads across her pretty face, and I swear I could come undone right there.

“You’re so fucking naughty,” I praise, loving every second of this interaction with her.

We both know I’m not going to put her in a position to make anyone gossip about her, but the threat of it is no less enticing.

“I caught Amy reading the other day,” she says, her tone breathless and raspy. “I don’t think she’d interrupt.”

“And what exactly was she reading?” I ask, my curiosity piqued.

“Nothing I’d read. I’m not really into religious books.”

Naughty, naughty, Amy Holloway.

“I read *At His Pleasure* recently. That was a wonderful book.”

When she tells me the author’s name, I know she’s saying something without saying something if that makes sense. I have no doubt there are scenes in it that she wants to reenact.

“I’ll have to take a look.” I angle her chin so I can press my lips to hers.

I’m an inch away, her uneven breaths ghosting over my lips when I hear Madison.

“I don’t think they need your help.”

I take a step back, and at the same time, Adalynn walks a few steps forward, her hand on the bottle of sprinkles, when the doors leading to the front of the bakery swing open.

Adalynn clutches the bottle of sprinkles to her chest, that fake smile of hers in place, when none other than Amy Holloway sweeps her eyes from me and back to Ads.

“Justin is getting antsy,” she explains. “I didn’t want him coming back here and umm... interrupting.”

The glint in Adalynn’s eyes tell me that I really need to ask her what book Amy was reading because her walking in on us back here seems to confirm something.

“We found them,” Adalynn says, shaking the bottle for good measure.

“I’m going to grab that icing you mentioned,” I tell Adalynn, heading toward the walk-in cooler because I can’t face Amy Holloway nor anyone else right now.

Women have it so easy, hiding their arousal. Mine is a baseball bat in my jeans. Adalynn can explain the flush of her cheeks away as a result of the heat in the kitchen and her working so hard to make sure everyone has a good time tonight.

I’m in the cooler for no less than five minutes before I’m capable of convincing my cock that it will not be getting any action at the bakery tonight.

Instead of trying to stick around and make polite conversation, I opt to just leave the bakery, but Adalynn is back in the kitchen when I step out of the cooler.

“That look in your eyes isn’t helping me right now.”

She chews on her bottom lip for a few seconds before responding.

“And that doe-eyed *whatever do you mean* look doesn’t help either,” I add. “That innocent persona you seem to have mastered turns my crank like you couldn’t even begin to understand.”

Her eyes drop below my belt.

“Adalynn,” I warn. “You’re fucking trouble.”

She doesn’t open her mouth to chastise me, and that tells me that the line between everyday interactions and the ones we have in the bedroom are starting to overlap with each other.

I grab her hands when she lifts them to my chest, leaning in to press my lips to her temple.

“I’ll see you later,” I promise, before leaving her alone in the kitchen.

Madison grins in my direction when I make it past the display case.

“Have a good night, Chief Tucker.”

I grind my back molars as I nod in her direction, smiling at everyone when they voice the same well wishes, as I make my way toward the front door.

Madison Kelly is trouble, and it makes me wonder if she’s somehow on my team, pushing Adalynn in my direction. If that’s the case, then I owe that woman everything. I’ve spent years wishing for something I was never able to convince myself I deserve. This last week has turned my world upside down in the best possible ways.

If she even had the slightest hand in that, I’m forever in her debt.

Chapter 22

Adalynn

It hasn't been until recently that I understood all of Madison's questions.

I had no answer when she asked how I've been able to keep my hands to myself where Cash is concerned for so long.

I had to literally will my body to stand still rather than run to him yesterday evening when I came out from the back to find him standing near the display case. It felt natural to go to him, and that's when I knew I was in trouble.

Knowing I love him and showing that I love him are two very different things. No one can stop me from feeling the way I feel, but acting on it can't happen. It compromises everything, and I almost did it in front of more than a dozen townsfolk.

I'm shaking my head, doing more than just washing the conditioner out when I feel his eyes on me. I've lived this fantasy more times than I can count, and it stemmed from that one time I didn't hear him ring the doorbell, and he called my name from my closed bedroom door.

When it happened, I sputtered and took too long to call out to him. If I think about it long enough, I know it would have the same power to embarrass me the way it did a couple years ago, but I managed to redirect that real life happening into fantasy that has the power to get me off in mere minutes.

I keep my eyes closed as I run conditioner-slick hands through my hair before letting them slide over my collarbone and sweeping the tips of my breasts. Despite the warmth of the water rolling down my skin, a ripple of awareness makes the hairs on my body rise.

I've been in a heightened state of arousal nearly every second for the last week, and this evening is no different.

My regular routine would be to wait for him at the bar like I've done countless times, but the way my body nearly made all of our secrets come to light yesterday, I knew doing

so would only mean trouble. I'm not immune to the pheromones floating around in the air at The Hairy Frog. Most everyone there is looking to find someone to spend the night with, and it makes the atmosphere thick with arousal and desperation.

I don't hedge the whimper that rushes out at the first brush of my fingers over my clit. Every cell in my body is on alert with need, and in the safety of my own home, I don't have to pretend to be the prim-and-proper woman everyone expects. I get to be normal. I get to have desires. Being aroused doesn't come with shame here the way it does out in public.

The rustle of a belt makes me smile, but I keep my eyes closed. My shower curtain is opaque enough to prevent him from really seeing any detail of my body, but I know he can see that I'm touching myself. It feels so naughty to do it without him giving me instructions to do so. I could've never done this if we hadn't spent so much time together the way we have this last week.

I bite my lip, an attempt to hide my smile, when I feel the rush of cool air on my skin as he pulls back the shower curtain.

"You don't seem alarmed," he says, his hand covering mine, forcing me to add more pressure to my clit.

"The alarm was set," I say on a gasp when his fingers slip past mine, one pressing inside of me.

"You weren't at the bar," he says, but it doesn't really sound like a complaint. "I figured I'd use my lunch break to check on you. Imagine my surprise when I find you like this."

His lips brush my chin before his mouth covers mine.

He doesn't give me the chance to formulate a response before the kiss grows so intense that my brain goes offline nearly completely.

His fingers continue to explore and tease. Every time I try to sink lower, to get him to push deeper inside of me, he pulls back.

My eyes open at the third chuckle that erupts from his throat.

The hours of fantasizing about this moment doesn't give the actual situation justice. The man is jaw-dropping delicious naked. Throw in water rushing over his skin, droplets getting lost in the dips and crevices his muscles create before disappearing down his legs, and he's irresistible.

"I think I know which part in *At His Pleasure* you want to recreate, baby, but there's still a scene from the other series I can't seem to pull my focus from."

When he drops down, his knees hitting the bottom of the tub, I know exactly which scene he's referencing.

"Cash," I whimper, the second he wraps his perfect lips around my clit.

Water sluices off my body, but he's either willing to drown, or he's somehow adapted to the ability of breathing under water because he doesn't come up for air as he devours me.

His grip on my hips tighten when my legs threaten to give out, and I swear his growls and moans as he sucks on my clit will live inside of my head for eternity.

His skill level is unmatched, my body tightening in preparation of release only minutes after he begins.

"Cash," I whimper again, my fingers tangled in his wet hair.

He grunts, and I take it as the permission he's giving me. It happened a little differently in the book, but that guy was an expert at orgasm denial. Plus, Cash is on his lunch break, so his time is limited.

The tips of his fingers dig into me in the most delicious way that will no doubt leave tiny dots of blue and purple on my skin as my core convulses around his tongue.

He forces one of my legs over his shoulder, licking and nipping at me as my orgasm rages on and on.

I'm a sated mess of nerves and zings of sensation when he stands.

"That was so much better than my fantasies," I say, my eyes widening when he grins at me.

The man makes it impossible to keep things to myself, but the confession doesn't seem to irritate him.

"Need to fill you with cum," he says, as he turns me around.

He doesn't even need to use his hands to line himself up at my center. The simple dip of his body as he lifts my right leg, directing it to the edge of the tub, is all it takes.

I feel like a goddess, like I was made for this man, when he groans his pleasure in my ear as he sinks inside of me.

"Fuucckk."

I bite the inside of my cheek at his reaction to keep from smiling too wide even though he can't see my face.

"I can't," he snaps, pulling free. Before I can question what's wrong, he spins me to face him, lifting my leg high up on his hip as his hand closes around my throat.

He doesn't apply much pressure, but he doesn't have to for him to get his point across.

Our height difference feels like more than the handful of inches it is for a few seconds as he towers over me, but he accommodates it wordlessly, his knees bending so we stay eye to eye.

When he slides inside of me this time, it somehow feels better than it ever has before.

With his hand around my throat, there's no chance I could look away. I'm so very grateful for his insistence because the intimacy of it would have made my eyes flutter closed if he wasn't.

"I fucking love coming inside of you, baby," he growls, his mouth hanging open slightly when he rolls his hips,

stabbing inside of me. “Tell me that’s what you want me to do.”

“Fill me up,” I beg. “I want all of you inside of me.”

His smile is slow and devious, his eyes locked on mine, but his hips never stop moving. His lower belly scrapes over my clit, and it’s just more proof of how skilled a lover he is. The consideration makes another wave of gooseflesh tremble along my back. Part of me loves this experience with him, and another part of me hates every woman that came before me.

“Stay with me,” he says, a hint of pleading in his tone.

“I’m with you,” I promise, my hands slipping over his back as I try to hold him tighter. “I’m going to come.”

“Good girl,” he says. At the first clench of my body, he grips my throat tighter, pulling me until our mouths crash together.

His tongue is slow and patient, a contradiction to the pulsing in my core as my orgasm hits me in palpable waves of pleasure.

His grunt is the first warning that he’s joining me, the throb of him deep inside of me the second.

“Fuck,” he whispers against my lips, and the four-letter word sounds like appreciation, like I’ve given him a gift.

He holds me, making me feel precious, as he softens and falls free of my body. He doesn’t open his eyes until my heart rate has slowed enough that reality threatens to ruin everything.

Silently, he shifts me around, his head leaning back under the flow of water. With effortless efficiency, he washes his body, his smile never fading.

After rinsing off, he steps forward and brushes a kiss to my temple before climbing out.

I quickly stand back under the flow of water, watching him in the shadows and distorted movements as he dries off and gets dressed.

I don't know what I expect the man to say before he gets back to this shift, but I certainly didn't think he'd just walk out without a word.

Chapter 23

Cash

In the years I've worked for the Lindell Police Department, before this last month, I could count on one hand the number of times I had to call Adalynn and tell her I wouldn't be able to see her at the bar. Recently, it seems like the world is stacked against us because not only did I not get to see her last night, but I also didn't get to meet her tonight either.

When she texted earlier this week and told me she had a bad day at work, I didn't hesitate to head to her house. What happened in her shower two nights ago will live inside my head until the day I die. Even after crossing over to wherever it is we go after taking our last breath on earth, I know nothing could pull that memory from my mind. I could be rotting in hell or walking those streets of gold, and I'd still be hyper focused on the way she clenched around me under that flow of water.

She was on fire, and it left me feeling a little singed, scorched from her heat. Things just keep getting better and better. Every time we come together our interactions make my years-long fantasies seem like child's play.

I haven't seen her in nearly two full days, and that's absolutely unacceptable.

My body is humming for the last two hours of my shift.

I should probably stay home after I shower. She has an early morning tomorrow like she always does, but feeling like an asshole doesn't stop me from parking on the street outside her house.

It's after midnight, and I know she only has a handful of hours to rest before she has to get up to go to work, but sleeping alone in my bed feels like the worst thing in the world. It feels wrong to be there without her, and I'm betting that she feels just as awkward alone in her bed.

Since getting shot isn't on my list of plans tonight, I press my finger to the doorbell, standing in full view under her porch light.

I sense her on the other side of the door before my ears register that she's there. I've always been that way with her. Even when we were hours away, her here in Lindell, while I was away at college in Huntsville, she always felt close.

"Cash?" she asks, terror filling her voice when she pulls open the front door.

In a matter of seconds, tears leak from her eyes and form pathways down her cheeks.

"Fuc—damn it, Ads, what's wrong?"

Her breathing is heavy, terror in her eyes.

"You're ringing my doorbell after midnight. You tell me what's wrong."

I swallow several times, trying to fight down the disappointment I feel at her reacting this way to me, as if I've broken some agreement.

"Who's hurt?" she whispers.

"What? No, Ads. No one's hurt." I scrape my hand over my shower-damp hair. "Shit. Shoot, I mean."

"No one's hurt?"

I shake my head. "I just wanted to see—"

The air rushes from my lungs when she slams her body against mine.

"Shh," I urge, my hand running up and down her back in an effort to calm her. "I didn't think. I'm so sorry."

She starts doing that traumatized hiccup crying when I pull her back so I can swipe her tears away with my fingers.

"I thought Ronnie or Don—"

"No, baby. Come here." I pull her against me once again, urging her legs up around my waist as I carry her inside. With one hand gripping her ass, I use my free one to shut the door

and engage the deadbolt before walking and activating the alarm.

She clings to me, her sobs softening as I carry her to her room.

Her lips taste of salt and mint when I place her on the bed and lean down to kiss her.

When her hands roam down my back, pulling me closer, I know she's giving me permission to take this as far as my body demands. As much as I love being inside of her, that's not why I came over here. I need her beside me more than anything.

It doesn't stop us from making out like teenagers for an hour, her quiet cries turning into pleading moans. As if by some unspoken agreement, we never reach lower than our navels, despite the rolling of our hips and growing need.

"You scared me tonight," she whispers into the darkness after our kisses turn calmer.

I pull her against me a little tighter, knowing that as close as she is to me right now, it's still not close enough.

"I'm sorry. I forget sometimes that I'm a cop. It sets people on edge."

Her fingers curl against my chest, and I don't know how to read the reaction.

She was so supportive of me when I told her years and years ago that police work is what I wanted to do.

She encouraged me to get my degree first. Back then, I let myself imagine she was hoping I'd go to college and find something else because she was worried about me getting hurt in the line of duty. Back then, I pictured coming home to her every day from a factory job or something less dangerous, and I swear I could've done it. What I did during the day didn't matter if I could just come home to her.

My delusion didn't last very long, because she's the one who sent me the application for the police academy that somehow lined up perfectly with my college graduation date.

Me being a cop didn't bother her because she didn't see me as the man coming home to her each night.

I knew I chose that line of work because something broken in me needed to be needed. I longed for people to rely on me, and being a cop put me in the position to help people when they needed it the most. It gave me that feeling of belonging when, as a child and a young man, I never had that.

"You have a key and the alarm code," she says as if I needed the reminder.

"It didn't feel right using them tonight," I confess.

Silence grows thick between us, and I smile when the warm breath of her yawn infiltrates my t-shirt.

"Can I stay here tonight?" I ask, because making an assumption that might make her feel uncomfortable later isn't the way I want to leave things.

She nods, her head movement heavy with sleep.

"You're always welcome here, bestie."

I can't argue my placement. I'm under her with our legs tangled. She's in nothing but a sleep shirt and panties, and despite not taking things too far tonight, I'm in my t-shirt and boxers. Her hand is on my chest as if measuring my heart rate, and my skin is on fire with need for her, but *bestie*?

That may be the position I held weeks ago, but after experiencing what it's like to make her come, I was sort of hoping to be moved from that delegation into something a little more intimate.

Part of me urges my muscles to move, to climb out of her bed, kiss her temple, and stay right where she left me years ago, in the friend zone, but I'm a weak man, desperate for any scrap she may throw my way.

It'll make us crash and burn eventually, but I won't light the wick on that bomb tonight. I'm too hungry for her affection, too ravenous.

Part of me thinks I deserve better, but the loudest parts inside of me tell me to be grateful with anything she has to

offer.

Chapter 24

Adalynn

I let the delusion of being able to go back to being friends live inside of me for longer than I'm proud of. It's what made me invite him over to my house after my fertilization window closed. I think his body's need for release is why he showed up the other night while I was in the shower.

Being friends again will never happen. It kills a small part of me, the pain of it eating away at me to the point that my stomach turns as I box up the leftover cupcakes from today, so I can run them by the police station.

Cash and I have broken so many rules. I don't think there is one that we put in place in an effort to stay friends that we haven't disregarded. The lines drawn have all been crossed.

The fear of losing him brings a sting to my eyes, very reminiscent of how I felt last night, seeing him standing on my front porch, fear that he was there to deliver horrible news about someone I loved.

He didn't feel right using the key he has.

The memory of his words feel like the sharp sting of a burn, flames that singe my nerve endings.

We took things too far.

No.

I took things too far.

I allowed sex and my body's need to control my actions. I opened my arms to him when I should've reminded him of the rules. I let the fantasy of a life with him cloud my judgment. I used sex to get a different type of love from him than the kind I already had, and, in the end, it'll leave me broken and alone.

I press my hands to my lower belly, unsure if a positive pregnancy test would be a blessing or a curse at this point.

I should've been appreciative of what I had rather than being so needy for more.

With a deep breath, I close the lid on the dozen cupcakes before making sure all ovens are off.

The bakery closed half an hour ago. With the slow day I had, all of my tasks were completed before I turned the open sign around and locked the front door.

I'm considering the sweet treats as an olive branch, an apology of sorts because I took things too far with him. I used him in a way that devalued what we previously had, and he made it more than clear last night that he was no longer interested. He didn't wrap his hand around my throat. He didn't demand I pull his boxers off after I convinced him to take his shoes and pants off.

I feel like I violated him in some way.

We're supposed to be friends, yet we're no longer friends at all.

We don't do the friend thing any longer.

I don't wait at the bar for him. He didn't join me last night for dinner with my parents. He has made up more excuses in the last two weeks about having to work that it's been a little obvious that he doesn't want to spend time with me. I have no clue why he showed up last night. Maybe he wanted something from me and then changed his mind, but that's not something we do. He's normally very considerate of the fact that I have to get up so early in the morning to prep the bakery for opening.

Despite knowing that we'll never be able to get back what we once had, I also know I can't just leave things as they are. After waking up to awkwardness this morning, that included Cash not being able to look me in the eye, I decided that I still have to fight for whatever dregs of our friendship we might be able to salvage.

I nearly drop the cupcakes while trying to wrangle the lock on the front door of the bakery. Wouldn't that be a sign of how things are going?

My car is asphalt hot when I drop down inside, forcing me to roll down my windows and turn up the air conditioner. Only during the summers here in Texas do I wish I lived anywhere else but here. I don't want to get away from the town so much as I just want to pick the whole thing up and move it a thousand miles north where it stays a little cooler.

With the awkwardness that I know is coming, I let the fantasy of living in a place where no one knows me settle inside a little too easily.

The police station is only a couple blocks down the road, but my own need for safety has me backing out into the right lane rather than whipping my car around to face the other direction. This has me going three full blocks before turning back onto Main Street to pull in front of the police station.

There's no point in sitting in the car because the massive paned glass window provides those inside the front office with a complete view of the street.

I wave to Chandler from my car as he stands up from behind the desk he was sitting at when I pull up.

My frown is unmistakable when I climb out and grab the cupcakes.

"I was hoping you were bringing us something," he says, opening the front door to the department for me, as I stand to my full height and nudge the door shut with my hip.

"Just don't judge me based on the way this heat is making the icing droop."

"I'll still eat them," he says, licking his lips as he looks at the cupcakes through the cellophane window of the box. "I'll let Cash know that you're here. I'm sure he and Eastyn would love one of these."

In my head I tell myself that I don't have time to stop him before he knocks on Cash's office door, but the mention of someone else makes me too curious. I peer around Chandler's body when he pushes the office door open.

The dark set of wavy, brown hair tells me I was wrong in my hopes that Eastyn was a guy's name.

The woman turns in her chair, her eyes lighting up at the sight of Chandler, before swinging past him to meet mine. Her expression doesn't change, but for some reason, I hate her immediately.

First off, I don't recognize her, and being an outsider already has the power to get my hackles up. This town has already lost too much to people who think they can come here unchecked.

Secondly, why in the world would they need privacy in his office? Chandler would have access to any reports written about her, so there's no point in trying to have such a private conversation.

When my eyes dart in Cash's direction, my heart threatens to break into a million tiny pieces. He's not looking at me. He's looking at her, a soft smile on his face.

"Adalynn brought cupcakes," Chandler says, throwing his thumb back over his shoulder to indicate me.

Cash's eyes are still slow to leave the woman sitting across from me.

My mind races with memories. Is she an old flame? Have they been dating? Did he come over last night to tell me that he can no longer donate his sperm to my cause because he's finally found someone he wants to date? Did I ruin it with my tears and desperation?

I hold my head a little higher, a smile I've perfected over the years in place. From the corner of my eye, I catch the falter in Cash's smile when he looks in my direction.

"They're just some leftovers," I explain. "I can see you're busy."

"Adalynn," Cash says as I turn away. "Come meet Eastyn Hart. She's going to be our new office manager."

My heart races with the urgency to run from here and never darken this door as long as I live, but common courtesy has me facing them once again and walking toward the woman, with my hand out.

“Adalynn Tate,” I tell her, hating that my hand is even remotely sweaty as she shakes it.

“Mr. Tucker was telling me about his best friend who makes amazing cupcakes,” she says. Her words are like a sharp needle to the bubble holding every fantasy I’ve ever had of the man.

“What else has he said about me?” I ask in a teasing way with a hint of laughter in my voice.

It’s the only thing keeping me from crying.

I read way too much into the time we’ve spent together. I’ve let wants and fantasies make me delusional. Cash has said nothing to me to make me think that things should be different between the two of us. Hot, enthusiastic sex doesn’t equate to plans to build a life together.

“Not much else,” she says, her smile still firmly in place.

It appears victorious to me, as if we were in some sort of competition, and I lost before the starting bell even rang.

“I have no doubt the two of you will be close friends,” Cash says, as if he needed to hit the end of the nails that have already been driven into my heart. “I have no doubt Eastyn will be down at the bakery numerous times a week.”

Cash always made a point to visit me throughout the day if he had time, but that’s just one more thing that has changed in recent weeks. He only shows up when he wants a piece of my body. As much as I liked feeling like an addiction he couldn’t control, it makes me feel smarmy right now.

“Well,” I say, that practiced smile still firmly locked in place. “I better get going. I’m helping Sage prep for her book and dinner event.”

It’s a complete lie. I haven’t spoken with Sage about those plans since I suggested she reach out to Riley Wilson.

“It was lovely to meet you,” Eastyn says, and I hate that she sounds genuine. She may not be from Lindell, but I can tell from the light twang in her voice that she comes from a southern town.

I let my eyes assess her just a little longer. She's pretty and seems several years younger than I am.

Her clothes are well made, designer, if I had to guess. The watch on her wrist looks expensive, not something someone who needed a barely above minimum wage job would wear.

"Have a good day," I tell them all.

"You're really going to hire her?" Chandler asks, as if he didn't know that was Cash's decision until the woman was introduced to me.

It's another line in the sand, one that feels like the resurrection of a concrete wall between the two of us because Cash is too busy introducing them and explaining her job duties to chase after me.

I manage to keep my head held high as I climb into my car, but it nearly guts me to see Cash offer her the only vanilla with chocolate frosting in the entire box. He'd peel Chandler's skin off his entire body before letting that man eat his favorite cupcake.

He doesn't bother looking in my direction as he smiles at the woman when she takes her first bite of the treat meant for him. I look over my shoulder to back out of the parking spot before he manages to drop his eyes to her mouth.

My heart is fully broken by the time I'm in my driveway.

There's no going back. The damage is done. I let myself get too involved. I let hopes and dreams get tangled around an agreement we never should've made. I should've listened to that voice in my head, telling me that this would end terribly rather than letting it cling to the hope Madison mentioned.

I shake my head. I will not place the blame for this on anyone else. This is solely my fault. Madison let her own happiness leach over into my life, and she couldn't help it. People happy in love want that for everyone else they know. Her wanting me to find my happily ever after, after she found hers, is no different from the harassment I get from my parents and brothers about finding mine. Although, Ronnie and

Donnie are incredibly picky and tell me often that there isn't a man who walks this earth worthy of me.

I debate heading inside my home, but I know I'd just curl into a ball once I got there.

Instead of climbing out of my car, I put it in reverse and back right back out of the driveway, Mr. Hinkle's horn blaring when I almost pull out in front of him.

He frowns at me when I lift my hand in apology, his head shaking back and forth, no doubt questioning why women were ever given the right to operate motor vehicles in the first place.

With my heart pounding from the near collision, I use more caution when I finally do back out. Instead of heading to my mom's or dad's, I shoot to the far side of town, just outside the city limits, where my brothers live.

They live together, which I guess has always been a given since they literally do everything together.

A car I don't recognize is parked in the driveway, and a frisson of excitement threatens to lessen the pain I feel about Cash as I park.

I climb out of my car, turning my head to peek into the window of the car to try and get a read on who owns it, as I walk by.

"Why are you here?"

I frown as I look up and see Donnie standing on the front porch.

"Why are you not at work?" I ask instead of answering.

"We're working nights right now because of the heat. Why are you here?"

"Whose car is that?" I ask.

"Nunya," he says, his arms coming to cross over his chest.

"That's mature," I chide as I close the distance.

“Is she a student at the school?” I ask, having noticed the parking permit on the top left corner of her windshield. “Or is she staff?”

I know the answer before he lies because the parking permits for Lindell University are color coded, and anything other than white is issued to students. The purple tag on the car tells me at least she’s a senior. Red is given to freshmen as if a warning that they’re too young, and only a few of those are handed out each year. Most freshmen aren’t even allowed a vehicle on campus.

“Who are you talking about?” he asks, as if I’m delusional.

“The girl who drives that car,” I tell him, my voice containing more annoyance than I have the right to, considering I’m the one who showed up at their house unannounced.

“See you at work.”

I swear my jaw hangs open when I see a guy walk out onto the porch. His bright blue eyes turn in my direction. His sun-kissed hair looks almost white when he steps out from under the shade of the porch.

Donnie looks disappointed when the guy claps him on the back before climbing down the stairs.

“Hey,” the guy says as he walks past me. “Gonne be late for class. Think you can move?”

I take a step to the side, my eyes still locked on my brother.

“Ma’am?”

I scrunch my nose.

“Ma’am?” I repeat, turning my full attention to the guy who looks older than the sticker on his car indicates he is. The man is sheer perfection with his chiseled jaw and perfect teeth.

The smile he’s giving me is charming, and I have no doubt the man uses it all the time to get what he wants.

“Carter,” Ronnie snaps, and it pulls my attention from the charming guy smiling at me to my other brother who is also now standing on the front porch.

Both men look like annoyed statues as they glare in our direction.

“Adalynn,” I say, holding my hand out to the guy.

“Ah,” he says, a hint of recognition in his tone. “The little sister.”

“You seem to know a lot more about me than I do you, Carter.”

His palm is warm in mine when we shake.

“I know you’re blocking me in.”

I chuckle, looking over my shoulder at my car.

“Seems I am. Maybe I won’t let you leave until you tell me all the things.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Carter!”

His eyes dart toward Ronnie but they’re full of mischievousness when he looks back at me.

“My brothers haven’t mentioned a new hire,” I explain. “Much less such a handsome guy.”

His smile widens. “I’m sure there’s a lot those guys don’t tell you.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

“They told me you were shy,” he challenges.

My own smile falters. I’m an outgoing person. I don’t struggle at being personable. I only hesitate when it comes to Cash because I never wanted to feel the sting of rejection I imagined would come my way when he shot me down.

The reminder of him makes me drop Carter’s hand.

“I’ll get out of your way,” I tell him, holding my hand up to let my brothers know I’ll stop bothering them.

“Ads,” Donnie calls, his face a mask of concern as he walks down the front porch steps in my direction. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head. “Just wanted to check in on you guys.”

The lie falls from my lips easier than it should, and I keep walking to my car, waving once again when I climb inside and back out of the driveway.

I don’t know how often Carter comes out here, but the grass on either side of the driveway is dry enough to back out on, something he could’ve done rather than complaining I was blocking him in.

I leave all three men standing together, staring after me as I drive away.

I knew the second I saw the car in the driveway my presence wouldn’t be as welcomed as it would be if they were here alone, but having a guy over for work shouldn’t make them so damned defensive, college student or not.

The guys work for Mac Hammer at Hammertime Construction here in town. They have for years and years and have always turned Mac’s offer down when he offers them a share of the company. They never wanted the responsibility. Never wanted to put in more hours than they had to in order to get by. The guys have always wanted a simple life. Well, as simple as they could get while finding a woman who was willing to put up with the both of them.

I don’t bother looking in my rearview mirror as I turn back onto the main road.

My phone doesn’t chime with a text. It doesn’t ring either. Just like it didn’t when I left the police station.

As caring as I am, as quick as I am to give my time to all those around me, it seems I don’t even register to any of them once I’m out of sight.

I refuse to think about Cash and Eastyn. I refuse to think about my brothers and how they can’t trust me with the information of what woman they’re dating. Even Walker has been sworn to secrecy. I hate dedicating so much of my own

time to others to not even be a consideration to them unless they need something from me.

I pause at the *STOP* sign in town and wait for another car to turn in front of me before continuing on to my house.

Tears sting my eyes, but I'm able to hold them off long enough to get inside. Falling apart with witnesses isn't something I would ever be able to forgive myself for. It's bad enough that I put myself in this situation in the first place.

Chapter 25

Cash

Hiring Eastyn might have been a mistake. I wanted her in the office to ease some of the burden, but this last week it's like she's taken over. I've worked late each night, not because she expected me to, but because she has, in order to get a little organization to the office. It felt weird leaving her to clean up a mess she didn't create.

Her work ethic is amazing, and watching her fly through tasks with efficiency has helped both Chandler and me do better.

It has also left me missing three dinners with Adalynn and her family. She hasn't even been meeting me at the bar lately.

Everything has changed. She was distant when she came and delivered cupcakes last week, and when I went to the bakery to visit her, the door was locked despite her car being outside. I texted her because I was afraid something was wrong, but she simply texted back *too busy to be interrupted*.

I never considered that I was bothering her with my visits, but maybe I've been reading her smile wrong for years. Maybe she has a fake smile for me, and I never read it correctly.

I've somehow gotten a better grip on my own neediness and haven't shown up at her door in the middle of the night again. The distress it caused her last time was powerful enough to break my heart, and I never want to see that look in her eyes again.

Tonight will be different. With Chandler's and Eastyn's help, we managed to get the office in order and, for the time being, all paperwork has either been completed or it's been scheduled. There's less chaos around the office and it's a more harmonious place to be.

It's giving me the opportunity to join Adalynn's family for dinner at her father and stepmother's house.

Once again, I knock on the door, wanting it to be Adalynn who answers so I can apologize for being so absent this last week.

It's just my luck that Ronnie answers the door instead, telling me that Adalynn is no longer in a rush to be the first one to see me.

"Hey, man," I say, pressing my palm into the ache in my chest.

Adalynn's brother narrows his eyes at me, his large body blocking entry to the house. I tilt my head, wondering what the hell is going on, but he blinks and then steps aside.

"Robin got a wild hair and made some new recipe from Pinterest," Ronnie mutters, before turning into the living room. "This one might actually kill us."

Before I can open my mouth to make a joke, Adalynn steps out of the bathroom in the hallway, looking startled when she spots me.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," I tease, closing the distance between us.

"Didn't expect you to come tonight," she says, turning her face away when I sweep a kiss over her temple.

"Eastyn finally gave me a break," I tell her.

She blinks up at me, but there's less familiarity in her eyes than is normally there.

"Did she make you change your bodywash too?"

Another wave of confusion hits me, and it takes me a minute to understand what she's saying. I lift my hands to my nose. "Hand soap in the bathroom. I think it's wildflower something or other."

She pulls her head away, like I'm holding up something disgusting, when I lift my hands for her to smell.

"No thank you," she says in that perfectly respectable way she would turning down a free sample at the grocery store.

It's not something she would ever do to me, however.

Things have changed between us, and it becomes even more obvious when we sit down for the meal and she can't even look in my direction. Ronnie makes a joke about the food, something Robin takes like a champ because she's a good sport and knows that it didn't turn out the way it was supposed to.

Adalynn doesn't lift her eyes to mine, as she normally would, to tell me she agrees but would never say so out loud. She's not the type to hurt anyone's feelings.

"I think some people put really good pictures up on that website and then they mangle the recipe on purpose so people waste good money on bad food," Robin mutters as she lifts her fork, the food sticking to it like a ball of paste.

"Give us a minute, guys," Gina says as she stands. "Come on, Robin. Let's whip up some sandwiches."

Robin gives one final frown down to her plate before standing and carrying it with her to the kitchen.

I turn a little in my chair to face Adalynn, but no sooner do I open my mouth to ask her how she's feeling, she's standing and carrying her plate to the kitchen.

A sinking feeling threatens to settle inside of me, but I'm not the type of guy to just let an issue go unchecked. I grab my plate and reach over to take Ronnie's as well and follow her from the room. She's coming back out to grab Donnie's and her dad's plates by the time I make it in there.

Another minute or so passes before we meet in the middle.

This distance is killing me, and I'm to the point where I don't care what others think or what they may see. I stop her on her way out of the kitchen and, with a hand on her elbow, I lead her from the room.

"What's going on?" I ask once we're alone in the living room.

“Nothing,” she says, not meeting my eyes as if I’m a fool.

“It’s not nothing.”

Rather than looking at me, she locks her eyes on something over my shoulder. I hate that she can’t even look at me right now.

“If I did—”

“I just don’t feel well,” she interrupts.

My eyes dart down to her stomach.

“Did you take a test? Are you—”

Her eyes snap to mine, a warning to keep my mouth shut. Although I won’t say it out loud, I stare right back at her, telling her that I need an answer.

“It’s too soon to know,” she says, breaking eye contact with me once again. “I can’t test for another week.”

“I should’ve been around more this week. I want to apologize for that. It’s been a crazy week at work, and I—”

“It’s fine, Cash. Honestly, I haven’t given it much thought. We aren’t attached at the hip or anything.”

That stings more than it should. I’ve spent hours missing her, and she hasn’t even noticed my absence.

I nod despite that ache I had in my chest earlier kicking back up. “I’m glad you’ve had a good week.”

Silence floats between us which normally wouldn’t be an issue, but it’s heavy and awkward right now.

“Did you start that new show? I’ve seen it’s been getting great ratings. I figured we could get a couple episodes in tonight and the rest—”

“I watched it already.”

I swallow down my disappointment. “Okay, then back to *The Walking Dead*. My place or yours tonight?”

I have a few ideas on how I can pull her out of whatever this funk she seems to be in right now, but I can follow

through with that at any place that offers a little bit of privacy.

“I think I’m going to pass tonight. I just want to go home, get a hot shower, and go to bed.”

“Adalynn—”

“We made tuna, and ham and cheese,” Robin calls from the dining room.

“We better go in there,” Adalynn says.

I catch her by the arm once again before she can walk away from me.

She looks down at the connection as if I’ve burned her before raising her eyes back up to mine. She only locks her gaze with mine for the briefest of moments before she looks away again.

“I forgot about something at the office. I’ll have to take a rain check on tonight.”

She doesn’t say a word, doesn’t ask me if it’s something that she can help me with. She doesn’t tell me to grab a sandwich to go because she’s worried about me getting too busy and not eating. All things she would’ve done before we lit the fuse to a friendship that I was always too lucky to have had for the time I did.

I press my lips to her temple, and for the first time in my life, it feels like a real goodbye.

Chapter 26

Adalynn

The last time I stood in the kitchen in my bakery and couldn't stop sniffing was because I attempted a recipe with habanero powder. Accidentally breathing some of it in cleared my sinuses like smelling salts would.

Today is different. Today my heart is more than a little broken.

As if the world is out to see just how much pain and heartbreak I can manage, the last several days have been a series of blows that individually wouldn't make me bat an eye, but altogether, it seems like too much to handle.

One of my ovens went out, but it's under warranty so it's being replaced. I've had to reduce my output for the bakery, which isn't a big deal, but several customers have left unsatisfied because I've had to slow production, preventing me from carrying the variety I normally carry.

Old Man Hinkle got super annoyed yesterday, asking me how I can call it a variety pack when I only have five flavors.

The air conditioner for the kitchen decided to back up, and the clogged drainage pipe led to a mess I had to clean up when I first came in this morning.

I woke up to my period which didn't surprise me. The signs and symptoms that it was coming have been torturing me for days. I still took a test because I was trying to convince myself that it was implantation bleeding like the books I've been reading suggested.

Despite knowing better, the single line on the test was the breaking point. I sobbed in the bathroom for so long, I missed the timer for the oven, and now I'll only have three flavors of cupcakes until I can manage to get the batter for something else made and in the oven. With the pity party I can't seem to pull myself out of, I've considered just keeping the front door locked and going home, but the idea of disappointing anyone in town makes me sob even harder.

As if she knows I need her, Madison's name flashes on my phone screen.

I press the button, allowing the phone to connect, but I can't seem to manage a word.

"Ads?"

I sniffle once again, suddenly feeling like a fool for being so upset.

I think I wished this into happening.

The last two weeks have been brutal. I haven't seen Cash since the dinner at Dad's house over a week ago. The texts between us have been few and far between. I tried to create distance between the two of us, thinking that maybe a reset would be best. I needed things to go back to the way they were before because I missed him so much. I argued with myself that hopefully I wasn't pregnant, so there wouldn't be anything between us that made it awkward.

Then my period arrived, and the negative pregnancy test confirmed my suspicions. Only now, I have to accept that the damage has already been done, and there's no going back. What happened between Cash and me isn't something you can just ignore for a few weeks.

"Ads?"

"I'm not pregnant," I manage on a sputter of pain and regret.

Her silence is everything. It tells me that she doesn't know what to say, and that speaks of the loss I'm currently feeling. I was at a loss for words when tragedy struck our sleepy little town a while back. Seeking revenge on something that had nothing to do with Lindell, gunmen showed up and shot up McKenna and Kalen Alexander's wedding reception in the town square. Chase's mother was killed as was Walker's twin brother. There were no words that helped anyone after that. That day nearly made Cash quit his job. He spoke to me about feeling helpless, that if someone else, someone better than him, had been the police chief, that maybe things would've been different.

It didn't help to explain to him that Cerberus, an elite team of men from New Mexico, were here and two people from our community were lost anyway. There was no blame spread around other than putting it right where it was due, and that was on the men who came to rip our town apart. No one in Lindell blamed Cash for what happened that day, not even Walker and Harper who lost their brother. I've never once noticed any sort of hard feelings between Chase and Cash either.

"Oh, honey," she finally says. I hate the pity in her voice even though I've been feeling nothing but that for myself these last couple of hours.

"If I were in town, I'd be there in a flash to hug your neck."

"I'm going to lose him," I confess, another sob racking my body. "I never should've—"

"We won't have that, Adalynn Tate. This is a minor setback. That's all. Lots of people don't get pregnant the first month they try."

Silent tears roll down my cheeks, as guilt swims inside of me.

My first instinct is to remind her that she got pregnant exceptionally easy but punishing her for what my body didn't do makes no sense. The jealousy I feel threatens to make me ill. I'm not normally a person who wastes time on envy. If there's something I want, then I make it happen. It's why I started researching fertility methods in the first place.

"You're not in town?" I ask instead.

"We took a little impromptu trip to Padre," she explains. "I mentioned it last week."

"That's right," I say, even though I can't recall having that conversation with her. I haven't exactly been myself the last couple of weeks.

The timer for the oven goes off, giving me the perfect excuse to get off the phone.

“We’ll talk when you get back. I have cupcakes to pull.”

“You’re sure you don’t need me? I’ll have Chase bring me home.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assure her.

“Call me if you change your mind.”

“I will,” I promise before ending the call.

Muscle memory carries me across the kitchen, and it’s the only thing I can rely on right now. I wasted the time I needed to use to make the icing, on crying and feeling inadequate and pathetic, so I’m even more behind.

An hour later, my kitchen is a mess and I’m only fractionally doing better.

I lift my arm to use my shirt sleeve to wipe away yet another stray tear, hating that I haven’t yet been able to pull myself from this crying game. It makes me feel weak, as if all my options have run out.

“Ads?”

I spin around, the green icing on the tip of my spatula slinging across the kitchen and landing on the side of the solid white wedding cake I managed to finish without ruining.

“Oh shit!” Cash snaps.

“Can I help you?” I ask, my voice full of hatred I didn’t know I was feeling until it slipped out.

The icing mishap isn’t the end of the world. I can easily fix it but with the way my day is going, that cake could very easily end up on the floor if I touch it again.

“Madison called,” he says.

“Of course she did,” I mutter before turning back around to scoop out more icing so I can finish the golf-themed cupcakes I’m working on for an order someone in town placed.

“You’re upset.”

“Of course I’m upset. I have to finish these cupcakes, and then I have to fix that wedding cake.”

“We can try again next month.”

My hand freezes, icing threatening to fall to the floor.

I need to have a conversation with Madison. What I say to her shouldn’t be relayed to Cash. She should know better.

I hate that I got so tangled up and confused about the different aspects of my life. I struggled to keep them separate no matter how much I convinced myself that I could handle the situation. I wanted a baby with Cash so badly, but I think I wanted the fantasy of him being mine in every way even more.

“We can’t,” I whisper, another round of tears threatening.

“What was that?”

I shake my head, incapable of repeating myself.

He doesn’t walk up to me and wrap his arms around me. He doesn’t repeat his offer, and I’m certain that’s because he didn’t mean to say it in the first place.

I want to turn and stare into his eyes, but I’d crumble if I saw relief there.

“You’ll get your baby, Ads.”

He doesn’t say we. There’s no us anymore. What we had is broken. I get no baby, yet I still don’t get to hold on to him.

It’s soul crushing, losing someone you were once so close to. It’s even worse when they’re only a handful of feet away but so unreachable they might as well be in another solar system.

“I have work to do,” I tell him, doing my best to look unaffected when I toss a smile his way over my shoulder.

“Ads,” he says, but there’s a certain level of resignation in his tone.

He sounds a little sad, but I can’t help him with his problems when I’m barely managing to keep a lid on my own emotions.

“It’s fine, Cash.”

“I want to stay, but I have to get to the office. Eastyn is ___”

“Can you turn on the open sign on your way out?”

There’s a minute of silence, but I know he hasn’t left yet because, as always, I can feel his presence.

“Sure. Have a great day.”

His footsteps carry him from the kitchen and with his tone, he might as well have said *have the day you deserve*, but I know I already am. It’s been a horrible day, and I’ve only been awake for a couple of hours.

I knew my choices were going to bite me in the rear, eventually. I just never imagined it would happen so epically.

Chapter 27

Cash

I shouldn't be surprised that she called Madison first. That transition has been slowly happening since Madison Kelly got back to town, but the reality of it doesn't make the sting any less painful. Making a baby was something she and I were doing together, and I'm still not her first call.

Maybe trying to maintain her as my best friend was never meant to happen.

I don't know how many times I've been told a man and a woman can't be best friends. Their reasoning is that one of them, usually the guy, is only sticking around until he can shoot his shot.

I had a girlfriend in college tell me that once during an argument, and then when I got defensive about it, denying it of course because Adalynn was only a senior in high school back then, she called me out on that too.

She was right, of course. I just didn't want to accept it. It made me feel like a creep, like some sort of pervert, as if I was being manipulative on some level just by being her friend. I vowed to never cross that line with her, as if I needed to prove something to someone who didn't even matter in my life any longer.

I guess I'm still lying to myself as much now as I was back then because nothing has changed. That's not exactly true. I think my craving for her has only multiplied. After touching her, tasting her, holding her in my arms, I know there isn't another woman alive that will ever be able to match what I shared with her.

But the cold hard truth is that it's all one-sided, and if I allow myself to really look at the whole picture, I can see that it always has been.

I don't think Adalynn was using me. I'm not a narcissistic asshole. I just think that what we agreed to didn't work out, and since she didn't get pregnant, she wants to cut

her losses. I'm certain she wants a baby. I'm just as certain that she's decided that she doesn't want one with me.

It's been over a week since I saw her at the bakery, after Madison urged me to go to her.

I know she doesn't think that I didn't hear her say that we can't try again, but I did. It crushed me then and still has the power to hurt me now. I'd never try and talk her out of it. I wish I could say I don't want a woman who doesn't want me, but Adalynn has been the end game for me for years. I let myself believe that the stars would align and we'd get our shot at happily ever after, but it seems my wishes were just that. Some sort of prayer that was never heard.

I now know where I stand with her, and that's on the outside where I'm certain I always belonged.

She hasn't called or texted, and when I was looking back through my phone over the last three weeks, I've been the one to reach out first each and every time. The last time I went to her dad's house for a meal was after I asked her directly about it. She didn't extend the invite on her own.

The writing is right there in front of my face, and like a fool, it took me much too long to catch on.

Not only is the trying to get pregnant part over, but it seems the entire friendship is too.

Deep down, I think I knew this would happen. I knew that she deserved more than I could ever offer her.

I recall the look on Ronnie's face when I showed up that last time. We aren't exactly great friends, but he's always been courteous to me. Maybe he got wind of what Adalynn and I were doing and voiced his opinion to her about it. Maybe everyone in her family got involved. Maybe I'm good enough to share a meal with but not good enough to have a more permanent place in her life.

"That look on your face makes me not even want to ask for a favor."

I snap my eyes from my computer screen toward my open, office door.

Eastyn is in the doorway, frowning at me.

“I talked to him about it. If Chandler has continued to flirt with—”

She waves her hand dismissively. “He’s been fine. A little skittish around me, but I don’t think that’s such a bad thing.”

Chandler didn’t miss a beat flirting with Eastyn when she first started here a few weeks ago. She didn’t say anything to me, but I could tell the attention wasn’t wanted, so I spoke with my officer about it. Chandler wasn’t happy about being chastised, but he was even more upset with himself because he bothered her when she wasn’t receptive.

We now have a no fraternization rule in place here at the office which protects all of us.

“What were you going to ask?”

I watch as she chews the inside of her cheek before speaking.

“I was going to see if I could use Friday as a personal day. It’s just that I have a thing out of town, and I don’t even want to go, but I—”

“That’s fine,” I tell her.

“I’ll have all of my work done, but that means—”

“It’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Did you honestly expect me to tell you no?”

“Well,” she says, her brows drawing together. “Yeah.”

“Why would I tell you no?”

“Because I just started working here.”

“And you’ve managed to get more done in a couple weeks than Chandler and I have managed in years,” I remind her. “Have a good weekend.”

“It’s an obligation to my parents, so it won’t be fun, but I’ll never hear the end of it if I don’t go. Do you have any

questions?”

I tilt my head in confusion. “Questions?”

“About my plans?”

“Didn’t you request a personal day?” She nods. “Then it’s none of my business.”

“My old boss would be grilling me right now.”

“Your old boss sounds like a jerk.”

“She was,” she says. “Thanks again.”

“No problem. Can you pull that door closed behind you?”

She nods before turning around and doing as I’ve asked. The last thing I want is for anyone to watch me sitting here, incapable of getting anything done because I’m so lost in my head that I can’t really function.

I don’t know if it’s intrusive thoughts or just self-destructive habits trying to convince me that going to Adalynn and yelling at her is the best way to handle this situation. I’ve avoided arguments with the woman for years because I was afraid of losing her. I also respected her too much to really express myself and how being just outside her orbit all this time has really made me feel.

It could go two different ways. It could possibly open her eyes to how I really feel and she could tell me that’s how she’s felt and she’s been a little gun-shy herself. Or, it could all blow up in my face and how she really feels about me is more akin to sympathy and pity than love.

I’m considering knowing the full truth is better than speculating when my office door swings open again.

“Eastyn, I—”

My words freeze on my lips when I see Bobby John Prichard standing there with hatred in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Eastyn says, standing behind the man, looking distressed. “He just barged in.”

“Barged?” the man snaps. “My taxes pay—”

“It’s fine,” I tell Eastyn. “How can I help you today, Mr. Prichard?”

Eastyn watches me for a second longer before backing out of my office. She keeps her eyes on me even after she sits behind her desk at the reception area. Her vantage point allows her to see the street and my office at the same time, depending on which direction she’s looking.

I do my best to give her a reassuring smile before turning my full attention to the angry man.

“Was this your doing?”

I glance down at the paper when Mr. Prichard slaps it on my desk so hard my computer monitor waivers. Although that says more about the low-quality furniture we have than his strength.

“Can they do this?”

I read through the Cease and Desist order. It’s on official letterhead from the sheriff’s department.

“It’s a courtesy letter, Mr. Prichard.”

“It was handed over by a uniformed officer this morning. Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was? Deena Mayfield was on her front porch and watched the entire thing.”

Deena Mayfield is the principal at the elementary school. If memory serves me correctly, she isn’t all that big on town gossip. She’s lived here all her life, but she never really fell in with those who always whisper behind others’ backs. She’s more of an ask questions to your face kind of person, and if she doesn’t, then it means she doesn’t care.

“What would you like me to do about it, Mr. Prichard?”

“I want to sue Mike Hodson.” He nods his head as if he’s been wanting to say those words for years.

“I’m not an attorney, so you may want to make an appointment with Barret Hyde. I don’t think you can sue the sheriff, Bobby John.”

“He’s saying I can’t call 911 any longer. What am I supposed to do in an emergency?”

I press my finger to the letter before speaking. “He’s asking that you don’t call emergency services when your peacock runs away.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “*Peahen* and Margie is like family to me.”

His voice is low, carrying a certain warning against me, arguing his words.

“I understand that,” I say, wanting to make peace rather than getting him more riled up. “Have you considered increasing security?”

I should ask him why she keeps running away from him, but I’m certain it’s because, much like he’s doing to me, he annoys the shit out of her.

“Do I look like I’m healthy enough to get out there in the heat and put up a taller fence?”

I take a deep breath, a little annoyed with myself that I didn’t even consider his ability when I’ve suggested he do this many times before.

He’s a prideful man, one who isn’t going to ask for help when he needs it. Aside from calling about Margie missing, he’s always been the type of man to get things done on his own or go without. I know what it must take for him to make his confession.

“How about you head to the hardware store and grab a roll of fencing? When Chandler gets here, we’ll track Margie down and put the fence up for you.”

“I don’t want an ugly fence,” he says, but the ire in his tone is fading.

“We won’t make your fence ugly,” I promise. “Sheriff Hodson was being nice with the official warning, Mr. Prichard. He’ll have you arrested if you call 911 for another non-emergency.”

I stand from my desk, keeping my eyes on him until he finally nods his understanding. The entire town would be in an uproar if the man was arrested.

“See you in a couple hours,” I tell him, my way of dismissing him.

He’s still grumbling under his breath, but thankfully he leaves my office, nodding at Eastyn on his way out the front door.

“That was intense,” she says, watching him as he climbs into his beat-up old Ford.

“I’m surprised you haven’t met him yet.”

“I met him at the Brew and Chew last week. That man today wasn’t the same man from last week.”

“He’s alone since his wife passed away,” I mutter. “He just doesn’t have anything else to do with his time. I think he’s lonely, but I also think he has a touch of dementia.”

“That’s so sad,” she says, her nose scrunching up.

“That’s life,” I tell her, incapable of feeling too sorry for the man.

Maybe it’s the way to go, forgetting things that once mattered.

The sad thing is that Mr. Prichard was in here a few weeks ago, swearing that someone came onto his property and killed Margie. He found a pile of feathers, but no carcass. Thankfully, Margie was only rattled and came home a few days later. I have no doubt a coyote or something tried to get her. I suggested once again that he enclose her area, for her safety, and to keep the old man from landing a night in jail, but he never does it. If Chandler and I don’t go over there and escape and predator proof her pen, then it’ll never get done.

I’m going to sweat my ass off today, but maybe a little heat exhaustion will keep me from thinking about how I utterly ruined everything with Adalynn.

Chapter 28

Adalynn

I've attended every single doctor's appointment in my adult life alone. I've never had someone here to hold my hand or chat with while I wait, but I've never felt so alone in my life.

I hate that I'm a fixer. I hate that there's this need inside of me that urges me to help everyone. It doesn't matter if it's a little old lady struggling to get a case of Ensure into her trunk or that one time that poor rattlesnake looked like he was all but dead on the hot concrete. I didn't think twice about going back into the bakery and grabbing a bottle of water. The snake literally rattled its tail in warning as I poured water on it, but the sound of that rattle changed when he realized he could lap up the water that was pooling in his coils.

Every man in my life, my dad, stepdad, the twins, and, of course, Cash, told me what I did was incredibly dangerous when I relayed that story to them that evening at dinner. I was urged, not so gently, to consider my safety over everyone else before jumping in to help people.

"You won't be able to help anyone if you're dead," Donnie had muttered, but I didn't let it bother me. He was always the moodier one of the two.

I didn't let their irritation change me. If there's a need, I will always be the first one to step forward and offer a helping hand. I don't do it for recognition. I help because it's what's right. It does bring me a sense of satisfaction, but that always comes secondary.

The problem with helping everyone else is that I rarely have time to focus on the things in my own life that need repair. I woke up three days ago with the decision in my head that I need to put myself and my own well-being first for once. As I showered, I told myself I was in my "no" era. If helping others interfered with my own goals and plans, then it was going to get a no from me. I was no longer going to

inconvenience myself to make others happy. I was no longer going to make myself smaller so others could shine brighter.

It's why I made this doctor appointment a couple months ahead of my normal annual schedule.

"Adaleigh?"

I tilt my head as I look at the nurse standing in the doorway. I know she means me. I'm the only person in the room. Any other time in my life, I'd be perfectly fine waiting fifteen minutes in an empty waiting room. I'd consider that they were busy in the back or some other kind of emergency has happened, but I've sat here stewing while the nurse and receptionist gossiped about a vacation one of them was planning.

"It's Adalynn," I correct, enunciating my own name. "Does it say Adaleigh on the file?"

The nurse narrows her eyes at me before looking down at the chart. I don't miss her calming intake of breath.

I should probably ask her if she needs a minute to familiarize herself with my history as much as she seems familiar about a ski trip to Breckenridge in the winter, but that would be mean. I may be in my "no" era, but I'll never be hateful out of spite.

"No, ma'am," she says, her fake smile in place. "I apologize about the wait. Can I get you to step on the scale?"

"Weight is up a couple of pounds," she says in a tone that somehow manages to sound both professional and chastising at the same time.

I'd like to see her go through a hard time while working at a bakery and see if the leftover treats didn't end up in her mouth at the end of the day.

I hold my head higher, not saying a thing as she escorts me to a room.

"Shouldn't I be meeting with Dr. Glade in her office?"

"Dr. Glade sees her patients in the exam rooms. She'll be with you shortly."

I don't see Dr. Glade shortly. It's forty-five minutes before the hateful nurse sticks her head back in to let me know the doctor had to shoot over to the hospital half an hour ago for an emergency C-section.

"She should only be another fifteen minutes or so. You can wait, or would you like to reschedule?"

I can tell by the inflection of her voice, she wants me to leave and come back another time. She probably didn't pay much attention to my personal information past letting me know I've gained six pounds since I was here eight months ago.

"I'll wait," I tell her.

Monday is my only full day off and I was lucky enough to grab this appointment only because someone else canceled last minute.

Fifteen minutes actually turns out to be an hour, but I'm not angry at Dr. Glade when she gently knocks on the door before stepping inside.

"I hope everything went well in surgery," I say genuinely.

She gives me a smile. "Mother and baby are both healthy."

A wave of relief for someone I don't even know washes over me.

"That's great news."

"What brings you to the office today, Adalynn? You're two months early. Do you have concerns?"

"I tried to get pregnant last month and it didn't happen," I blurt, feeling a little uncomfortable.

I use my right hand to cover my left because there's no ring on that finger, but Dr. Glade doesn't miss a beat.

"Was this your first month attempting to get pregnant?"

I nod.

“Were you on birth control prior to this?” She glances down at my record.

“I haven’t taken it in months. It bloated me, and I was exactly... I wasn’t having... I mean, I wasn’t sexually active until recently.”

“I see,” she says. “Sometimes it takes a while for conception. Stressing out about it isn’t healthy for you, and it could even be a deterrent for fertility. Maybe take a month or so off, or maybe even try to forget about it altogether. Sometimes it happens naturally even without actively trying.”

I don’t know how to explain my current situation without sounding like a terrible person, but I can’t explain what things are like with Cash and how naturally isn’t an option for me.

I’ve probably already caused irreparable damage to our friendship by letting things get as far as they have.

“Okay,” I agree. “That makes me feel a lot better.”

I know without much consideration that this may be my last visit to this office. I’ve already chosen someone from out of town because I don’t need people gossiping about me. Although Dr. Millway at the clinic in town is nice enough, I heard once that, a few years ago, he had a few too many beers at The Hairy Frog and answered a private question about a patient to someone who was being nosy. I would die if he spilled my secrets that way. I moved all my private business out of town the week after hearing that.

I don’t linger at the food warehouse when I go shopping for my weekly supplies. I just don’t have the energy to waste any time. There’s no joy in my life these days, and it’s not supposed to be like this. The distance I’ve put between Cash and me was supposed to be healing. It wasn’t supposed to be painful and something that continues to chip away at me daily.

The lights behind me as I enter town aren’t surprising. If anything, it should make me smile. More than once, Cash has seen my car reentering the city limits, and he does this to get my attention.

“I just wanted to say hi,” he’d tell me from the driver’s side of the car.

I’d tell him he was abusing his power. He’d say something to the effect of *I only break the rules for you, Ads*. I would try to hide my smile because it would be confessing too much.

He doesn’t bother to walk up to my side of the car. Instead, he pulls open the passenger side door, moving my purse to the back seat, before climbing inside.

I keep my eyes locked ahead, unsure of what I should say to him.

He shouldn’t feel like a stranger, but somehow the last couple of weeks separating us feels like years, decades even.

I chance a glance at his face, watching as his jaw flexes.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

I take a deep breath, pointing my focus out ahead of the car. Looking at him is painful, causing an ache inside of me that’s unreachable, a wound that has no chance of healing any time soon.

“I just got back from the doctor. She suggested I stop trying to get pregnant.”

I feel his eyes on the side of my face.

“Is there something wrong?”

With you, goes unsaid because of course it has to be my fault.

I shake my head, refusing to give in to that spiteful whisper in my mind to tell him that maybe he’s the problem. Pointing fingers and issuing blame doesn’t help this situation at all.

“Everything is fine, but I think I agree with her.”

“Okay.”

Four letters, two simple syllables, yet it feels like a thunderstorm inside of me, a storm that leaves only destruction

in its wake.

His agreement shouldn't surprise me. Cash has always been quick to take the same side I do, but I think there was a part of me, hidden deep among all the hurt and bad choices, that wanted him to speak up and fight for what we shared. I want him to make confessions, to tell me secrets, that he has loved me for years and that he won't survive losing that part of me.

I always seem to ask for too much, however, and his silence speaks volumes about where his head is at right now.

"I get off early today," he says, his voice monotone and lifeless. "Maybe we could hang out."

I can't tell if it's a lifeline because of guilt he may feel or if he's just using those words to fill the void between us.

"I'm helping Harper finalize the fundraiser this afternoon," I tell him honestly. "I figured Eastyn would've said something to you about it."

"She didn't tell me you were helping," he says, and it's like a jagged blade across my skin.

Eastyn has been to the bakery several times to grab the guys cupcakes in the last couple of weeks. She mentioned last week about helping Harper. Had Harper told me about her plans to invite Eastyn along, I probably would've declined, but it was before my "no" era began. I may be that way going forward, but I wouldn't feel right about backing out of prior obligations.

"What about dinner with your folks this week?"

I open my mouth to lie, but he continues.

"I ran in to Robin at the grocery store two days ago. She promised that tonight she'll stick to a tried-and-true recipe."

I chuckle because that's what's expected of me, but I feel a little bulldozed right now. I can't heal and allow some scabs to form over that part of me that let myself imagine a life with this man if people in my life keep interfering.

“I’ll see you tonight, then,” I say. “I have cold stuff that I really need to get back to the bakery.”

It takes everything I have to fight tears when he leans over and presses his lips to my temple.

“See ya soon, Ads.”

My vision is hazy with tears all the way through town, but I have to keep the car straight because he follows me all the way back to the bakery, flashing his lights for a few seconds before driving away.

Chapter 29

Cash

I'm not exactly a helpless man, but I've always looked forward to the meals I share with Adalynn and her family. Not only do I get to spend time with her, but I'm less inclined to cook for myself. I've eaten mostly sandwiches and cereal these last couple of weeks.

I knew Adalynn was avoiding me, but I'm over that shit. When Robin invited me to dinner, I only hesitated, to give Ads the space she clearly wanted, for a second. I figured it was fate stepping in and reminding me that what we have is special even if it won't include all the extracurricular fun we were allowed for a little over a week.

I'm doubting fate just as quickly when it's almost time for my shift to end and Chandler stands in the doorway of my office.

The look in his red eyes tells me everything. The man had to bring his father home from the hospital on hospice in the middle of last week. His cancer returned almost two months ago, and there was just nothing that could be done.

I'm a strong man, but when he clears his throat to unclog the emotion lodged there, my own eyes burn.

"He's gone," he whispers. "I just couldn't stay home. The funeral home came and got him, and it was just too quiet."

I nod as I walk across the room to him, forgetting all the bravado that men are supposed to have. Bruce Jacobs treated me like a son the second Chandler started working at the police station. If I had to explain my chosen family, the Jacobs men wouldn't be very far behind the Tates and Adalynn's stepfather, Charlie Gibson.

He wraps his arms around me, his chest shuddering with a sob.

Much too quickly, he takes a step back, swiping an angry hand at the tears on his cheeks.

“He’d be pissed to see me so upset.”

“He wouldn’t,” I quickly argue. “He’d know how much he’s loved.”

“I need to work,” he says, but I’m quick to shake my head.

He may need to stay busy, but it wouldn’t be fair to him or the citizens of Lindell if he made the wrong choice while on duty. We deal with life-and-death situations, and those require our full attention.

“Why don’t I have the SO cover for us and we head to The Frog instead?”

He nods in quick agreement.

“Give me a few minutes to set it up, and then you can follow me to my house. I’ll play designated driver tonight, and then you can crash on the couch.”

“That sounds perfect.”

If the man doesn’t want to be in the same house where he was raised, that has now become the house his father passed away in, then it’s nothing for me to offer my place while he deals with his loss.

He gives me a little privacy in my office as I call the sheriff’s department to let them know that we’ll need some help tonight. All of our emergency calls go through them anyway since we don’t have a dispatcher of our own.

They’re quick to agree. Mike let me know that they’d already fielded the call from the funeral home about the transport of Bruce Jacobs’s body.

I fire off a text to Adalynn to let her know that I wouldn’t be making it to dinner tonight, and I hate the simple *okay* I get when she responds.

Eastyn has already left for the day, and I was only sticking around the office, waiting for dinner at the Tates’ house, so I make sure to lock the office up behind Chandler and me when we leave.

I keep darting my eyes to his truck in my rearview, but he seems to be driving okay. I've dealt with a lot of death in my time as a police officer. There have been vehicular accidents, old folks in town passing away. The town collectively dealt with the news of Hux Kennedy's death as well as the shooting that happened nearly two years ago, but this may very well be the first person I've lost that I would consider myself close to.

I have no idea what Chandler is feeling right now. I never knew my birth parents and I haven't spoken with my adoptive parents in years.

I don't know what to do other than be a good friend. Considering I'm in short supply of even those these days, I'll do whatever Chandler needs to help himself feel better, even though I know a couple beers at the local bar will merely be a Band-Aid for him.

He stays on the porch when I go inside to change out of my uniform, but he thanks me once again when I step back outside in jeans and a t-shirt, ready to head to the bar.

"It's the least I can do," I tell him when I crank my truck up and back out of my short driveway. "I wouldn't spend a lot of time thanking me yet. My couch isn't all that great."

He huffs a laugh like he's supposed to do, but I don't hear a hint of humor in it.

"Man, I don't know what to fucking say."

He shakes his head. "I don't expect you to say anything. I knew it was coming, but it doesn't make it any easier. I don't know why I thought it would."

I stay silent.

"He's just always been there, you know?" he continues. "I don't know how to exist in a world where he isn't a part of it."

"I can understand that," I say genuinely.

Someone being there one day and not the next has never made more sense to me than it does right now.

I'm so down about all of it that by the time I park outside of The Hairy Frog, it leaves me wishing we'd called someone to bring us both here instead of offering to drive. I'm in the mood for a beer or ten myself, honestly.

"I don't know if this is a good idea," Chandler says once we're heading toward the door.

"Why is that?"

"I don't know that I'll be able to stop once I get started."

His statement gives me pause. "Do you mean tonight or in general?"

He pauses, his eyes glued to the door, and I can see that he's running the question through his mind to come to the true answer.

If this is going to be the beginning of a downward spiral for the man, we'll leave right now. I want nothing to do with his destruction, and I'd never forgive myself for being part of the catalyst if that's the case.

"Tonight," he answers with a frown.

"Tonight, let me be the responsible one. You can pick it right back up tomorrow with a hell of a hangover. Sound good?"

He nods. "I appreciate you, Cash."

I give him a quick dip of my head. "Any decent man would do the same."

He sucks in a deep, fortifying breath, as I pull the door open.

Word of his father's passing has already begun circulating, I realize when Walker's gaze lingers on Chandler for a long moment before he pours the man a shot and declares his drinks are on the house tonight.

For hours the jukebox plays nothing but fast-paced rock and roll, and Chandler drinks like a fish. His smile is genuine after a handful of shots when a woman I've never seen asks him to dance.

“Think he’s going to be okay?” Walker asks, as he inches closer to me while wiping down the bar.

“He has to be,” I answer honestly. “What other choice does he have?”

He mentioned having a great childhood. He said he had no regrets where his father was concerned. He simply wished he had more time with him. Their relationship grew by leaps and bounds when his father was first diagnosed with cancer a few years back. They both thought when he went into remission that his father was given a second lease on life. He said they didn’t take the gift they were given for granted, and I think that’s the best anyone can do.

“He’s all alone,” Walker says, and I feel the pain in his voice. I know it has to do in part with him losing his brother.

Ronnie told me once that he didn’t know how Walker survived after Jason was shot and killed. He said he couldn’t live a day without Donnie, and his twin was quick to agree.

“He’s not alone,” I argue. “He has us.”

“His family is gone.”

“You don’t have to be bound by blood to be family,” I remind him.

He looks at me in a way that tells me he’s only now realizing who he’s talking to.

Instead of apologizing like a lot of people would, he knocks his knuckles on the bar twice and walks away.

Maybe I was wrong about not knowing what it was like to lose someone you can’t imagine losing.

Isn’t that exactly what I’m going through right now with Adalynn?

I refuse to worry about my own problems right now, as I watch a drunken Chandler grinning from ear to ear as the woman who’s dancing with him laughs at something he told her.

Time ticks on, and Chandler doesn't stop accepting drinks from people.

The woman he was dancing with gave up on him two hours into his maniacal laughter.

Walker looks at me like I've done something wrong when he drops a beer bottle as he tries to stumble to the bathroom.

I take it as our sign to leave, directing him toward the front door instead.

Thankfully, the parking lot is nearly empty when he presses his head against my truck to piss before climbing inside with a grunt that tells me it took him more effort than it should.

"I'm going to feel like shit tomorrow," he complains, with his face smashed to the closed window.

"Just so long as the vomit makes it into the trash or toilet, you'll be fine."

"I don't puke when I drink," he says, but he turns out to be a liar when he nearly falls off my tiny front porch so he can upchuck into the neglected bushes.

I check on him twice through the night to make sure that he's still lying face down on the couch because I'm fearful of him choking on vomit.

I can only pray that he had time to sober up because my couch is empty by the time I wake up the following morning.

Chapter 30

Adalynn

I'm really failing at this "new me" vow I made.

I allowed myself only a minute of disappointment when Cash canceled on dinner last night.

I don't know why I took the long way home. That's a lie. I do know why. It's the only way to see the police station to see if he was still there without the people in the police station being able to see me. It was locked up tight. What it also allowed was for me to see his truck parked at The Hairy Frog. I have no doubt better plans came up for him. He was probably invited out for a drink by Eastyn or something. I imagine at this point, anything would be better than dinner with my family.

It makes no sense for him to accept an invite only to back out.

When the knock comes to the front door before the sun even rises, I know it has to be him.

I press my palms to the countertop, wishing I hadn't hit the snooze button this morning. If I had gotten up when it first went off, I'd have half of my coffee inside of me by now. I don't have the fortification to deal with him this morning. I already didn't sleep well last night.

"I can see your shadow moving around in there, Adalynn Tate. I'm not leaving until you open this damn door."

I look up at the ceiling, hating the row of ugly plates lining the wall. I make another vow that I'm going to pull them down and repaint them like I've always wanted to, Aunt Mable be damned.

With the mood I'm in, the man should look old and ugly, but of course he's just as handsome as ever when I pull open my front door. His scent catches on the light breeze, and I hate that I'm too familiar with his cologne. I also hate that I know he doesn't smell like Eastyn's stupid hand soap right now either.

“It’s too early,” I say, not stepping aside or offering to let him come inside.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but we need to get back to us.”

I almost scoff right in his face. We haven’t been us for a while, and I’m not even thinking about how I stopped going to the bar with the hopes that he would come here and get naked with me. I’m not thinking about the dinners he’s missed at my parents’ houses.

Us ended long ago. There may not even have been a real us because I can’t think of a time that I didn’t look at him and wanted more than he was ever willing to give me. Us never existed.

I’m probably more than half responsible for all of it and I can take my part of the blame. Heck, I’d take all of it if I were given enough time to heal, but even as I look at him, I know that can never happen. I won’t heal from the void him being gone will leave.

I have no one else to blame but myself.

“I know you’re upset about not getting pregnant. I can go and get tested. Whatever you need me to do.”

“I think I’m going to use the donor,” I say, having made that decision on the drive back from the doctor’s office the other day.

“No, Adalynn. You don’t have to do that. If you want to take a month off like the doctor suggested, that’s fine, but don’t waste your money on using a donor.”

Before the pain, I might be able to convince myself that he’s saying all of this because he wants to be my child’s father, but I know better. My days of lying to myself have to be over if I have any hope of healing even a little bit from so much disappointment.

He’s looking out for me, yes, but it isn’t because he wants to give me what he’s offering. He’s kind enough not to want me to go into debt. It’s commendable, really. He’s

looking out for me. It's just not in the way I need for him to be.

"Promise me," he says, taking a step closer, his hand going up to push my hair off my face when I'm forced to drop my gaze due to the threat of tears.

I can't look up at him, and he makes no move to get any closer.

The old Cash would've wrapped his arms around me or done something silly to get me to smile.

I don't recognize this man or the distance between us.

The silence is so loud it makes my head hurt.

"I promise," I tell him, knowing it's another lie, but what's the big deal? I've been lying to him for years.

Best friend this, best friend that.

All I've ever wanted from him was a chance at forever. I'll never get it, so there's no real reason to try and force a change between the two of us now.

"Adalynn," he whispers, the pain in his own voice enough to pull my eyes up to him.

Before I can swallow, his fingers are tangled in my hair and his lips are sealed over mine.

My body is a knot of confusion. I want to jump for joy. I want to cry. I want to pull him closer. I know I need to push him away.

I could convince myself for a few minutes that he loves me the way I love him, but it would only make me delusional. I've spent so many years getting lost in the what-ifs that enter my head. What if this is our moment? What if I confess my feelings and he says he's always felt the same?

I should push him away, but it feels like one last goodbye, an apology of sorts.

The heated kiss turns slow, languorous, the utter perfection of it throwing up red flags that even I can't ignore.

“Stop,” I tell him, pushing at his chest.

His cheek twitches, something I’ve only ever seen when he’s incredibly mad.

“I need you to tell me if you’re going to want me to get you pregnant.”

His words sounds like an insult coming from his lips. Normally, he’s so very patient with me, allowing me to make my own decisions in my own time.

I question the change until it hits me. He’s found someone else, but he’s a good enough guy to hold up his end of the bargain if I continue to ask that of him.

“Yes or no, Adalynn.”

I press my fingers to my lips as if I could seal the memory of our kiss there forever because I know it’ll be the very last one.

A sob escapes, and some of my old friend must still be inside of him because he takes a half-step forward before realizing his mistake and pausing. The lump in my throat triples.

“I just need some time to decide,” I tell him, but I know all it will do is postpone my pain.

I don’t have to worry about waiting for him because he’s the type of man who won’t be able to wait for me. I shouldn’t even expect that from him. Doing so is cruel and unfair.

“I’m not trying to complicate your life.” I’ve never felt like more of a burden in my life.

His cheek twitches again, but he remains silent.

I want to cling to him, to beg him to love me, to pick me over every other woman walking the earth, but I’d rather save myself the embarrassment of his rejection.

“If you need to break the pact because you’ve found someone else then it’s fine. I understand.”

Both sides of his jaw flex with irritation this time, but he doesn’t say a word before he turns and walks away. Maybe

he's upset because his thoughts are more transparent than he realized.

His tires squeal on the pavement outside of my house when he drives away. I step inside, tears running down my face when a light comes on in the house across the street.

Chapter 31

Cash

I tried talking myself out of stopping by her house this morning, but it was like someone else was driving my truck.

It felt completely natural, pulling into her driveway, and on any other day, I could let myself get lost in the fantasy of her being mine.

That imagery faded as quickly as it arrived. There was no smile on her face when she finally opened the door. She wasn't happy to see me. I could see the irritation in her eyes, as if I was the annoying little kid next door who can't take a hint that no one likes me.

With my palm on my chin, I tilt my head and crack my neck, before turning and doing the other side as well. It brings no relief. I only had a beer at the bar last night, keeping my promise to Chandler, who drank everything that was offered to him. I'm surprised I was able to get him in the truck and back to my house without a gurney.

"Chief?"

"Yeah, sorry," I grumble. "What was the issue this time?"

I cringe, hearing the sound of irritation in my voice.

"The dates on the arrest report don't make sense. They say he was arrested on the ninth but he was detained on the seventh. There's not much the DA can do if they're wrong. The case will get thrown out on the first day of the trial. It may not even make it to trial."

"I'll get the corrections in. What was the case number again?"

It's the clerk's turn to sigh in annoyance, but thankfully, she relays the information once again.

When I get off the phone, Eastyn is standing in the doorway of my office. She's always a little early, but I beat her

in today, after my soul-crushing stop at Adalynn's house this morning.

"Early calls?" she asks.

"The courthouse. Wrong dates. Again."

She takes a few steps closer. "Chandler?"

"Yeah," I tell her. "This one is from last year."

"I can make corrections and get the new report back to them. He's doing better. I showed him an easier way to complete the reports."

I give her a weak smile before handing over the slip of paper I jotted the notes down on.

I make my own fair share of mistakes, so I never ride his ass too hard, but fielding the calls from the district attorney's office never sits well with me. As the chief, all mistakes fall on my shoulders, but I barely have the time to keep up with my own reports. I've never been the type of guy who wanted to micromanage anyone.

"You heard about his dad?"

She nods, a sad smile on her face.

"You're not going to fire him, are you?"

I shake my head. "There isn't anyone sane enough to take his place. The job is boring most days, and the pay is awful. He's a good guy. I just have to check up on him a little more often, I think."

"I'll set up a checks and balances with him and make sure his reports are clean before he submits anything outside of the office."

"I appreciate that, Eastyn."

The guy means well, but there are repercussions to our mistakes. Although we don't have many hardened criminals in town, we need to make sure that the cases we do send for prosecution are good.

"What do we do for him?"

“I think the checks and balances are—”

“I mean since his father passed away,” she interrupts. “Do we send food?”

“Do you cook?” I ask, knowing the man wouldn’t be interested in a sandwich or a bowl of cereal.

Her nose scrunches up. “My meals are delivered by Riley Wilson’s catering company. I can’t help with this.”

“Really?” That sounds extremely expensive, but it’s not my place to judge where people spend their money.

“She makes the best lasagna. The mushroom gravy she uses with her pork chops is a little spicy for me, though. Oh!” she says snapping her fingers. “You know what he’d like? Those chocolate chip cookie dough cupcakes that Adalynn makes.”

“I don’t know if—”

My words fall away when my cell phone chimes.

I don’t even have to look at my phone to know what the alert is. The notification alerts from the app has a very distinct sound.

Eastyn looks from me to my phone on my desk, but I know she can’t see anything with the privacy screen on it. The look in her eyes tells me that she’s familiar with the app.

“The DA’s office was hoping to have that new report by noon.”

“Chandler will have to sign it. I’ll get the corrections done and you can swing it by his house when you take him the cupcakes.”

She gives me one last knowing look before leaving my office and closing the door behind her.

I wait, making sure she’s far enough away before picking up my phone as if I’m doing something wrong. The banner on my phone making me aware that Adalynn is once again back in her fertility window starting today affects my body more than it probably should, especially after our fight this morning.

Time.

That's what she asked for, but I'm certain that it's only her way of putting a little distance between the two of us, as if she believes it will make the complete severing of our friendship easier.

She's had nothing but time. Weeks of time. There have been limited texts and hardly any interaction. I've only laid eyes on her a handful of times in the last several weeks.

I thought I'd be the one struggling with regrets, that I'd have a problem going from being her lover for a little over a week to being her friend, but she's made it clear she regrets all of it. It's quite possible she regrets even being my friend for so long.

I dismiss the notification before closing my eyes and pulling in several slow breaths.

Time and distance would be more bearable if I knew what the final outcome would be. The not knowing eats away at me with every second ticking away on the clock.

I jerk my eyes open when Eastyn knocks on my office door.

"All ready?" I ask when she walks inside, holding out the report.

"It was only a few date corrections. I've attached sticky notes to all the places he needs to sign. If you get them back to me quickly, I can drive them to the courthouse and hand deliver them. I wouldn't chance them being late with a courier service."

I take the folder as I stand from my desk. I could really use a chiropractor right now. My bones feel as if they're rubbing against each other.

"I'll get him to sign them."

"Don't forget the cupcakes. You can't show up empty-handed."

I frown in her direction, but my annoyance isn't about her. She can't possibly know the issues Adalynn and I are

having right now.

“Yes, ma’am,” I tell her, my cheek twitching when she gives me a wide smile. “I’ll be back in just a bit.”

“I’d say you have about three hours before I’ll need to leave for the courthouse. Take your time.”

The glint in her eye makes me wonder if she isn’t aware of more than I give her credit for.

The unrelenting Texas heat slaps me in the face when I step outside, my uniform molding to my body as a sheen of sweat covers my skin. I can’t wait for fall, although the temps won’t drop too drastically until late November, early December, and then there’s still a chance we’ll be wearing shorts on Christmas Day.

The thought of the holidays makes my chest ache. I’ve always spent the holidays with Adalynn and her family. They’ve never once made me feel unwelcome or like I was invading their time together. I’ve always had presents under the tree like the three Tate children. When Aunt Mable was still able to get out and about, she included me in her handmade gifts. For a man who doesn’t cook, I have more potholders than I know what to do with.

As I climb in my truck and head to the bakery, I realize just how alone I am. I’ve clung to Adalynn like a leech. I’ve put all of my eggs in her basket and expected her to keep them safe. I forwent spending time with other people in order to soak up every drop she was willing to give me. I’ve alienated myself from nearly everyone else who has tried to be a part of my life. At the time, I didn’t think I needed anyone else. I couldn’t imagine a day when she wasn’t the first person I’d call.

Things are different now. We’re broken, and I’m all alone.

I’m not a man who cries, but that doesn’t stop the taste of salt from invading the back of my throat when I climb out of my truck and walk toward the front door of her store.

With a deep fortifying breath, I pull open the door, my heart racing when I see her standing behind the display case, describing each one of the cupcakes to a customer.

Her smile is perfect, proof that she loves what she does.

It fades when she glances up to see who entered.

There was a time when her smile would only grow when she saw me.

I wait for the customer to make their decision, keeping my distance because I don't want to intrude despite it taking what feels like forever for them to end up only buying one cupcake.

I nod at the stranger when they walk past me to leave.

“Do you have time to talk?”

“Super busy today,” she says, her eyes landing anywhere but on mine.

“Chandler's dad died yesterday evening.”

Her jaw flexes. “I'm aware. I was going to put together a care package for him.”

I hate the dismissiveness in her tone, but I also know that I can't control how she feels. If I could, the kiss this morning would've landed us in bed where I would've kept her all day.

“That's why I'm here.”

Her eyes find mine for the briefest of seconds before she pulls them away again.

“Eastyn said he'd love the cookie dough ones.”

“How considerate of her. I'm all out of cookie dough. I put the last of them in my care package.”

There was a time when she'd suggest that we send one care package together. The man can only eat so many cupcakes after all.

The suggestion never meets her lips.

“What's his second favorite?”

She shrugs as she reaches for a bleach cleaning wipe. “Eastyn didn’t tell you? She seems to know everything about everyone.”

I pull my head back at the unfamiliar bitterness in her tone.

“I’m sure he’ll be happy with anything,” I tell her.

Chapter 32

Adalynn

Just like a man to think someone should be grateful with whatever they get.

I pull in a deep breath as I reach into the display case to pull out the last of the vanilla cupcakes with chocolate icing. They're Cash's favorite, but I recall Chandler begging him for one once when I took some to the office. I figure they'd be great to send to him.

I should probably apologize to Cash for my attitude this morning. Madison let me know about Chandler's dad after I got to work this morning. Apparently, the heartbroken man got drunk last night at the bar, but he went with Cash who made sure he was safe.

I was hurt thinking that Cash skipped out on family dinner last night just to go drink or even meet someone else there when really he was being a good friend.

Then I remember how many times over the last month that he's called to cancel plans. I know he wasn't helping Chandler those times, and my anger flares once again.

"How much time do you need?"

I nearly drop the cupcake in my hand when he speaks.

"Excuse me?"

"Time, Adalynn. You wanted time. How much?"

I open my mouth to speak but he continues before I can.

"The app told me this morning that you're fertile. Are we doing this again this month or what?"

Good enough for that, but not good enough for more.

I'm a fool for thinking it could be anything else.

With a calmness I don't feel, I place the cupcake into the box and flip the lid before placing it safely on the counter. I turn to face him.

“You’re off the hook, Cash. I should’ve used the donor in the first place.”

His eyes narrow at me, and anger swells in my chest at the audacity he has for getting angry at all.

“Is that how you really feel?” His words are more of a growl than actual speech, and I hate the way it reminds me of the barked commands he’d use in the bedroom.

“I don’t need this right now,” I tell him. “Is this all you need?”

He doesn’t bother to even look at the box of cupcakes when I point to them. He’s too busy glaring at me.

“I’m not going to continue being dismissed by you, Ads.”

“I’m not going to be treated poorly in my own business,” I counter, hating the way my chin quivers.

“I’m not treating you poorly. I did you a favor. Do you realize how much money I saved you?”

“That’s a little egotistical don’t you think? The donor sperm—”

“Was mine!”

My head snaps back in confusion. “What?”

“I’m donor sixty-four ninety-two, Adalynn.”

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s not. I donated in college.”

“No. Why would you do that?”

“Money, Adalynn. Not everyone got money sent to them every week. Some of us had to learn to survive without the help of others.”

There’s an unfamiliar bitterness in his tone, but it falls so easily from his lips, it makes me wonder how often he has thought one thing but said something different. It’s almost as if he’s criticizing me for the comforts my family provided, as if he sees me as some kind of spoiled brat.

“You lied to me,” I say, the words weak on my lips. “I asked you flat out if you were that donor.”

His eyes dart away, but even if he’s feeling ashamed for it, the damage is already done.

I ring up his cupcakes, telling him his total. The man pays despite never having paid for a single cupcake I’ve ever made. I give the locals a discount, but family gets what they want for free.

The charge as well as him paying makes a statement. It draws an uncrossable line in the sand, one I never thought would exist between the two of us.

His eyes search mine when he lifts the box off the counter, but the bell above the door chimes, interrupting whatever he was planning to say.

“Do you want me to take your care package?” he asks instead. I know that’s not what he was originally going to ask.

“Wouldn’t want you to go out of your way for me,” I say, my nose burning with unshed tears.

Instead of arguing or looking upset, he simply nods before turning around and leaving the shop.

“Am I interrupting something?”

I shake my head, but a tear still rolls down my cheek. I dash it away with the back of my hand, giving Claire the best smile I can manage at a time that feels like my entire world is imploding.

Cash and I have had arguments in the past, but he’s never walked away as angry as he is right now and not spin right back around and concede in some way. Maybe that’s a “me” problem. Maybe I’m not bending enough for him.

“I’m just here to grab the cupcake order for Larkin’s birthday,” Claire says, her voice betraying how awkward she feels right now.

“That’s right!” I say with a maniacal edge even I can hear. “I know you only ordered four, but I used eight so I could create the number three.”

Her face falls.

“My gift to her for her birthday. In fact, the whole thing is her gift. Do you have balloons for her party? Because I have extras and a tank in the back. If you give me just a few minutes, I can get them ready for you.”

“Adalynn,” she says with a sigh, her chin quivering a little. I swear if she cries, I’ll cry. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?” I ask, darting away another tear, my smile locked in place. “Her third birthday is very important.”

“You said that last year for her second.”

“They’re all so very important,” I remind her.

I lift my hand to the locket hanging around my neck. I have valued this thing more than any other gift anyone has gotten me. Even with the fight Cash and I just had, I know I’d never be able to take it off. Even if our friendship doesn’t survive the recent mistakes we’ve made, the locket is a reminder that there was a time that he loved me, even if it wasn’t in the way I needed him to.

“The balloons?” I repeat.

She shakes her head. “She’s allergic to latex.”

“That’s sad. Balloons are so much fun. Have you been to The Devil’s Lettuce this week?”

“I got a postcard in the mail letting me know I won a hundred-dollar gift card for any in-store purchase. The stickers on it were a nice touch.”

“Stanley Jones is a lovely man,” I say, wondering how long we’re going to play this game.

“I don’t like charity.”

And the game is over.

“You just get lucky.”

She scoffs.

“Listen,” I say, coming around the counter so I can step closer to her.

“I’m doing my best,” she says, emotion clogging her throat.

I press my palm to her forearm.

“None of that,” I urge. “You’re a part of Lindell, and we take care of our family. You’re just going to have to get used to that.”

She shakes her head but I don’t read it as her rejecting the help, just that maybe she doesn’t feel like she deserves it.

“Hux loved you. I know that if he were here today, he’d love that precious little girl just as much.”

She takes a step back, breaking our connection. She turns to face me after grabbing her box of cupcakes.

“Thank you for this.”

“Anytime,” I tell her, but she’s already heading toward the door.

I take a deep breath, thinking that I’ll have a few minutes to sob and feel sorry for myself, but the doorbell chimes once again. I smile at the next customer before going right back behind the counter.

I can do this. I can live in a world that doesn’t include Cash Tucker.

I rolled the dice, gambled with our friendship, and I lost. I have to come to terms with the consequences of my actions.

Chapter 33

Cash

I can't even begin to count the number of mistakes I've made in my life. Hell, my birth was a mistake—one my birth mother remedied for herself the day I came into the world. She couldn't get away from me fast enough, so I don't know why it comes as such a shock that Adalynn has also had enough of me.

We weren't even dating, and it still feels like I've lost the love of my life.

Getting out of bed this morning was harder than it should've been, considering I don't think I slept at all.

If this were ten years ago, I might have done something stupid. I might've ended up in a destructive spiral that landed me on the wrong side of the badge I now proudly carry.

My t-shirt and running shorts feel like sandpaper on my skin as I dress.

The sheriff's department is covering all calls for us today. It's the Sixth Annual Guns and Hoses competition, a fundraiser for the local departments, in an effort to keep the citizens' taxes down and keep the police and fire departments operational. Those who can afford to pay support us through donations, and those that can't, aren't penalized the way they would be if the money was demanded from the local tax assessor.

It's supposed to be a friendly competition, but the guys at the firehouse act as if it's the Olympics. Maybe if Chandler, the two reserve officers, and I took it a little more seriously, we wouldn't lose to them every year.

The air outside is already hot and thick from the overnight thunderstorm we had. The bright lightening and loud thunderclaps made me almost forget about the fight I had with Adalynn. I had grabbed my keys to go to her house, knowing her fear of storms, before I realized she no longer wants me in her life.

Instead of grabbing a lawn chair out of the garage like I do every year for her, I simply toss the duffle with my change of clothes to the passenger side and climb inside the cab. It's going to be a long-ass day. Hell, it's going to be a long-ass week.

My phone chimes yet another notification about her fucking fertility like it's been doing every day for the past week. I take deep breaths as I open the lock screen and delete the app entirely instead of crushing the phone in my palm or throwing it out the damn window.

Every second of my life is a reminder of her and what I've lost. The last thing I need is a fucking app letting me know she needs to be fucked.

Should've gone with the donor.

Her words eat away at me from the inside like a cancer that has no discernible preference.

What she was saying was that she regretted that time we spent together. She'd rather have a doctor use medical technology to impregnate her than have me touching her.

I wonder how many times she scrubbed at her skin to try and erase the memory of my touch.

But my brain isn't fully on board with her exit from my life, and thinking of her in the fucking shower takes me on a much different path.

"Fuck!" I snap, slamming my hand on the steering wheel as I turn onto Main Street.

I regret the mini outburst the second I look over and see a child about nine or ten watching me with a frown. I have no doubt the kid is more than capable of reading lips.

I smile, the best one I can manage, and give him a little wave. I'll make sure to try and find him in the crowd during the parade and toss him an extra handful of candy.

"Shit," I grumble, making sure my lips don't move as much.

I forgot to go to the store and get candy for the parade.

No wonder the damned fire station wins every year. I can't stay organized for anything.

I'm running through a list of things I've forgotten for today as I pull into my normal parking spot at the police station. All cruisers have been parked closer to the center of the town square as a form of decoration for the town to see. I have no doubt Harper, who works as the office manager of the fire station, suggested that purposely because they have a ladder on one of their rigs that needs to be replaced and she wants the townsfolk to see it, hoping it will increase donations.

I jerk when knuckles hit my window.

Eastyn is grinning on the other side, and her smile doesn't falter even when I can't manage to smile back.

"I don't know why I parked," I grumble. "I have to go to the store."

"The Fresh Quest Grocer is closed today, just like every other business in town."

Not every business in town is closed. Boone Myer, the owner of the local mechanic shop, has never fallen in line with what others do. His shop for example is named The Garage instead of something with a pun in it. It's another thing that has been brought up more than once at the town hall meetings. They've since enacted a rule about the city council having business name approval, but Boone's business was grandfathered in.

"I'll have to go into town. I forgot candy for the parade."

"I grabbed four bags when I went to the courthouse."

"Eastyn—"

I snap my mouth closed when I spot Chandler walking up, not missing the way his eyes drop to her ass before he looks over at me. The man may be heartbroken, we buried his father only a few days ago, but he's still a man. Sometimes I hate my gender.

I mean, I see the appeal. Eastyn is a beautiful woman. She's just not Adalynn, and that has always been enough to

keep me from seeing her as anything but an employee.

“That’s very thoughtful of you. Give me the receipt on Monday and I’ll pay you back.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind as she steps back and gives Chandler a spot in this small impromptu meeting.

“Hey,” I say as I climb out of my truck and shake his hand. “I didn’t know if you were going to be here today.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he tells me, taking my proffered hand. “Pop loved this competition. He always gave me shit for being a cop rather than joining the winning team. Sorry for the language.”

Eastyn frowns, as if realizing she’s not as much a part of the team as she considered herself. “I’ve heard worse.”

“Still,” Chandler says, his eyes darting from hers back to mine, like I’m going to chastise him like a child for cussing. “It’s disrespectful.”

“Fuck it,” she says with a shoulder shrug.

Laughter erupts from my throat, and Chandler’s ears turn pink.

I spend a minute looking between the two of them. I have no doubt Eastyn would chew him up and spit him out. I think Eastyn has a little bit of a wild side to her that Chandler could never keep up with.

“Okay,” she says, clapping her hands. “This is the year the Guns win it all.”

I follow behind her as she turns toward the town square. I don’t pop her bubble. I know us coming in dead last will do it soon enough.

“You know,” I begin. “As the office manager, you can take part in this competition too.”

“Harper does,” Chandler adds. “She beats us too.”

“Not really my thing, bossman.”

“Exercise?” Chandler asks.

“Performing for an audience. Do you see that line?”

We both look in the direction of her pointing finger. The women sitting in chairs at the starting line don't even bother to look ashamed with our attention.

“Half of those women are married, and they're still here to ogle shirtless men.”

Chandler's smile widens. “It's all in good fun. It's a FUNdraiser after all.”

“I'm just here to support the community,” I argue.

“Same,” Chandler quickly agrees. “And the food. My God, have you tried the beef and cheese hand-pies that Ruth makes. I'm drooling just thinking about them, and as competitors, we get to eat free.”

I grin at the man. I know he's hurting, but he's facing that pain and not letting it get him down.

“It's my first Guns and Hoses event, but I've heard talk of all the business owners and what they offer at these types of events. I'm looking forward to Adalynn's ice cream. I hear it's to die for.”

I feel her eyes dart to me, but I keep looking down the road at the folks gathering for the start of the event.

“Some only offer certain things exclusively at these events. Adalynn sold out of her ice cream before I got a chance to sample any of it at the ice cream social a few months ago,” Chandler says, going on to talk about his favorite things each vendor could be offering today before circling back to mention those hand-pies Ruth makes.

I tell myself I'm checking the crowds to make sure everyone is safe. We have increased security here from the sheriff's department since we're all competing today.

Despite it being almost two years since the shooting in the town square, it was suggested that we create a one-way in and one-way out type of setting for Lindell. Talk of building walls in Texas isn't a new thing, and everyone seems to have

an opinion on it, but the construction of those are usually much further west of our town.

I've kept my mouth shut through all of it. I don't want my knowledge to ruin their false sense of security. Violence can happen at any point, and we aren't just at the mercy of outsiders. The man the district attorney's office called about recently was a domestic violence case. People in town are quick to gossip, but they refuse to acknowledge the bad stuff, as if ignoring it will make them safe. I want Lindell to stay as untouched by the big cities as it can, but we aren't without our own faults and obstacles.

No one in town wants to hear how much security it would require to keep those that want to harm us from coming in, and they certainly don't want fingers pointed at those who already exist inside our city limits.

Hell, Adalynn Tate ripped my heart from my chest and stomped on it, and no one around is the wiser. If it were brought up, I'm sure it would be all my fault. There's no way one of the town princesses could ever do such a thing.

As if thinking of her drew her into existence, I spot her near the memorial set up for Jason Conroy and Chase Woodson's mother. She's wearing her sash from when she won Ms. Lindell, a competition she told me she didn't even want to participate in. Several women from different generations wear their sashes. It's expected of them at more than one of these types of events. Even Ruth, who is setting up her booth, and Marlene, who owns the small grocery store in town, have theirs on.

Her eyes dart in my direction, but they move away just as quickly, as if she doesn't even recognize me at all. Maybe I'm finally realizing my place in town, and it in no way includes Adalynn Tate.

Chapter 34

Adalynn

“You’re avoiding me.”

“I’m doing no such thing,” I say, but I don’t lift my eyes to Madison.

She huffs, not letting me get away with anything.

“Can you at least give me a towel?”

“I don’t have any towels.”

“I see the stack of them peeking out from under the edge of your table skirt.”

I drop my eyes right to where the towels are kept.

“See!” she snaps, laughter in her voice.

I grab a towel and hand it to her.

“Have you seen him?”

I take a deep breath. “Do you want an ice cream? I made an orange creamsicle flavor since the cupcakes are so popular.”

“Yes, I want an ice cream, but I also want you to talk to me. I know you’ve been avoiding me.”

I know she’s not going to let it go, especially since she’s brought it up twice already, in the span of two minutes.

“I’m not doing it on purpose.”

“Have you been avoiding Cash as well? And before you lie, just know that I saw you over here during the entire competition.”

“I wanted to make sure my booth looked nice.”

“Your booth always looks nice. The best booth in town.” She leans a little closer. “But don’t tell Ruth I said that because she’ll lie out of spite and tell me she’s out of hand-pies.”

“She can be mean at times,” I say, even though it won’t deter her.

“They did better this year. They still lost, but it wasn’t by such a large margin.”

I nod. I was keeping track of the competition through the Facebook page. Bobby John Prichard was updating it every couple of minutes while the mini-triathlon was taking place.

“I think they should’ve spiced it up. I saw online that some of these cops and firefighter competitions do more of a strong-man thing. Or even a boxing match. I think Cash would’ve won if they did that. He seems like he’s got a lot of aggression he needs to channel.”

“One scoop or two?”

“Two, always. He barely even smiled when he was throwing candy to the kids, but maybe he’s upset that the firemen get to spray people with water guns. Chandler came. I know a lot of people thought he might stay home this year. He looks like he’s doing okay, all things considered. Oh yum. Thank you.”

She takes a quick lick of the ice cream cone I handed her, but it doesn’t slow her down.

“This is delicious. You should consider selling it every day at the bakery. No, don’t do that. I’ll be the size of a house before I even make it into my third trimester. Eastyn didn’t compete with the guys. I wonder why. Harper was wearing her bright red shirt and running, swimming, and biking right along with Hayes and the others. Do you think she has a thing going on with any of them?”

“I think her personal life isn’t any of my business.”

My friend narrows her eyes at me, but I straighten my spine and stare right back at her.

“That may be,” she says slowly. “Because you aren’t her best friend.”

The challenge is there, and I know my time of avoiding this conversation is over. I have been keeping my distance from Madison. It’s hard to watch her being so happy and getting everything she ever wanted. I’m not mad that she’s

happy, I'm just upset that I can't seem to get that opportunity too.

"Who is Harper's best friend?"

Madison frowns, or at least she attempts to frown, but it's impossible with how much she's enjoying the ice cream.

"Fine," I say with a huff, throwing my hand towel over my shoulder until I need it again.

"I'm not going to beg," she says after I don't immediately start talking.

"Yes, you will," I say, making her smile wider, but I won't make her.

I angle my body so I'm not facing anyone. There are more than a handful of people who think they can read lips around here, and I don't want some contorted version of what I'm going to say ending up in the *Lindell Gazette*.

"Cash and I aren't even friends anymore. We had a fight."

"Adalynn!"

I do my best not to cringe when she places an ice cream sticky hand on my forearm.

"You told him how you felt and he turned you down? I was certain—"

"He made it clear how he felt about me. I think he has someone else."

"False," she says quickly. "I'd know."

"How?" I snap. She's been back in Lindell for a couple of months. I only left town for college and then came right back. If anyone had their finger on the pulse of this town, it would be me.

She shrugs, taking another lick of her ice cream. She does it so leisurely, I almost rip it from her hand and throw it in the trash to take away her distraction. But I'm not the type of person who would make a pregnant lady cry.

“The man loves you, Ads.”

“I don’t even think he likes me as a person any longer.” I wave my hand in front of my face and make a sound that doesn’t convince her that I’m hot rather than on the verge of tears. “We had two fights right in a row and he all but demanded I tell him if we were going to try for a baby again this month. It was like he had better things to do.”

She stays silent, but this time she doesn’t lift her cone to her mouth until it melts down her hand, and she only does it then to keep from making too much of a mess.

“Is it possible you read him wrong?”

“No,” I say adamantly.

“How are you so sure?”

“I know him, Madison.”

“If you knew him as much as you think you do, you’d know he was head over heels in love with you.” She holds her hand up to stop my argument. “And before you say he’s not, I’m not the only one who sees it. Heck, everyone in town sees it but the two of you. It’s incredibly frustrating to be honest.”

“Why have enemies?” I mutter.

“Really?” she says, annoyance in full swing in her voice. “That pity crap isn’t going to work with me. I love you, Adalynn, but sometimes you can’t see the forest for the trees. I watched him the entire competition, and his eyes kept darting to the same place. I can’t even count how many times he looked at that old elm tree.”

The elm tree is where I sit every year while the competition takes place. I’ve avoided it all day because so much has changed. I’m no longer the same girl who sat under it, watching him last year.

She mentioned Eastyn not participating, but, honestly, I was worried that she would be wearing a matching blue shirt, the same as Cash, and they’d smile at each other while they ran side by side. She looked like the type who could keep up with him, something I could never do.

“Maybe the two of you need a little distance from each other, but there’s nothing that can keep the two of you apart. Destiny doesn’t work that way.”

I want so badly to believe her, to let myself imagine a year from now and how things could be, but I’ve dreamed of so many things for so many years, and taking action is the only thing that makes stuff happen. The cards fall where they will when you’re the one holding the deck. I played my hand and lost.

Cash Tucker and Adalynn Tate were never meant to be, and the sooner I can accept that the sooner I can start putting the pieces of my heart back together.

“How many does she have left?”

I snap my eyes up to see Madison talking to Chandler.

He grins, a piece of seasoned taco meat on his chin.

“She said she was almost out,” he says, before tossing the last piece of one of Ruth’s hand-pies into his mouth, chewing with a wide grin.

“That old bag,” Madison mutters before turning back to face me. “This conversation isn’t over. I’ll be back.”

“Can’t wait,” I mutter unenthusiastically, a smile tugging up the corners of my mouth when her fast walk turns into a light jog when she sees several people arrowing toward Ruth’s booth.

“I take it everyone likes the hand-pies?”

I turn away when Eastyn speaks.

“Yeah,” Chandler answers her, having more manners than I can manage right now. “I know the bossman is going to be happy we grabbed a couple for him. See ya later, Ads. Save me some ice cream.”

“Would you like a cone now?” I offer, turning my attention to him as if Eastyn doesn’t exist.

If my mother or Robin saw how I was acting, they’d drag me behind the post office by my ear and give me a stern

talking to.

“I need to grab a brownie from Hippy Jones first. I think it would go great with your ice cream.”

“Tell him you want one without sprinkles,” I mutter.

His smile grows and my lips threaten to do the same, but Eastyn laughs as if the joke was meant for her.

“We had that conversation last year. He knows he can’t sell those type of brownies any longer. He almost went to jail at Christmas for it,” Chandler says. “You do have vanilla, right?”

“I’ll save some for you,” I tell him.

“Have a good day,” Eastyn says. If I were a naïve person, I might believe the smile she gives me is genuine.

I consider the fact that I just might be becoming a hateful person when they walk away.

I miss Cash. I’ve told myself a million times that I would be happy just to have him as my friend, even if we can’t have more. I’ve promised to be okay with whomever he might date in the years to come. Before bed last night, I almost was able to convince myself that eventually I’d find someone I could love, who would love me the way I deserve, but the sight of her brought all of that ugliness right back to the surface. I know it isn’t fair to hate her without even knowing her, but I can’t seem to help it either.

I can’t count how many times I see Cash walking around and talking to people. He gets a ton of slaps on the back, people giving him sad smiles and no doubt trying to encourage him after yet another loss against Hayes Campbell’s team from the fire department.

He grins and takes it all in stride. Cash isn’t a competitive man. He never has been. He’s always been the type to just be happy being able to participate. Winning isn’t required. If anything, he sandbags his abilities because he knows it means so much to Hayes.

He's a lot like me in that fashion, someone who wants to make others happy, a people pleaser of sorts, even if it comes at his expense.

I turn my eyes away, finding something else to do to keep my hands busy as I fight the urge to go to him and apologize.

I can't seem to formulate the words. I have no idea what I would say or what I'd be apologizing for.

I don't think *I love you and I can't help it. I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable* would go over very well.

If I had just kept my mouth shut in the beginning, I could already be pregnant with his baby. Of course, I wouldn't have ever known that donor sixty-four ninety-two was him. I'd probably still wonder my entire life as a parent what it would be like to have his baby, but then I wouldn't be alone.

I chastise myself the way I know my mother would for being so down on myself. There are so many people in the world that have much less than I do. I need to stop being ungrateful.

Knowing this doesn't stop me from pressing my hand to my empty lower belly when no one is looking and feeling like a complete failure.

Chapter 35

Cash

“Thanks, man,” I say, hanging up the phone after Walker tells me that my food will be ready in a few minutes.

I should’ve eaten more today after all that damned exercise, but I couldn’t stomach a thing with the heat.

Going to one of the other booths to get something also put me closer to Adalynn, and the pull to her was hard enough to fight from the other side of the town square.

I mingled like it was expected of me. I did my best not to look in her direction too many times, but I couldn’t help it when Chandler and Eastyn walked up, offering me one of Ruth’s hand-pies. I didn’t take it because I knew Chandler would enjoy it more.

Eastyn said she thinks that Adalynn hates her, but I let her know Adalynn doesn’t hate anyone. I wasn’t about to open a can of worms by letting her know that I’m probably the only person that woman hates right now.

To give the sheriff’s department a break and, because I can’t stand to be home alone right now, I’m driving around town in my patrol car. It’s quiet, the majority of the townsfolk probably just as tired from the heat today as I am. We often have events in town. Some start early in the day like today, but the same folks who get up to support the community at seven in the morning are also the ones willing to get to the square at ten at night when we have one of the stargazing events. We did that last year to support the astronomy club at the middle school when they voiced a need for a new but expensive telescope. The town came together and made it happen, much the same way they came together and named Bruce Jacobs as an honorary competitor today.

Chandler smiled and thanked Harper rather than blaming the fire department.

Bruce Jacobs had lung cancer, and I’m sure a lot of that had to do with being a firefighter for many years in town, long

before the funding came in that made the town capable of making it paid positions. It not only allowed them to have folks on duty all the time, but the fund also provided the firemen with proper equipment, something Bruce didn't always have when he was running into burning houses to save people and pets for so many decades.

Last year, Harper and Walker's brother was named an honorary competitor, something both of them smiled at and accepted. Jason was also a member of the fire department.

I even heard whispers of a curse earlier today and how those connected to the fire department might all be in danger.

I shook my head and walked away. Such things are always easier to give credit to in the dark where it's customary for bad things to happen.

I slow my cruiser down, groaning in annoyance when a flash of feathers appear in the headlights.

Margie.

That damn peahen is out again, even after Chandler and I sweated bullets extending her pen and making sure the damned thing was covered with predator-proof mesh over the top.

Luckily for me, the bird seems to have an affinity for me, and she stops once I call her name out the window.

Her stride in my direction is slow and purposeful. I move slowly to climb out of my car and open the back door. Without missing a beat, she jumps into the car. I make sure not to catch one of her feathers in the door before closing her inside.

I give Mr. Prichard a call to let him know that I have his bird and will be putting her back in her pen. I don't want to get shot at going onto his property unannounced.

The whole ordeal takes longer than it should due to having to take the long way around after the thunderstorm we had washed out some of the gravel on the most direct route to his house. The county has a crew heading our way the first part of next week, something I had to relay to more than one

person when they complained to me about it at the competition earlier.

I feel more relief than I should when I finally make it to the bar and don't see Adalynn's car in the parking lot. I don't know why I even expected it to be there. She hasn't met me here in weeks. It's just one more thing that has changed where we're concerned.

I leave the windows cracked because even with as cordial as Margie was when she saw me, it didn't stop her from shitting in the back seat of my cruiser. I pray the odor is gone by the time I make it back out, but if it isn't, it wouldn't be the first time I eat my dinner using the trunk as my table. I'm adaptable that way.

My thoughts about staying in bed all day hit me right in the chest when I step inside, my eyes going right to the table that Adalynn always waited for me at. There's a stranger sitting there, but Adalynn is sitting across from him, a wide smile on her face.

Anger slashes at me, my hands forming fists as I start in that direction.

"Hey, man."

I glare down at the palm pressing against my chest before looking up at Walker. There's a warning in his eyes.

"I'll have the cook remake your dinner. I expected you sooner."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not hungry."

"A man in uniform needs dinner just as much as the next person," Walker says, his choice of words hitting me right where they're intended.

I'm on the clock, technically working for the city right now. Beating the shit out of someone in front of witnesses wouldn't be received well. The climate surrounding cops isn't the greatest, and I've always prided myself in being part of a team that takes its oath to serve and protect very seriously. I didn't even rough up that man who was hurting his wife the way I really wanted to. He made it to jail with no injuries,

even though his wife was sitting in the hospital with a broken arm and enough fear that she didn't want to press charges.

I swallow before speaking.

"I need something else."

"So not the burger and fries? We have chicken strips, and I think there might be some corn dogs in the freezer if you—"

"Whiskey," I snap. "A full bottle."

His eyes dart back down to the badge pinned on the left side of my uniform. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I'll take it with me."

"That's illegal, champ."

"Leave it on the back stoop," I tell him, locking eyes with Adalynn when she diverts her attention from her date.

He looks over his shoulder, and it surprises me that I don't recognize him. Normally, Adalynn wouldn't give an outsider her attention. She's the most Lindell-loyal person I know.

Something flashes in her eyes, but I'm in no position in my anger to recognize it. She's either upset that I'm here in the first place or she's feeling a little bad about getting caught.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

"The whiskey, Walker," I growl before turning around to walk out of the bar.

"I love a man in uniform," a woman says, blocking my path to the door. "For when you get off shift."

I don't stop her when she pushes a slip of paper into my pocket. If she had reached into my right pocket, just below my firearm, I might have had to put my hands on her, but she must be truthful about her uniform fetish because she keeps to my left side.

The paper goes in the outside trash the second I leave the bar. I've never had time for badge bunnies, and even with the

way I feel right now, I don't plan on entertaining the idea of them.

I wait by my patrol car, the stench still permeating the inside. I watch as light flashes in the back, telling me that the back door opened and closed, before heading back there.

I feel like a complete asshole when I get around the back and see the Styrofoam clam shell sitting beside the bottle of whiskey. I put Walker in a position that could make him lose his livelihood and instead of refusing me, he also included my dinner.

That regret doesn't stop me from scooping up both items and going back to my patrol car. I radio out to the sheriff department's dispatch when I pull up in my driveway.

I'm off tomorrow, and I have every intention of spending it with the worst hangover this bottle will give me. I put the dinner Walker left me in the fridge because I don't want a damn thing keeping me from punishing myself for how fucked up I let things get with Adalynn.

Chapter 36

Adalynn

Making a plan and following through with a plan are two very different things, I realize, when I sneeze the second I step into the small animal rescue that Corbin McBride has with his veterinary clinic.

My plan was simple. If I was going to be the woman who stays single for her entire life, then it's only right to do it as a cat lady.

Apparently, the allergies I had to pet dander didn't get the memo.

"Are you okay?" Claire asks when I press my nose into the crook of my arm.

I pull it away enough to explain my allergies.

Her frown only grows. "You said you were here to adopt all the cats."

"I really want to. Could you suggest an antihistamine?"

"That works well enough for someone who sneezes before she even touches an animal?"

I nod, frowning, as another sneeze builds inside of my nose.

"Not one that would still make it safe for you to drive. Have you considered allergy shots?"

I raise my eyebrows, hope swelling. "Would that work?"

She gives me a small smile. "Probably not enough that you could live comfortably with cats. What about dogs? How are you with them? We have four—"

"Just as allergic," I tell her, looking up at the light, but it doesn't stop me from being hit with three sneezes in a row.

"Why don't we go back into the office, or better yet, let's go stand outside. You look like you could use some fresh air."

The fresh air brings only mild relief despite the deep breaths I pull into my lungs.

“Why would you think you were no longer allergic if you haven’t had shots?”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t thinking, but you can’t exactly be a cat lady without cats.”

She cackles, having a hard time dropping the smile from her face even though I can tell she tries.

“Oh, Adalynn.”

“You’re too young to sound exactly like my mother,” I chide.

She huffs another breath of laughter.

“Believe me, I know the struggle with dating, or people expecting you to date. In my case, everyone looks at me like I’m sinning for the entire world to see if I so much as speak to a single man.”

“You’re a widow. Who gets to judge when it’s time to move on?”

I swallow down a bard of pain. Maybe she has come to the same conclusion about Hux that I have come to about Cash.

I think I always knew deep down that it was either him or no one. The guy last week who sat down with me made me realize it even more. I told him I wasn’t interested, and he was quick to tell me he was waiting for someone else.

We chatted, and he was nice enough, even for someone who isn’t from Lindell.

Cash came in and saw me talking to him. Instead of getting jealous, he took a woman’s number and left. It crushed me. Stomach acid rose in my throat to the point I thought I was going to be sick.

Before I could leave the guy I was talking to, his friend arrived. Much to my surprise, it was Carter, the same guy who was at the twins’ house the other day.

I had a million questions, but the woman feeling comfortable enough to slip her hand into the front pocket of his uniform took over, and it has eaten away at me for days and days.

There wasn't an extra car in his driveway, and I did find it weird that both his truck and patrol car were there when I drove by. But my days of worrying about him have to come to an end. I have to accept that he was never mine to worry about in the first place.

I take a deep breath, this time finding I'm able to do it without the wheeze taking over this time.

"Apparently everyone in town has an opinion, but my in-laws' voices are the loudest. I honestly think they'd be perfectly fine if I dropped Larkin off at their house and disappeared."

I open my mouth to tell her she has to be wrong, but she knows them better than I do. The Kennedys have always kept to themselves, but that doesn't stop the people in town from gossiping about the entire situation. I feel a wave of guilt for knowing more about her situation than she's ever told me herself.

"That sounds messy," I say, scrunching my nose in commiseration.

"Very," she quickly agrees.

"Listen, apparently the adoption thing isn't going to work out, but I'd like to cover all the fees for those cats that need them. Are there families who can't afford the fees?"

"You can ask Corbin, but I've heard him say too many times that if they can't afford the low fees, then there will come a time when they can't afford the vet bills and maybe even the food. He doesn't want to send an animal into a situation that might be bad for them, but we take donations all the time. Do you want to come inside and get a donation envelope?"

I eye the front door, watching as another customer comes out with an animal losing its mind in the small carrier she has

in her clutches.

“There’s also a link online,” she says after the woman gets the carrier inside her minivan.

“I’ll use that,” I tell her. “Thanks for your time, Claire.”

I give her a little wave before getting into my car. I check the glove box for napkins, sighing in relief when I see a huge stack. I pull a few out and stuff them in my cupholder for ease of use. I know I’ll be sneezing for the rest of the day, but maybe I’ll get lucky this time and my eyes won’t start swelling shut.

I skip the trip to Austin, knowing it might force me out after work one day later this week if I run out of stuff, but I know my body. I can’t risk the drive right now.

I’m feeling rather foolish for not thinking this whole thing through as I pull up outside my house.

I can’t keep plants alive, so gardening isn’t an option. I don’t exactly have a lot of free time with my hours at the bakery. I could have more classes, but I feel weird charging for them. It feels like a constant money grab, and I know eventually people will start gossiping about me and wondering if I’m having financial trouble.

I cringe thinking about Ruth offering free dinners to me on Mondays when I go in for chicken and dumplings.

“Crap,” I mutter.

Now I know how Claire feels. We’ve all wanted to help her, but we haven’t taken into consideration how she feels about accepting it.

That’s not true. We even talked about her not wanting charity, and we still bulldozed her life and put her in a position where she couldn’t say no. I played as big a part, offering her twice the cupcakes for free, as Stanley Jones did to make sure Larkin got gifts on her big day.

Since there’s nothing I can do about my past with Claire, I force myself to think about my own life and what I can do that’s in my control.

I park the car, leaving the windows cracked a little because the heat is bad enough, I'm certain my dash will melt if there isn't a way for some of it to escape.

I pull my mail from the little box on the porch and carry it inside.

Noticing that it's the fourth and I still haven't gotten my water bill speaks of routine but it also tells me just how boring and predictable my life is.

I need change. I need something different. I don't think a trip to the hair salon is going to fix it this time. I need something bigger, something more daring.

Of course I have to call Madison because she's always been my cheerleader. She's also the type of person who will support me and remind me why I wanted something in the first place when I start to have my doubts and back out.

She's the reason I practiced walking for hours after buying a pair of heels for our senior prom. She's also the one who told me to stand proud and not shrink down to make myself fit in someone else's box they were trying to shove me into. She said this after my date showed up and said I needed to put on flats because the shoes I had on made me the same height as him.

Madison told him it wasn't my fault he was short, and then she danced with me all dang night. It was one of my fondest memories. I wanted to ask Cash to be my date, but I'd done that my sophomore year and he turned me down. He told me it was weird to go back to a school he had already graduated from.

"I need your help," I say into my phone the second the call connects.

I stare down at the stack of mail that was probably delivered to every other resident in town. There's nothing personal about any of it, and I'm honestly tired of being so dang predictable.

"Is this going to require a shovel and boots?"

I huff a laugh.

“Not this time.”

“You know if the FBI were listening in on this conversation they probably wouldn’t understand that the last time was because we were mucking horse stalls because you felt bad for Mr. Hinkle.”

“That old man still glares at me every time he sees me. How was I supposed to know the difference of hot and cold manure?”

Madison releases a puff of air, the sound of it crackling in my ear. “Don’t say manure.”

“There is no horse poo involved this time,” I promise. “And I don’t need real help. I just need you to not let me back out of what I’m going to tell you when I start to get cold feet.”

“I swear,” she says before I even give her any details, and that’s the kind of support I’m looking for in my life.

Chapter 37

Cash

“Fuck,” I grunt when I pull the mail from the mailbox outside my house.

I know from just a glance at the loops and swirls in my name that the card came from Adalynn.

Running my thumb over the writing makes my chest ache in an all-too familiar way. Being without her has been impossible the last month and a half. I’ll catch glimpses of her in town, but I send Eastyn or Chandler down to the bakery for cupcakes. Talking to her would land me on my knees, begging for just a sliver of her attention. My anger subsided as quickly as it always does when we argue, but I’ve stayed away because I know it’s what she wants.

This birthday card, however, could mean that I might possibly be wrong.

I carry it inside, wanting to cherish the intimacy of opening it up.

Years ago, she got a card in the mail from her Aunt Mable. Offhandedly, I mentioned never having gotten a card in the mail like that, and that same year, on my birthday, one arrived. She has sent one every single year after, and it seems even this chasm of pain and distance between us isn’t powerful enough to break that tradition.

A series of questions run through my head as I unlock my front door and step inside my little house. The water bill and weekly *Lindell Bulletin* are forgotten on the small table just inside the door as I walk toward the couch and take a seat.

The white envelope is stained from its travel through the postal system, but the smudges on it don’t fade when I wipe at them with my fingers.

If she’s still going to send the card, then she can’t hate me, right?

Is this an olive branch, her way of begging me to reach out to her, or is this simply Adalynn being Adalynn and even though she may not want me around her, she doesn't want me to have a terrible birthday? Months ago, I'd know the answer to that question. Months ago, I wouldn't have to wonder if she still cared for me.

My first instinct is to jump and find her, to track her down and tell her everything that has been eating away at me. It's been nearly two months since the confrontation in her bakery, after Chandler's dad passed away.

The heat in town has calmed some, making calls to the police department fewer. It's given me more time off from work which I'd been praying for, for months. But it came right at a time when I needed to stay busy, when I needed something to take my mind off the woman I've craved for years.

I haven't seen her nor that guy she was chatting with since that day at the bar, and with the hangover that bottle of whiskey gave me, I've been suffering without alcohol. I just don't recover the way I used to, and, honestly, I hated the way it made the ache for her dull. Adalynn is like a bruise that I just can't help but press a finger to in order to see if it still hurts. It always hurts, always feels like an open sore that has no chance of healing.

The intimacy we shared, the way her body sang when I was inside of her, was amazing, next level, something I have no hope of ever finding again. But given the chance to go back, I'd change everything. If it meant not losing what we used to have, I'd give up those experiences. I'd forgo those memories.

When I pull the card from the envelope, I notice the difference immediately. There's no hint of perfume coming from the thick paper. The absence of it is like a jolt to my synapsis. If there's no scent now, and there's been one every year prior, then she was misting her perfume over them in the past.

It has to mean something, right? That maybe I wasn't seeing her the way I should've been all these years?

The card is simple, something she'd send to someone she doesn't know very well, much different from the funny ones she has sent in the past.

I could sit here and dwell over a million unanswered questions, but I've done nothing but that for weeks and weeks. I've given her space. It's what she asked for before I lost my temper at the bakery. I put my needs first, and in that moment, I felt as if I had the right to be selfish, but the ultimatum ruined us.

Adalynn is the kindest woman I've ever met, but she has never done well with now or never. Helping someone and being inconvenienced is very different from being backed into a corner, and that's exactly what I did that day. She stood her ground, and although I hate the outcome, I'm also proud of her for not letting herself get bulldozed.

She hasn't kept the status quo. This card is a sign, at least that's how I'm planning on seeing it. Even though it's plain and unimpressive, the thought behind it is what I choose to focus on.

I drop the card to the scarred coffee table I grabbed at a garage sale a few years ago and head to my room.

My shower is quick, but I spend a little extra time in front of the mirror when I shave. I can't do anything right now about my overly long hair, but I'm also not going to waste another day without her in order to get an appointment at Hair Force One in town either. The unruly locks haven't bothered me until right now, not even when Mr. Hinkle asked me if I was hanging out with Hippie Jones with another declaration that if I stop using deodorant, he'd complain to the city council.

I pull on the pair of jeans that Adalynn helped me find at a department store a few years ago and the navy polo she said made my eyes look mysterious. I put on deodorant but argue against the cologne because I don't want to do too much. It will only make the rejection worse, but before I can get to the front door, I turn back around and give my chest one spritz

because she's the one who got me the bottle last year for Christmas.

Instead of turning on the air conditioner in my truck, I roll down the windows before heading to her house. I suck in a deep breath but refuse to lose any steam when I see her driveway empty. She isn't at the bakery either and that little bubble of hope that began to inflate in my chest threatens to pop until I turn and see her car parked beside Madison's SUV outside of Black Widow Designs, a clothing boutique. The offerings there aren't really Adalynn's style, but Madison may be the one shopping.

I have to circle the block to find a parking spot, and I end up on the far side of the building. I don't waste a second climbing out. My name is called before I can round the corner to get to the front door of the shop.

I wave at Donnie when I look over my shoulder and realize he's the one who called out to me.

He doesn't smile at me, but that's nothing new. Donnie isn't exactly the type of guy who grins very often.

"Hey, long time no see," I tell him as I approach.

I dip my head down to give Ronnie a little wave, but, like his brother, he doesn't seem happy to see me either.

Maybe I read too much into the card Adalynn sent. Maybe the entire Tate clan is glad to be done with me.

"My sister's inside with Madison," Donnie says.

"I know. I was looking for her." I don't give any further explanation.

My relationship with Adalynn was never because of the twins. We're cordial to each other, but a choice between them and her was never a choice at all. They had an issue with me when we were all in high school because back then the three-year age difference was a big deal. They kept a close eye on me, and I never once stepped out of line where she was concerned.

"We want you to leave her alone," Donnie says.

I don't have to lean down to verify with Ronnie that the man is speaking for the both of them. I've never seen them disagree on a single thing in all the years I've known them.

"She's moved on," he continues.

My jaw aches when I grind my back molars. They've never brought up the subject of Adalynn and me. I was never encouraged or discouraged from trying something with her since we've both become adults, so his insistence that I need to leave her alone now is strange to me.

"Moved on?" I ask, my hand coming up to scratch at a spot on my freshly shaved face.

"If you can't step up and be the man she needs, then you need to clear off so she can find the guy who can."

I lick my dry lips. "Which is it going to be, Donnie? Get out of the way or man up?"

He narrows his eyes at me.

"Our little sister deserves everything the world has to offer, but she's been locked in some fucked-up loneliness because you don't have the balls to tell her how you feel."

I can't really argue with the man. I haven't opened my mouth to make confessions to her, and, apparently, she isn't very good at reading body clues because if she was, she'd know from the time we spent together that she's it for me.

"She's my best friend," I say, even though I know he doesn't need the reminder.

I've questioned whether my need for her in my life is more a bad thing than a good thing. We aren't toxic exactly but my co-dependence on her could easily be seen as an issue from the outside looking in.

"Have you told her that's all it will ever be?" he challenges. "You're so in love with her that you don't even see the other women watching you."

My lip twitches in irritation. I hate that I'm so transparent to everyone but her.

An insidious thought begins to settle inside of me. What if she does see it, but she's been ignoring it all these years because she's hoping I'd give up on that delusion?

"That look on your face right now tells me that you're not ready to be what she needs, and maybe you never will be."

"I can't just go to her and demand that she be mine," I growl.

He's quiet for a minute, his eyes darting back and forth between mine. "Can't you?"

Instead of waiting for a reply, he opens the driver's side door of his truck and climbs inside, leaving me on the sidewalk with less bravado than I had when I got that birthday card in the mail earlier.

Chapter 38

Adalynn

“And this?” I ask, holding up the cutest camouflaged bodysuit.

“Camo?” Madison asks, her hand going to the small swell of her stomach. “I don’t think she’ll like it.”

“She isn’t going to know the difference between this and a dress,” I remind her. “Plus it reads *Daddy’s Hunting Buddy* on it.”

“Chase doesn’t hunt.” Her nose scrunches up. “Does he hunt?”

I shrug, hanging the outfit back on the rack. “He’s your husband.”

I watch as she looks down at the diamond shining on her left hand. They got married in a small ceremony at their house two weeks ago, and it was everything she ever wanted. I helped as much as I could, providing a small cutting cake and a huge spread of cupcakes. I stood beside her like we always said I would as her Maid of Honor, while she promised to love her soulmate for all eternity. I even managed to keep the tears to a minimum when they sealed their vows with a kiss. I was able to sob in private during the reception without anyone knowing. I’d hate to have ruined her perfect day with my jealousy and the discontent in my own life.

“I was thinking more along the lines of—holy shit—”

“Madison,” I chastise. “Crap.”

I freeze when I see Cash striding toward us with determination.

A feeling of dread hits me square in the chest, making my stomach turn and the threat of losing the lunch I ate not long ago a very real possibility. The last time I felt it was the night he showed up on my front porch late at night.

He hasn’t approached me in weeks, seven to be exact, so there’s no real reason he should be doing it now, unless

something is wrong.

“Madison,” I whisper.

“He’s not in uniform,” she says, thinking the same thing.

“Hey,” he says when he’s within hearing distance. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“You found her,” Madison says, drawing his attention. “Thank you again for the wedding gift.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, his eyes only darting to her for a second.

“You’re having a little girl?” he asks, his eyes landing on the purple-and-teal tutu Madison is holding, before looking back at me.

A sheen of sweat coats my skin when his eyes drop to the yellow bodysuit in my hand.

“Or twins?”

I lift my eyes to get Madison’s attention, but she’s watching him.

“I’m having a little girl. Adalynn doesn’t know what she’s having yet. So she’s shopping for neutrals.”

I could wring her neck. When Cash turns his angry eyes at me, I’m fully on board with doing just that the minute I get the chance.

“You’re pregnant?”

Tears don’t even have the chance to burn the backs of my eyes before they’re rolling down my cheeks. I fully understand now how Madison could cry over the simplest things. For the last couple of weeks, I haven’t been in control of my emotions, and not getting the chance to second-guess everything before reacting to it has felt like freedom. But right now, I hate my body and the way it’s betraying me. I’m supposed to be a fortress where he’s concerned.

“Can we talk?” he asks, his eyes darting to Madison before coming back to me. “Alone?”

Madison doesn't offer to give us privacy, but I guess I shouldn't expect her to. She's been my champion the last two months, and she's not going to shirk that duty now.

"Please?" he begs, and that's all it takes for me to hand over the yellow piece of clothing to my friend and head toward the front door of the shop.

As quick as he was to ask for a moment alone with me, he's not very fast at speaking once we're on the sidewalk.

"You're pregnant?" he eventually asks.

"I am," I confirm.

His eyes drop to my stomach, but there's nothing to see. This trip to the shop was Madison's idea. She said I needed to celebrate the changes in my life when I got the two lines on the test yesterday.

"I took a test yesterday after work, but it hasn't been confirmed by the doctor yet. My appointment isn't until the week after next."

"I'm trying not to be mad right now," he says, his fingers running through his hair.

It's longer than I've ever seen it before, and the tips of my fingers itch to touch the silky strands, but that doesn't go along with the plan I've put in place for my life. Wanting and pining for things I can't have are no longer a part of my daily routine. Although it's a work in progress, I remember that speaking the truth is a part of the new me. But I just can't seem to build the courage to tell him any of it.

"You don't have the right to be mad about anything," I say, straightening my spine when really I want to apologize like I normally would.

I don't like people being mad at me. Before I'd go out of my way to try and change an ill opinion about me, but his anger is not about me at all.

His eyes find mine, and instead of anger, all I see is pain and heartache.

"Adalynn."

“I love you,” I blurt, resisting the urge to slap my hand over my lips.

His eyes widen, and I don’t give myself enough time to talk myself out of making all my confessions.

Madison urged me to do it weeks ago, but the opportunity never presented itself until now.

“I’ve loved you for years. Not loved you, Cash. I’m *in* love with you. I pictured us living happily ever after for as long as I can remember. There isn’t another man alive that compares, and I highly doubt there will be, and I—”

“I love you, too.”

“Think that we should—what?”

He shrugs, sadness still in his eyes.

“I love you, too, but I understand if we’ve gotten so far off track that we can’t ever make it back to where we were.”

“Are you dense?” I snap. “I used present tense. *In* love, not *was in* love, insert some mean ultimatum here, Cash. In.”

“Are we fighting about being in love?” he asks, his hands vibrating by his side as he takes a step closer.

“That depends,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest stubbornly. “Are you going to give me some argument about me deserving better or something?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll pray every day that you never realize you can do so much better than me.”

I shake my head. “That self-deprecating attitude has to go.”

“Gone,” he quickly agrees.

“I’m still pregnant,” I tell him, knowing how easily it can be a deal breaker for him.

“I don’t care who the father is. If given the chance, I’ll raise that baby as my own.”

My heart clenches. “You never wanted kids.”

“A lot of things have changed. I love you.”

The words fall so easily from his tongue. We've told each other I love you more times than I can count, but this isn't the same kind of love we were expressing before.

"Love won't change how you feel about kids, and I don't want you to—"

"Being loved by you changes everything, Adalynn."

I hold a hand up when he takes a step closer. "Wait."

His eyes drop to my lips, making his intentions very clear, and my body almost takes over once again.

"I need the fairy tale."

"I'll give you every part of the world I can manage," he promises.

"I need to have all parts of you."

"You own me."

I huff a laugh. "I need the friendship we had before."

He takes a step back, and I know that he's misunderstanding me.

I step forward and place my hand on his chest. His heart pounds beneath my palm.

"I want all of you. I need a best friend and a lover."

His eyes grow soft, his hand landing on my hip, and it almost melts my resolve.

"I think we both need time to think about this. I don't know if my heart can handle losing you a second time."

"You won't," he promises.

I give him a sad smile.

"I need you to be sure you aren't just feeling lonely and sad, that you're not just saying everything you think I need to hear. Eventually, we can get back to being friends. You're my family, Cash, but we have to go slow. I need to know that you won't break my heart."

His hand cups my jaw.

“Anything you need,” he says, the words a wisp of air on my cheek before he presses his lips to my temple.

He walks away before I can even argue with the man.

When I turn back to go inside the store, I find Madison standing in the window with her hands clamped over her heart and tears running down her face. It seems you still don't have control over your hormones even in the second trimester.

Chapter 39

Cash

She didn't ask for space again.

She didn't tell me I wasn't worthy of her love.

She didn't tell me to get lost or that we'll talk about it later.

My feet freeze on the sidewalk.

Why am I walking away?

I don't even bother reaching for the door handle of my truck.

My strides back to her are purposeful, and thankfully, I catch her before she goes back inside the store.

“Ads!”

She turns her attention toward me, and I swear she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

“I love you,” I blurt, the words so easy on my tongue.

Her smile is soft, her eyes watery, making her look like she's on the verge of tears.

“I know you hate public displays of affection. I want you to know that I know that, but if I don't kiss you right now, I'm going to—”

Her lips crash against mine, her hands tangling in my long hair, with a bite of pain I find that I quite enjoy.

My tongue sweeps against hers without hesitation, and the rumble of a moan escapes her chest and slides inside of me, arrowing straight below the belt.

I should probably stop. This isn't the place for this, but my body and brain somehow aren't connected.

“How many news outlets do you think would show up if the police chief is arrested for lewd behavior in public?”

Adalynn smiles against my mouth at the sound of Madison's voice.

"We aren't being lewd," I argue, my eyes still on my girl.

Adalynn, as if to prove the point, rolls her hips against mine, her lower belly scraping against the erection forming in my jeans.

"Jesus, I need you," I mutter, my hand cupping the side of her face.

She chews the inside of her cheek as if trying to decide what to do.

"Not here, obviously," I mutter, clearing my throat as I take a step back.

"I went ahead and bought this for you," Madison says as she steps closer.

Instead of handing the small bag to Adalynn, she hands it to me.

"So you can umm, hide that whole situation," she says, waving her hand at my crotch, making it obvious to anyone watching just what the hell she's talking about.

Adalynn's face flashes cherry red, her cheeks heating with embarrassment as her eyes dart around.

Most of the businesses here have massive, inviting, glass-paned windows, making it easy for everyone who looks out of them to see us.

Instead of looking over at her friend, Adalynn keeps her eyes on me.

"I always said I didn't like PDA because I was trying to tell you that it would be okay for you to kiss me in private."

I tilt my head to the side.

"But you're not very quick on the uptake," Madison adds.

"How long?" I ask, trying not to get upset. "How long have you felt this way about me?"

Her cheeks turn redder.

“Adalynn,” I say, a warning in my tone as I lick my lips.

Her eyes drop there, and it’s like we’re playing a game of cat and mouse, and there’s a glint of mischievousness in her eyes right out here, on the sidewalk, in the middle of town with witnesses abound.

“For a while,” she confesses.

“Years,” Madison clarifies. “She was writing Mrs. Cash Tucker in her diary in junior high.”

“You were doing the same with Chase,” she snaps, as if they’re both back in school and tattling on each other.

“And look at us now,” Madison says, her hand cradling the small roundness of her belly. “Pregnant by our teenage obsessions.”

My heart skips a beat as I look at Adalynn. This time, the chewing of her lower lip is a nervous response, not one filled with timidity or arousal.

“Ads?”

She swallows, her throat working with the effort of it before she speaks, but she doesn’t direct her attention back to me.

“Should I just go home so you can tell him everything?” She glares at Madison for a response, but her friend doesn’t back down.

“You told me that you needed me to be the person who won’t let you back down. I’ve spent months watching the two of you be miserable all because you were too afraid to speak up. I’ve pushed you in Cash’s direction and Walker has done the same with him.” She waves her arm at me with frustration. “I say years because that’s how long this has been going on. I never said anything to him. I let the two of you attempt to work through that stuff, but no more. You love each other. You’re meant to be with each other. I think that it’s time—oh shit, he doesn’t look happy.”

Both Adalynn and I turn our attention to the street, just in time to see Donnie walking toward us. He looks like he's ready to pull my arms from my body.

"Donnie, listen," I begin as he gets closer, but his hands lift.

I squint my eyes closed because the man is going to knock my lights out, but I'll just have to take it. I'm not going to ruin my chances with Adalynn because of a fistfight with one of her brothers.

Instead of a meaty fist to the face, arms wrap all the way around me. Right on the sidewalk, Donnie Tate, the grumpiest man I've ever met, hugs me.

"I approve," he says, only loud enough for me to hear, before clapping me on the back hard enough to remind me just how much damage he could do if he wanted to, then stepping back. I get a half-grin, and I know that's a victory of epic proportions coming from him.

Emotions clog my throat as I look past him to see Ronnie standing outside of their truck with a wide grin on his face.

"Not twenty minutes ago you warned me away from her," I remind the towering brute.

"Donald Tate!" Adalynn snaps.

"Look, if the man wasn't willing to go against what I said, then he didn't love you enough," the man says without apology. "He nudded up just the way I fully expected him to."

Adalynn scrunches her nose with his choice of words.

"What I won't tolerate is the two of you making out and dry humping each other on the street, so you need to take that mess somewhere private," Donnie says, his eyes locking on me.

"We weren't dry nothing each other," Adalynn says, but even she doesn't sound like she believes her words. When Madison whispers that she's a liar, she rolls her lips between her teeth to hide her smile.

I can't stop looking at her, can't stop the millions of questions rolling around in my head.

"Can we go somewhere and talk?" I ask.

Adalynn is quick to nod, but before she walks away with me, she shoves her car keys into Donnie's hand.

"Take my car to my house," she tells her older brother before reaching down and taking my hand.

I shift the straps of the small bag Madison handed me in order to hold her hand, and it draws Donnie's attention. I feel Adalynn stiffen beside me. She hasn't told her family yet.

"What's in the bag?" Donnie asks, as if no one around him is allowed to have secrets, which I guess isn't true because he clearly knew how I felt about his sister for years and never once brought it up.

"Lingerie," Madison says. "A red lace, silky little number with bows on the—"

"Ick," the man says, scrunching his nose. "That's my little sister you're talking about."

"Then quit being so damned nosy," Madison snaps.

Donnie narrows his eyes as he looks at her. "You better be glad I respect Chase, because a mouth like that would get that cute little ass of yours spanked."

A choking noise comes from Adalynn, but Madison just narrows her eyes at the man.

"I think that's our cue to go," I say, pulling Adalynn away.

Madison and Donnie continue to stand on the sidewalk, arguing like they don't care who sees them.

"I used sixty-four ninety-two," Adalynn says when I open the passenger side of my truck so she can climb inside.

I lock eyes with her.

"That's what Madison was saying."

"My baby," I say.

She nods. "I didn't think I'd ever have you, but I knew I couldn't go through life without a part of you."

"It seems we have a lot of talking to do."

Her chin quivers, and I know her well enough that she thinks something is wrong.

I cup her cheek and step in closer to her, pinning her to the side of my truck, but I think better of taking things any further while out in public.

Nerves has her reaching for the locket at her throat.

"I never knew I wanted kids until I found those brochures at your bakery. I knew then that if I had kids, it was going to be with you or nothing," I confess, my fingers trailing along her skin until I meet the clasp of the necklace.

"You're not mad?"

I give her a soft smile as I shake my head.

"This," I say. "Has always been my confession."

I run my thumbnail through the super glue I applied to it so many years ago.

"It opens?" she asks, sounding astonished.

When the glue releases, I turn the locket around so she can read the inscription.

"I never knew how to tell you. I didn't want to risk losing you with my own selfishness."

"You're my ever after," she reads out loud, her eyes beginning to glisten with tears. "Cash, you gave me this necklace years ago."

"I need to get you home," I tell her, my body responding in a way that might bring in those camera crews Madison mentioned, now that I understand the look in her pretty eyes.

I clench my hands into fists when she climbs up into my truck, wondering if I'll ever stop watching her thighs with a hunger inside of me that I can barely contain.

God, I sure as hell hope I never do.

Chapter 40

Adalynn

Nerves make my hands tremble, but even pushing them between my knees on the drive back to his house doesn't help.

Despite how I reacted, Madison helped me today.

As we turn on the road to Cash's house, I try my best to not feel the regret that's threatening. We have lost so much time. I can't help but imagine what our lives would look like right now had either of us just spoken up about how we felt.

"Ads?"

I look over at him, realizing we're parked outside of his house.

"I think it happened exactly how it was supposed to," he says, his eyes soft and understanding.

"How can you know what I'm thinking now but you never did before?"

He takes a deep breath, but instead of responding, he climbs out and makes his way around the hood of the truck to open my door.

"Come inside with me," he says, offering me his hand.

I don't hesitate for a second, taking it in mine.

"I think," he says after he closes the passenger side door behind me. "That I saw a hint of it after that dance your freshman year."

"And you didn't say anything? You left for college and I was so lost without you."

"I would've gone to jail, Ads. Our age difference wasn't okay then. By the time I came back to town for summer break, you had these shields up."

I step to the side as he unlocks his front door.

"I figured you had come to your senses, that you realized liking the little orphan boy was beneath you."

I freeze only a single step inside his house. “I never saw you that way, ever, Cash.”

He takes a deep breath, but I can still see in his eyes that he’s still not sure that I don’t feel that way now.

“I love you,” I tell him. “I’ve always loved you. I might not have known exactly how to do that the right way when I was younger, but I know what I feel now.”

He looks... relieved, as if he was still struggling with doubt.

“And you’re worthy,” I continue, walking closer and wrapping my arms around him. “And if you want to be a father, then I think you’ll be a great one.”

There’s a certain level of doubt I can read on his face, but he doesn’t argue with me.

There’s no hesitation when I lean forward for a kiss. It’s passion-filled, soft, and slow. It’s as if we’re finally realizing that we don’t have to pack a little of everything into every single second we’re together because we’ll get to do this today, tomorrow, and every other day we’re given the privilege to walk the earth.

The kisses are binding, promises of the future we’re agreeing to build together.

Tears sting my eyes before rolling down my cheeks and flavoring our kiss.

“Hey,” he says, pulling back and swiping a thumb over the trail of tears on my face.

“Is this real?” I ask, my voice a little broken, my fear a tangible thing in my chest.

“So real,” he vows. “I hate the wasted time. I’m sorry I was a coward.”

“Let’s not live with regret. We can just make up for lost time.”

He pulls me tightly to his chest, and I know he’s in the same mindset as me when his erection throbs against my lower

belly.

“That sounds a lot like we’re not going to work tomorrow.”

“I’m feeling a little under the weather,” I say, faking a cough.

“No one in town would believe it, especially after that show we put on in the middle of town.”

I do my best not to feel embarrassed, but my cheeks still begin to warm.

“What do you think they’d say if they knew how well you took my cock?”

I suck in a hiss of air, my body tuning in immediately to his words.

“How did you—”

“Do you really think I’d stop reading the series? I went back and started from the beginning, waiting for the eighth book to release.”

“Next week,” I say, moaning when he tilts my head to the side, his lips roaming down my neck.

“We can read it together,” he offers. “But today, we’re just us. We’re not performing scenes out of a book.”

“Yes,” I say, the word sounding more like a whimper.

His hands roam my body, squeezing my breasts until I gasp from the pressure, before moving on and tracing a wandering finger up my thigh as he lifts my dress. He brushes his finger over the slickened front of my panties before letting my dress fall back around my thighs and reaching for the zipper on the back.

“I get to do this every day?” he asks, a heightened level of awe in his voice when I lift my arms over my head so he can pull my dress off me.

I nod, biting my lip because I wasn’t exactly prepared to get naked in front of anyone today. My bra and panties don’t match. I’m dressed for comfort, not seduction, but it doesn’t

seem to make any difference to him. He runs his eyes over every visible inch of me, his hand absently gripping his erection over his jeans.

“You are perfect,” he says, wonderment in his tone.

“Have you been with anyone since—”

“No, Adalynn, and as crazy as it sounds, I haven’t been with anyone since college except you.”

“You don’t have to lie. I understand that you’re a man with needs and you—”

He presses a finger to my lips to silence me.

“What I am is a grown-ass man who has known for a very long time what I want. That’s you.”

He swallows before opening his mouth to speak again.

“I haven’t been with anyone either,” I confess, lifting my hands to clasp his face.

“Good girl,” he says, catching my hands in his and guiding them to the front of his jeans.

The time for conversation and explanations are over. We’ll get to it, but the call of our bodies’ needs are greater right now, and there will be no regret this time. We won’t have to wonder if our friendship will survive this or if we’re ruining everything. We’ve said enough to each other to know that we’re together even with the sweat drying on our skin.

“Tell me what you want,” I say, sliding my hand behind the waistband of his boxer briefs.

I feel power in the hiss of his breath and the way his jaw hangs open slightly.

“I want to fill you with cum,” he says, his tone full of gravel and need.

I smile as I lower to my knees, pulling his jeans over his hips and down his legs as I go.

“That’s not where I’ll be coming, Adalynn. Now go to my room before I bend you over and fuck you on the arm of

the sofa.”

I let my eyes drift to his couch, but he presses a finger to my cheek, urging my eyes back to his.

“Not today, baby. My bed, Adalynn, now.”

He takes a step back, giving me room to walk past him, and I feel his eyes burning my skin all the way down his short hallway. I walk slower, giving him a show as I hear the thud of his boots hit the floor then the sound of his jeans and boxer briefs rustling as he pulls them off. I turn to look at him over my shoulder but I’m met with the heat of his body behind mine when I cross the threshold into his room.

“Is there anything I need to know before we do this?”

I turn to face him, my brows drawing in. “What do you mean?”

“Are there any restrictions right now? With the baby?”

“I need to cut back on caffeine. I’m not supposed to have deli meats. There’s surprisingly a lot of mercury in—”

“I will learn everything I need to know about your pregnancy, Ads, I swear. Right now, I need to know how hard I can fuck you.”

I lick my lower lip, a thrill running through every cell in my body before I speak.

“You can fuck me as hard as I need you to.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, with a devious smile I’m praying I’ll get to see every day. “Now lie back on the bed so I can get that pussy wet.”

The talented man makes me see stars twice before he ever climbs on top of me. I beg him for more, plead with him to take me harder, and he obliges, sweat coating his tan skin before he grunts his release.

“I want to spend the rest of my life holding you in my arms like this,” he says after our heart rates slow.

I snuggle in deeper against his chest.

“I’ve never wanted anything more,” I confess.

I know we have a million and one things to talk about. We have so many things to get off our chests, but I know there’s nothing he can say about the past that will change the trajectory of our future.

I press a kiss to his chest and relish the way his fingers tangle in my hair.

“Do you think our son will have your red hair?”

“You’re making a lot of assumptions. I’m hoping we have twin boys.”

He takes in a deep breath before speaking. “I thought Donnie was going to rip my head off.”

“I did too. You weren’t the only one holding their breath when he approached. How do you think he’s going to react when you tell him I’m pregnant?”

He freezes under me. “Do we tell them the truth, about the sperm donor part I mean?”

I press my palms to his chest so I can look down at him. “It’s a unique story, don’t you think?”

“It is,” he quickly agrees. “But I don’t know if it’s one we’re going to want to relay over and over.”

“We don’t have to make that decision right now,” I tell him, climbing over his body and situating myself exactly where I need him for round two of many.

Chapter 41

Cash

“What’s going on?” I hear Adalynn ask from her mom’s front door.

“We’re here for dinner.” That’s Madison’s voice. As many times as I shared a meal with these people, Madison hasn’t been here for one since right after they graduated high school.

“I don’t like surprises,” Adalynn says, but Madison just chuckles.

Chase is right behind her when they round the corner into the living room. I shake his hand, giving him a cordial greeting. We’re here to tell her family about us being together and about the baby. Donnie and Ronnie already know about the relationship, but not the baby. Their grace and acceptance may tip in the other direction when they find out their unmarried sister is pregnant.

Adalynn spoke with me about it at length last night. She also told me about the promise Madison made to her to not let her back out when she got cold feet, which happened that day she went to the clinic for her fertilization. It almost didn’t happen. She was afraid when I found out that I’d be livid. Even though she was doing it for herself and not me, I was on her mind.

I let my eyes follow her across the room, my cock threatening to stiffen at the slight hitch in her step. We’ve been incapable of keeping our hands off each other, and I’ve already scoped out her childhood bedroom to see if there’s a chance to sneak up there with her at some point in the evening.

Before she can make her way across the room, Donnie walks into the living room.

“Dad needs you for something,” he tells Adalynn, never halting his stride in my direction.

He looks over his shoulder, watching my girl leave the room in search of her dad before leaning in really close to me.

“Listen, I know exactly how feral I’d be watching my pregnant woman, but you need to keep that shit in check right now. That’s my little sister you’re eye fucking.”

Before I can ask him how he knows, he claps me on my back hard enough to almost make me fall on my face before walking away.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re sitting down to a meal, a little more crammed at the table than usual with the addition of two more people. Adalynn is trembling with nerves beside me. We had a game plan. This is her family, so she felt as if she should be the one to tell them, but with the way she’s about to vibrate out of her chair, I get the feeling she’s getting cold feet.

“It’s always great to see you, Madison,” Robin says, but there’s a hint of confusion in her voice.

It doesn’t surprise me that Madison is here, and when she raises her eyebrows at Adalynn, I know this is just one more facet of that promise of support.

Adalynn shakes her head softly, earning a small smile from her friend.

“Adalynn and Cash have finally figured out they’re both madly in love with each other,” Madison blurts. Chase frowns from beside her.

I want to chastise her, but when yips of joy float around the table, Adalynn relaxes a little, a bright smile on her face.

Charlie and Donald Sr. stand and shake my hand. I have to stand to get hugs from Robin and Gina.

“We’re also having a baby,” Adalynn says, forcing the entire room into silence.

She looks on the verge of tears as she makes eye contact with her mom and dad.

“A baby?” Gina asks, her hand brushing the base of her throat.

Adalynn swallows as she nods.

“I’m going to a grandma?” Gina asks, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Can she call me Glam-ma?” Robin asks.

A huff of laughter escapes my girl’s lips as she nods and darts away the tears from her eyes.

“She?” Donald Sr. scoffs. “It’s going to be a boy, if not two.”

“Hell yeah,” both Donnie and Ronnie say at the same time.

I feel the love all over again when another round of handshakes and hugs come my way. There may come a time when we’re comfortable enough to tell the real story, but right now, I think the pain of almost losing each other over our own stupidity is still a little too raw.

We know we’ll be together forever because there’s just no surviving if we aren’t. But we need to work on building those bonds after so long of not even talking to each other.

Thankfully, we have a lot of time before the baby gets here to strengthen every aspect of our connection.

“And they’re getting married at the Graves Estate,” Madison adds.

I look at Madison before looking at Adalynn. My girl looks just as shocked when her eyes find mine. She shrugs, giving me a little nod, and all I can do is smile.

“It looks like we’re getting married at the Graves Estate,” I confirm.

Eventually, all the surprises are over and we can finally settle back into our meal, the conversation taking a different turn than it would’ve originally.

I’m passing the mashed potatoes to Donnie when my phone rings.

I pull my cell from my pocket, and excuse myself from the table, seeing that it’s Chandler.

I try not to let fear develop in my chest, but the man is on shift tonight and he doesn't bother me with issues. He's more of an ask forgiveness than ask permission kind of guy. It's something we're working on.

"Chief?" he says when the call connects.

"What's wrong, Chandler?"

"I have Walker Conroy in custody."

My chest clenches with guilt, thinking it might have something to do with the position I put him in with that bottle of whiskey nearly two months ago.

"He says Adalynn sent him to Claire Kennedy's house, but she called the police when she found him lurking around in her backyard."

"I wasn't lurking," Walker snaps at Chandler, loud enough that I can hear him.

"You were trying to steal Larkin's ride-on car." That has to be Claire.

"Hold on," I tell him with a sigh, poking my head back into the dining room. "Did you send Walker over to Claire's to have him steal a ride-on car?"

Adalynn chews her bottom lip before speaking and I already know this is going to be a mess. She loves to help everyone, but sometimes her help causes more issues than it fixes.

"He's there to put a new battery in it," Adalynn says. "Did he do it right now? He wasn't supposed to be there until after nine."

"I wasn't going to come to her house after dark," I hear Walker say on the other end of the line, telling me that Chandler has our call on speakerphone. "That's how you get shot."

"Do you still want to press charges?" Chandler asks.

"If that's what it takes to get people in this town to stop getting in my business," Claire says.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, mouthing an apology to Gina and Robin when they glare at me. “Give me ten minutes. I’m coming.”

“You,” I tell Adalynn, pointing at her. “Let’s go.”

Much to my surprise, neither Donnie nor Ronnie stand up and tell me to be more respectful of their sister.

The glint in her eyes as she wipes her mouth with her napkin before standing tells me she wants to be disrespected a little.

I just know that the rest of my life is going to be filled with more fun and pleasure than I can ever imagine.

THE END

Grab Walker and Claire’s [HERE!](#)

(With a Grain of Salt)

Synopsis:

There are certain rules that make the widows of servicemen off-limits.

As a veteran, I’m well aware that Claire Kennedy is forbidden.

It’s why I’ve kept as much distance between the two of us as I can manage in our small town.

When she came looking for a job at my bar, I refused to hire her.

That didn’t stop the gorgeous spitfire from showing up, putting on an apron, and getting to work one day while I was gone.

Not only is she good at tending bar, she’s also an expert at keeping me distracted.

Being her boss doesn’t matter when she catches me in her backyard.

Instead of asking me what I’m doing, she calls the cops.

Even with the threat of going to jail, I find myself smiling at her.

I knew she was going to be trouble the day she came to town.

Yet, I just can't seem to stay away.

Want to stay up to date on all the happenings in Lindell, Texas?

Join the Facebook group [HERE!](#)

Other Books in the Same World

[Hale Series](#)

[Cerberus MC Series](#)

[Ravens Ruin MC Series](#)

[Blackbridge Security Series](#)

[Mission Mercenaries Series](#)

Social Media Links

[FB Author Page](#)

[FB Author Group](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[BookBub](#)

[Newsletter](#)

OTHER BOOKS FROM MARIE
JAMES

Blackbridge Security.

Hostile Territory

Shot in the Dark

Contingency Plan

Truth Be Told

Calculated Risk

Heroic Measures

Sleight of Hand

Controlled Burn

Cease Fire

Crossing Borders

Blackbridge Security Box Set 1

Blackbridge Security Box Set 2

Blackbridge Security Box Set 3

Standalones

Crowd Pleaser

Macon

We Said Forever

More Than a Memory.

Mission Mercenaries Series

[Lessons Learned](#)

[Mistakes Made](#)

[Bridges Burned](#)

[Depravity Delivered](#)

[Redemption Refused](#)

Cole Brothers Series

[Love Me Like That](#)

[Teach Me Like That](#)

Cerberus MC

[Kincaid: Cerberus MC Book 1](#)

[Kid: Cerberus MC Book 2](#)

[Shadow: Cerberus MC Book 3](#)

[Dominic: Cerberus MC Book 4](#)

[Snatch: Cerberus MC Book 5](#)

[Lawson: Cerberus MC Book 6](#)

[Hound: Cerberus MC Book 7](#)

[Griffin: Cerberus MC Book 8](#)

[Samson: Cerberus MC Book 9](#)

[Tug: Cerberus MC Book 10](#)

[Scooter: Cerberus MC Book 11](#)

[Cannon: Cerberus MC Book 12](#)

[Rocker: Cerberus MC Book 13](#)

[Colton: Cerberus MC Book 14](#)

[Drew: Cerberus MC Book 15](#)

[Jinx: Cerberus MC Book 16](#)

[Thumper: Cerberus MC Book 17](#)

[Apollo: Cerberus MC Book 18](#)

[Legend: Cerberus MC Book 19](#)

[Grinch: Cerberus MC Book 20](#)

[Harley: Cerberus MC Book 21](#)

[A Very Cerberus Christmas](#)

[Landon: Cerberus MC Book 22](#)

[Spade: Cerberus MC Book 23](#)

[Aro: Cerberus MC Book 24](#)

[Boomer: Cerberus MC Book 25](#)

[Ugly: Cerberus MC Book 26](#)

[Bishop: Cerberus MC Book 27](#)

[Legacy: Cerberus MC Book 28](#)

[Stormy: Cerberus MC Book 29](#)

[Oracle: Cerberus MC Book 30](#)

[Newton: Cerberus MC Book 31](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 1](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 2](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 3](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 4](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 5](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 6](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 7](#)

[Cerberus MC Box Set 8](#)

Ravens Ruin MC

[Desperate Beginnings: Prequel](#)

Grab it for free [HERE!](#)

Book 1: [Sins of the Father](#)

Book 2: [Luck of the Devil](#)

Book 3: [Dancing with the Devil](#)

MM Romance

[Grinder](#)

[Taunting Tony](#)

Westover Prep Series

(bully/enemies to lovers romance)

[One-Eighty](#)

[Catch Twenty-Two](#)

Hale Series

Coming to Hale
Begging for Hale
Hot as Hale
To Hale and Back

Lindell

Back Against the Wall
Easier Said than Done
With a Grain of Salt