

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, about to kiss. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a dark top. The man has a beard and is shirtless. They are set against a background of a snowy winter landscape with evergreen trees and a wooden cabin with a glowing window. The overall mood is warm and intimate.

*I love him.
But I hate him
more...*

Holiday *Do Us* *Part*

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Cover Design: All By Design

Photo: Adobe Stock

Editor: Novel Mechanic

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To Jennifer:

There may not be alien Santa's, but there *is* a cabin and a whole lot of
"wood"...

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Easton Cruz was my world.

Our souls collided the day he walked into that bar. His presence made me whole in a way I hadn't been before. He was my forever.

Until one day, he wasn't.

The beautiful life we were starting to create was destroyed by betrayal. And after two long years, I was still trying to move on and put my shattered pieces from his deception back together.

Except when the man you hate haunts your dreams, moving on is impossible.

Maybe that's why my friends tricked me into going for a secluded weekend in the woods. A vacation to heal and finally move on.

But this trip was anything but serene and healing. It was more like a nightmare. I vowed never to let him in enough to hurt me again. Because I hated him.

The problem is, I loved him more...

Sometimes goodbye is a second chance.

-Shinedown

Chapter One

Callie

I always imagined how I would die. A thrill-seeking bungy jumping accident. Meh, there's not a bone of thrill in my body. Being attacked by a shark while deep-sea scuba diving. Scratch that. I hate water. Even something as simple as being in my husband's arms at the frail age of ninety. I'd have to have a husband first, let alone a boyfriend, for that to happen.

But I never imagined complete boredom would be the death of me.

As I stare across the table at my blind date, listening to him list the ingredients of his mother's meatloaf, I realize that being eaten by a shark would have been better.

"You should come over for meatloaf night. Sometimes, when I'm good, she adds nutmeg to it. Gives it a super sweet taste. But don't tell her I told you her secret ingredient. She'd have to kill you."

"Oh, I would *never*," I say because if I ever find myself at his mother's house, eating said meatloaf, the bigger topic would be how to clean blood out of her tablecloth because I would have stabbed a fork into my jugular before my first bite.

It's official. I'm done with dating sites. I'm done with dating, period. Done pretending I'm not destined to become anything but a single, lonely wallflower and I should start investing in a colony of cats now.

"Wow, this key lime pie is pretty good. Not as good as my mom's. She likes to splash a bit of—"

My phone, set to the highest volume, goes off right on time. "Oh, shoot. Hold that thought." I look at my screen to see Tory's goofy face. "Hey Tory, what's up?"

"Ring-a-ling! Tell me he's the one."

"Oh, my God. Is he okay?"

"Wow, so it's bad?"

"Oh, that's awful. What hospital did they take him to?"

"Damn. I really thought this dude was the one."

"Yes, of course. I'm on a date, but I'm sure he'll understand."

"That poor dude—"

I hang up on Tory. "I'm so sorry. Something happened to a friend, and I need to go. Hope you understand. I had a *great* time, though." I place my napkin on the table and stand, grabbing my purse. "Thanks again for dinner. I'll call you." And I turn to rush out of there.

"Hey, before you leave, I think your part of the meal came out to thirty-seven dollars and forty-two cents. I already divided the tip."

I plow through the doors of Ray's Bar, brushing the snow off my jacket. The dive bar is as divey as it gets, but they still manage to spruce it up with lights for the holiday season. I look around the bar and spot Tory and Ashley at our regular pub table. Ashley sees me first, and her lips downward-dog into a sad

face. When Tory turns, her eyes light up with humor. “Man, we were sitting here planning your engagement party. What happened?”

I flick Tory off and take the empty seat next to Ash. “We never would’ve worked out because I’m pretty sure he’s in love with his *mother* and masturbates to her meatloaf on the daily.”

Ashley’s nose scrunches while Tory lets off an obnoxious laugh. “I mean, is his mom good-looking? And I can’t imagine boinking a meatloaf would be enjoyable. Jamming your dick into the mushy loaf—”

“I said *to* it, not *in* it—it doesn’t matter. Steve was a complete no, and as if the date could get any worse, he made me go Dutch on the bill.”

“No,” Ashley gasps.

“Yeah! Not to mention, he added a slice of key lime pie to take home to his mother, and it *accidentally* was put on my part of the bill!”

Tory leans back in her chair, taking a long sip of her vodka tonic. “Damn. That’s ruthless.”

“Tell me about it.” I wave to Sherry, our favorite waitress, who gives me the thumbs-up that my espresso martini is on the way. “I’m officially done with those dating sites.”

“Oh, don’t give up, Cal. Mr. Right is out there.”

“I’m pretty sure Mr. Right is a fictional character in one of your romance books and doesn’t truly exist. At least not for me.” Gotta love a friend who thinks that happily ever afters grow on trees. “I’m claiming spinsterhood. Mark it right now.”

“Ew, gross,” Tory says.

“No way. Think about it—no more shaving. I can have hairy legs and pits if I want. Screw dieting and working out. My future cats won’t judge me. And I don’t have to share TV time with anyone!”

Tory is gaping at me, horrified. Ashley looks at me with sympathetic eyes, probably itching to give me a pity hug. I look around, needing to know where that damn martini is.

“Okay, so I didn’t want to say it, but after that comment, I feel like the intervention is needed.” Tory looks over at Ashley, and they exchange a secret nod.

“What?” My eyes narrow on my two best friends. “What are you two conspiring about now? If this is some sort of plan to get me to another swinger’s club again, I will murder you both—”

“That was *not* my idea, for the record,” Ashley rushes out. Tory doesn’t bother denying it, that bitch. “We just... we just want you to be happy. You’ve been in this slump ever since—”

“Don’t you dare say it,” I snap. That is the *last* thing I need tonight.

“But it’s true! Ever since—”

“Say his name, and you both die.”

Tory waves me off. “You can’t hurt a fly. Ashley’s right. Ever since the breakup with Easton, you haven’t been yourself. And it’s been almost two years.”

Easton Cruz.

The tattooed bad boy on a bike, who oozes sex appeal and danger, a.k.a. my asshole ex. And I cannot stress the word, *asshole* enough. “Two years of greatness,” I add.

Tory rolls her eyes. “You still wear his T-shirt to bed.”

“That was *one* time. I was doing laundry, and it was the only thing not dirty. I’ve burned it since.”

“And the CD he made you that you *still* play in your car?”

“I’m not going to stop listening to my favorite music just because he made

it for me.”

Tory shakes her head. “Dare I bring up the photo you still have on the fridge?”

I throw my hands up, annoyed with my soon-to-be ex-friends. “It’s the only photo I have of Jake. I loved his dog! He was technically my dog for a whole year.” Coming here was a bad idea. My friends are supposed to support me after the worst blind date on the planet, and instead, they’re pointing out what a pathetic loser I am. Which they are one hundred percent spot on. “You know what. I’m out of here—”

“Oh, sit down.”

“No, I’m leaving.”

“Before you drink your martini?”

Right then, Sherry arrives with my drink. Dammit. No one abandons a martini. “I’m leaving after I slam this.”

“Great, so while you do that, we have a proposition for you.”

I take the first frothy sip of my martini and moan into my glass. There is nothing on earth better than a perfectly shaken martini. “I told you, I’m not going to those wanderlust retreats again either.”

“Ew, no. That was super weird and totally not what the pamphlet described.”

“What are you two up to?” This never ends well for me. “Since I’m zero and seven with your propositions, one I’m still finishing community service on, I’m going to assume my answer to whatever you’re proposing will be a hell no.”

“We got you a vacation,” Ashley blurts out.

“A vacation,” I repeat. I look over at Ashley. She seems suddenly nervous.

“Yeah!” Ashley digs into her purse and spreads a pamphlet across the pub

table. “Look how cute this is? It’s a little rental cabin in the woods.”

I look at my two friends, wondering if they’re high as well as drunk. “You bought me a vacation to a cabin in the woods in the middle of nowhere.” I have to say that out loud to really process the whole, what the actual *fuck* were they thinking?

“Yeah, dude, why do you keep repeating us?”

“Because I’m just confused as to why you think I need a vacation.”

“Well, for starters—”

“Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t need a vacation. I need to not go on bad dates. It’s fine. I’m already over it—”

“We say otherwise,” Tory cuts me off, and I narrow my eyes at her. “Cal, your mood swings and depression, for starters, say that you need exactly that. Not to mention your sad, lonely snatch—ow!” Ash slaps her shoulder. “We think it would be best if you took some time away. Figure things out.”

“And what exactly am I figuring out that requires me to travel to the middle of nowhere? Please tell me how, if my sad, lonely snatch is the issue, I’m going to fix her there. I mean, what,” I laugh. “Did you set me up on a blind date with a bear? Oh, wait! Does this cabin come with a room of pain? Will I realize that I’m not finding the one because I’m really into domination? Whips and—”

“See, this is your problem,” Tory starts. “Pre-Easton, Callie. As in before Easton. You used to be so upbeat. Nothing ever bothered you, and you were such a fun time.”

“She was fun during Easton, too,” Ashley chimes in.

I glare at her as Tory goes on. “Then there was a post-Easton, where all you did was hole yourself up in your apartment with this pessimistic look on life

and love and literally anything you could complain about because you got your heart broken.”

“Well, get *your* heart broken sometime, and maybe you’ll understand.” I slam my martini and wave to Sherry for another. I don’t understand why they’re still bringing Easton up after a year and a half. He’s old news. I moved on from him ages ago.

“Girl, that’s not my point. My *point* is that we want pre-Easton Callie back.”

“You have her. She’s right here drinking her martini.” Or was. Where’s that next round?

“No, honey. This is post-Easton.”

“Pre,” I snap back at Ash.

“Post,” Tory says.

“Pre—!”

“Oh Jesus Almighty, you need a fucking vacation, Callie. Whether you think so or not, you need to take some time off. Go out to the cabin. Enjoy the wilderness. Refresh. Find yourself. Because this Callie? She’s still drowning. We love you. This is us looking out for you because we know you aren’t looking out for yourself.”

I can’t believe they are coming at me like this. “You guys are serious?”

“Yes,” Tory and Ashley reply together.

Unbelievable. I shake my head. “Well, even if I wanted to, I can’t. I’m swamped with work. And my yearly review is coming up. It’s not a good time to take a vacation. Especially around the holidays.”

“You’re a freelance graphic designer. And you work from home. Which means you can work anywhere.”

Dammit, they got me there. I stare at the pamphlet. A cabin in the woods.

They couldn't have sent me to a beach? Paris? A Taylor Swift concert? "Fine, you're right. I know things haven't been ideal for me. Life didn't work out the way I planned. But I'm *totally* cool about it. I don't need to seclude myself in the middle of nowhere to fix my life. I just need my friends and another espresso martini, and I'll be fine."

Both girls stare back at me skeptically. "I'm serious. I don't need this." Still staring. "I'm not going on this vacation!"

Chapter Two

Callie

“**V**acation, my ass,” I grumble, trying to see through my blizzard-covered windshield. Cringy holiday music plays from the only station that works when a man on the radio warns his listeners of the pending snowstorm of the year and to stay indoors if possible. “I would have loved to, *Grant*, but I have sucky friends,” I say to my radio. Who the hell sends their friend to a cabin in the woods during a snowstorm? My two ex-best friends, that’s who.

I swear, this whole *you need a vacation* talk was a setup. Tory and Ashley could have just told me they were sick of me complaining without making me leave my comfy apartment. My blind date stories *were* horrid. Instead, they sent me to commune with the wildlife. In a blizzard, nonetheless. I still don’t know how they got me to agree to this. *You said yes after six martinis and got to opt out of your bar tab*. Low blow. I *am* a sucker for free drinks.

But for real! What has been so bad about my life that they think I need a reset? People go through bad breakups all the time. It takes time to get back on your feet. Find love again. Or a decent date. Or, at this point, just sex!

Mmm... sex. To feel a man's hands on me. Work my body into a frenzy until I see stars. Shit, at this point, I'd take a rub down from a homeless man if it got me off.

Back to the issue at hand. They act like Easton broke me. Yeah, it hurt, but I survived. I did the whole meditation thing and spent half a year finding my zen. It didn't work. Neither did the voodoo doll I bought off Etsy. But it helped me overcome the anger and betrayal. I was on cloud nine before, thinking I was the luckiest girl to have a man who made my head spin.

Easton Cruz was my world. Looks never defined a man for me, but Easton, Lord Almighty, was the pure definition of gorgeous. I'm talkin' sex on a stick, lickin' good time. He was tall, with thick black hair that was always wild, and God, I loved running my fingers through it. His electric blue eyes were so intense. It's like he constantly gave me access into his soul. And his body, ugh. Toned, sculpted, and painted in an array of artful tattoos.

I sigh, remembering how lovely he looked naked, lying on my bed with his mysterious smile.

And then I remember what an asshole he is.

He may have been the hottest guy on this planet, but he was a liar and a cheat. The only reason I never wrote a bad review about the voodoo doll was because he did kind of disappear. Not that I killed him. I don't think. That's still to be determined. But one day, he just stopped calling. Stopped trying to get me to listen to his excuses. And as much as I wanted him to fall off the face of the earth, the second he sorta did, it just made me worse off.

But days turned into weeks, then months, and eventually, Easton Cruz was a part of my past. I'd moved on. Started to date again and rebuild what he had broken. And I've been a ray of sunshine ever since.

"Maybe they're the problem," I suggest out loud since I'm the only one in

the vehicle or anywhere else because everyone has taken Grant's advice. What's done is done. I agreed to this stupid life timeout. I just need to make the best of it. Get to the cabin, crack open a bottle of wine, light a fire, and watch the beautiful snowflakes fall. It will be peaceful and quiet. . . and I'll probably want to blow my brains out because I *hate the quiet!*

"Ugh!" That's it. Hate texts wait for no one. I grab my phone, but it slips between the seats. "Dammit," I grunt, trying to keep my eye on however much of the road I can see, and bend to grab my phone. "Come on." It's at the tip of my fingers. I shimmy it between my thumb and index finger when I hit a patch of ice. My tires skid, and I grip the steering as I slide across the road.

My car does an impressive three-sixty spin, once, twice, three times—Jesus, there's a reason I don't do rollercoasters—until I bash into a large snowbank. It takes me a minute to gather myself. I'm in one piece, so that's good. I turn the ignition, but my car doesn't start. "Oh, don't you dare." I turn it again but nothing.

"Why, why, *why?*" I yell. I kick my feet and slap my steering wheel. When I gather a sliver of normalcy, I go for my phone and click on my roadside app, realizing I have no service. Waving my hand in all directions, I wait for a bar to appear. "Come on, baby. Give me one. . ." When that doesn't work, I try to roll down my window, but nothing happens since the car is off. "This seriously *cannot* be happening to me right now." I throw myself back in my seat. What the hell do I do now?

The directions show the cabin's only a mile away. But I am *not* walking a mile in a blizzard. Someone will drive by. They'll see my car and help me. I just have to wait.

Only a few minutes pass when I start to see my breath. My windows are

frosting over, and I decide that my only two options are to freeze to death in my car or out there attempting to walk a mile through all this.

“Tory and Ashley, you two are dead to me!” I curse my best friends. I gather my purse, laptop bag, and a bottle of wine from my bag of groceries. A gust of wind slaps my face when I open my car door. I quickly shut it. “Yep. I’ll just freeze in here. There’s no way I’ll make it. I’m too short. Not enough meat on my bones to keep me warm. And I have zero survival skills.”

But I also know that if I die here, I won’t be able to make it home and murder the two people who put me in this predicament. If *that* doesn’t give me the drive to succeed, I don’t know what else will. I grab my thick scarf and slip on two sweaters under my winter coat. A mile isn’t that far. I was able to run it in under nine minutes in high school. I can walk it in a snowstorm just as quickly. Taking one last look at my directions, I memorize the streets. Left on Tucker Trail. Over the bridge, take a left on Weber Way. The cabin should be just over the bend. I got this. Tucking my phone into my jacket pocket, I wish myself luck and venture into the storm.

By the time I hit the bend, I can’t feel my body and probably resemble the abominable snowman. I’ve debated giving up over a dozen times. Popping that wine bottle and drinking until I turn into an icicle. Good thing my rage keeps me going. When I think my legs are about to snap off, the cabin comes into view. Smoke pours from the chimney, and lights shine from the windows.

“Oh, thank God,” I praise, pushing my legs to walk faster. The second I get inside, I’m going to strip naked and soak in the heat from the fire. I cry out in relief when I hit the porch. My thighs burn with each step I take, and I make it to the door, reaching for my phone to get the code for the lockbox. I dig into my pocket. My now empty pocket. “No. . .” I search them thoroughly,

but they're both empty. Maybe I put it in a different pocket. It's possible. My brain is kind of frozen. I unzip my jacket and search my inner pockets, but nothing. "You have to be kidding me!" I yell. Seriously, this day cannot get any worse.

The door to the cabin suddenly opens. Startling, I jump back. Oh, thank God, the owner is still here. "Oh my god, thank you, my car—The *fuck*?"

"Cal?" Okay, maybe I did die on the walk, and now I'm having some out-of-body experience, wandering between realms because. . . no. "What are you doing here?" He looks at me, then behind me, then back at me. "Did you walk here in the blizzard?"

The fury thaws out my brain, and when I realize the situation I'm in, I'm still may half frozen, but I'm also fucking steaming. "I'm going to KILL THEM!" I scream at the top of my lungs, twist on my heels, and stomp back down the steps.

"Callie, wait."

I do *not* wait. I trek back through the snow. "Dead. So fucking dead."

"Callie, stop. It's a fucking blizzard out here."

"A measly blizzard isn't going to stop me," I say, my teeth chattering.

"Jesus, just stop."

"NO! Go away, you nuisance." How could they do this to me? Angry tears begin to fall, only to freeze on my cheeks. I continue to lift my legs over the pile of snow, but each step becomes heavier. I lift my right leg and my left cramps. I trip, falling forward.

"Hey, I got you," Easton says, his arms hooking around my waist.

"Let me go! This was a misunderstanding. I have people to kill."

"You can go on your murder spree once you get warm. Come on." He carries me back up the steps into the warm and cozy cabin. He sets me down

slowly, allowing me to test whether my legs work.

“I’m fine,” I snap and push him away.

“Sure, whatever.” He puts his hands up and allows me to gather my bearings.

“If I can just use your cell phone, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Don’t have a cell.”

“Who doesn’t have a cell—you know what, whatever, a landline then.”

“Phones are down. If you haven’t noticed, there’s a blizzard out there.”

“Yeah, thanks for the update. I noticed. I also noticed that you still seem to be an asshole. Thanks for the hospitality, *not*. Goodbye.” I turn and walk toward the door.

“And where exactly do you think you’re going?”

“The hell away from you.”

“Before you run away, want to explain how you got here?”

I whip around. Because I was half frozen and in shock before, I failed to notice that he’s shirtless, wearing only a pair of worn jeans. My eyes follow the trail of ink down his sculpted abs to the happy trail I used to love. “I—I. . .” God, I hate how beautiful he still is. But thankfully, that reminds me that I hate him. “No, I don’t.” I rush toward the door.

“And where exactly are you walking off to? You showed up looking like a snowball, frozen to the bone. It’s only getting worse out there.”

“I’ll be just fine.” I open the door, and a blast of cold slaps me in the face. I quickly shut the door.

“Cal.”

“Just don’t. I need a minute.” Or a lifetime to try and understand why they would do this to me. My teeth chatter, and my hands shake.

“You need to take your clothes off.”

I whip around. “Oh, don’t you dare think. . . You come near me, and I’ll stab your eyes out.”

Easton throws his hands up. “Wasn’t planning on it, babe.”

“And don’t you dare call me *babe*. I’m here for reasons I cannot say out loud because I might explode in a rage of fury. But I’ll be out of your hair soon, and we will never see each other again.”

He takes a step closer. “I was just going to offer to take your jacket. You’re defrosting and leaving a puddle in my living room.”

I look down, and I am, in fact, standing in a pool of water. “Oh, sorry.”

“I’m just gonna go get some towels. Please don’t bolt on me. I’m not in the mood to search for your frozen body in the woods tonight.” I open my mouth to yell something snarky, but he disappears down the hallway. I debate defying him, but the warmth of the fire holds me captive. When he returns, I’ve slid off my jacket and boots and placed them by the front door.

“Here.” He hands me a shirt and a pair of oversized sweatpants. “You can wear them until your clothes dry.” I want to take them and shove them down his throat, but I’m desperate to feel my toes again. I snatch them out of his hands and walk down the hall. I open three doors until he says, “You passed it. Second door on the left.” I storm back and disappear into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

“What the hell?” This can’t be happening. I slap myself. “Ow!”

“Everything okay?”

“Yes. You open that door, and I will throat punch you.” I rest my palms on the sink and bow my head. I try to take a few breaths to calm my erratic heartbeat, but it doesn’t do anything. When I raise my eyes to the mirror, I groan in horror. My cheeks and nose are bright red, my lips are a pretty shade

of blue, and my mascara is smeared down my face. “Oh my god, someone, just kill me right now. This is not *happening to me right now!*”

There’s a knock on the door. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Actually, no! I’m not! I’m standing in a cabin that is supposed to be MY vacation cabin. Instead, my asshole ex, who I wished to never see again, opens the door and now I don’t know how to rewind time and never agree to this stupid vacation in the first place because this is stupid and how do I make this floor *swallow me up?*” If things couldn’t get any worse, I start to cry. And not a cute cry. A good ole ugly cry.

“Open the door, Cal.”

“No,” I say through my broken sobs.

“Open the fucking door.” I grab the handle and fling it open, ready to punch him between the eyes when he sticks his hand out and stops me. My eyes fall to the object in his hand.

“Wh—why are you handing me that?”

“Because I know how you get when you’re upset and what you want when you are.” I stare at the full glass of red wine. My savior. My antidote. “You gonna take it, or should I—”

“Give me that.” I snatch it from his hands and allow the smooth, oaky flavor to do its magic, warming my belly and soothing my overactive heart.

“Get changed. Then we can talk.” He walks away, saying nothing more. I shut the door and struggle out of my wet clothes. I shamelessly sniff Easton’s shirt as I bring it over my head. Moaning at his signature scent, I slide it over my chest. His shirts were always so soft. Even my nipples perk at the feel of it. I step into his sweatpants, and when I look in the mirror again, I’m reminded of a girl from a long time ago. One who would wake up in one of Easton’s oversized shirts wearing the biggest smile.

Pushing down the nostalgia, I shake off the memory and clean my face. When I feel somewhat more presentable, I walk to the living room. Easton is seated by the fire with a glass of bourbon.

“When do you think the phones will be back up?”

“Not sure. Depends on how long the blizzard lasts. Then how long it takes the city to clean the road for the power company.”

“That doesn’t sound like it’ll be a quick fix.”

“Probably ’cause it isn’t.”

I could cry all over again. I cover my face. “Fuck!”

“Why you here, Cal?”

I lower my hands and say, “I can ask you the same thing. Last I checked, you were in *my* cabin.”

His laughter is anything but humorous. “Say again?”

“I know it’s been a couple years. Did you go deaf during that time?”

“I can hear just fine, babe—”

“Don’t *call* me that,” I hiss.

He shoots from his chair and invades my personal space. “Seeing that you’re in *my* cabin, I can call you whatever I want.”

“In what alternate universe do you think I would willingly show up at your cabin?”

“This one, since you’re in it.”

My rage returns. Putting my kill plan on hold for Tory and Ashley, I aim it at Easton. “Wow, still full of yourself, I see. And why would you think I would ever want to see you again?”

“To apologize for starters.”

Easton has always been a live-on-the-edge kinda guy. But this is going overboard. Because he is *asking* me to murder him. “You—you think *I* need

to apologize?”

“For starters. Then you can tell me why you’re here—”

“I’m here because I rented this place! It’s mine! So you can get out of *my* cabin, you arrogant *asshole!*”

I don’t have time to react. Easton’s arm hooks around my waist, and I’m pulled into him. His scent assaults my nostrils. At the same time, his breath skates across my cheek, and his voice whispers against my earlobe. “Look around, sweetheart. This is my cabin. Now, stop with the excuses and tell me why you’re here.”

He stares down at me, his normally bright eyes darken in intensity. They drop to my lips, and I suck in a breath. I need to push him off me. Punch him. Claw his face off. But I can’t seem to break our stare. He watches my mouth as I suck in my bottom lip, wetting it. Suddenly, the feel of him, his hands touching me, is overwhelming. He dips his head, and I know he’s going to kiss me. He could never be around me and not claim my mouth. He leans closer still. I know I’ll regret this later, but my eyelids flutter, my lips part, and I wait for his kiss. But it never comes. Just as quickly, he releases me. I stumble, my eyes shooting open as he sits in his chair by the fire and slams his drink. “Whatever. Wouldn’t be the girl I remember if you weren’t hiding.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Not mine to fuck anymore, Cal.” He leans forward, grabs the bottle, and pours a fresh drink.

“That’s *not* how I meant that—God, I hate you!”

“Then it seems we still have one thing in common.” He slams the drink, his eyes trained on me. I wonder if he’s watching my head grow in size as it prepares to explode.

“You know what. . .” That’s it. I stomp over to my boots, shove my feet into them, then grab my jacket. Throwing my purse and laptop bag over my shoulder, I snag the bottle of wine and toss open the front door. “Have a nice life. Or not, because I could care less what you do.”

I step outside, ignoring the bite in the air. I take a swig of the wine, then start my trek back to my car. The wind has picked up, and at least two more inches seem to be on the ground. “You’re fine. This is way better than being inside with that jerk.” Even though inside has heat. “You got this, Baker. You’ve endured worse.” I try to convince myself of that, but my toes are still numb from before, the damp boots not helping. I make it to the bend, and my teeth are already chattering. The snow is too high and thick, making walking almost impossible.

Each time I lift my leg, I exert too much energy. When I cross the bridge, I can barely see in front of me. “God. . . *dammit!*” I gasp and fall backward into the snow. Even if I take a small break, the car is too far. The weather is too bad. And I’m already a popsicle. “So, this is where I die,” I cry and lift the bottle to my mouth. I chug it while cursing the world and making vows. The first one is to haunt Tory and Ashley for eternity for this. “I was so close to landing that Winston and Fields account.” I sob between drinks. “That contract would have secured my rent for months. And God, all the evidence I’m leaving behind.”

Tory, Ashley, and I had a pact. If any of us suddenly bit the dust, the other two would clear all search history and inappropriate shit on our phones, laptops, and nightstand drawers. But now, with my phone lost in the woods and no one knowing I’m about to become a human popsicle, I’m screwed! Everyone will know about my perverted obsession with fictional superheroes or my weird fascination with unicorns because I swear they *are* real. “Great,

well, I hope the world knows I'm *not* allergic to the silicone that dildos are made of, and that was a one-time thing." Thank you, Google, for clarifying that rash and teaching me that buying vibrators from sketchy websites are not worth the deal, even if it was buy one get three free.

I silently pray none of my exes get wind that I secretly still stalk them on social media to make sure they aren't doing better without me. And all the porn! "Mom and Dad, I'm so sorry! I swear I'm not into furies. I was just really curious!" I sink deeper into the snow. "God, if you can hear me. Please tell my parents I love them. And to take care of Captain Jack, my pet fish." *Chug*. "Tell that one girl Melanie in college that I'm sorry. I should've befriended her instead of my sucky friends because I bet she wouldn't have done this to me." *Chug*. My hand shakes so badly I barely make my mouth and spill wine down my jacket. It freezes, and I eat the iced merlot chip. I hit the bottom of the bottle and then toss it into the snow. "Great, not even the wine is going to warm me this time." I slump further into the pile of snow and close my eyes. "So this really is it. . ."

There's the rumbling of an engine in the distance. I sigh, physically feeling like my lungs are starting to freeze over. Then, I feel pressure against my torso. I assume it's my maker bringing me home. He smells like spice and mistakes.

"Up we go." His voice is husky and familiar.

"Am I dead?" I ask, basking in the warmth of his hands, his breath.

"Not yet."

I sigh and relax, letting him carry me as my eyes close and sleep takes me.

Chapter Three

Callie

“It’s your round. And don’t try and trick me with the cheap vodka.”
“Dude, that was one time. I had like seven bucks to my name.” I
blow Tory a kiss because I totally plan on ordering her drink with the
cheaper vodka. I squeeze through the crowd and work my way up to the bar.
“Hey, Sherry. Can I get a blueberry lemon drop martini, vodka soda—with
house vodka— and a gin and tonic?”

“You can put that on my tab.”

I twist to my left to reply, but my words get caught in my throat. Holy blue
eyes. The owner of said eyes slowly looks me over, and a carefree smile
quirks his full lips as he leans against the bar. My cheeks flush, and I clear
my throat. “Well, in that case. Sherry, make that vodka top shelf.” She nods
and walks off.

“Let me guess. The blueberry martini is yours?” His voice is smooth like
melted butter.

“Why do you think that?”

“Seems to fit you.”

“And what do you know about me to know it fits?”

His eyes drop to my lips. It’s only for a second, but he returns them to mine and shrugs. “You look like you enjoy sweeter things.” He leans in. “But if I had to guess, you have a little spicy side to you, too.”

My lips part. His gaze drops again, and he watches as I slowly suck in my bottom lip. “Tell me your name.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know your name before I’m inside you later.” I couldn’t spit out my name if I wanted to. My brain malfunctions at his comment, and I can’t do anything but stare at him. “Name, babe.”

“Ca—Callie.”

He leans forward, and my entire body shivers at his warm breath against my earlobe. “Even your name’s sweet. Nice to meet you, Callie.”

He purrs my name, instantly soaking my panties. Pulling back, he grabs the beer off the bar and takes a sip.

“Are—are you going to tell me your name?” There’s even a shiver in my tone.

“Give me your phone.”

“Huh?”

“Phone, Callie.”

On autopilot, I hand the stranger my phone. He types something in and hands it back. I look down. “Easton.”

“Gonna love hearing you moan that.”

“Kind of full of yourself, aren’t you? To assume I have any interest in doing anything with you.”

A hand hooks around my waist, and I’m suddenly pressed against him. He’s a lot taller, so I have to pull my head back to keep eye contact. His eyes alone

are doing crazy things to me. “Will you stop looking at me like that?”

“Like I want to eat you alive? ’Cause I can’t. One look at you, and I’m not sure I ever plan on stoppin’.”

“You don’t know me. Literally just met me.”

“Sweetest day of my life. Now tell me, Callie,” he says with such seduction. “Tell me what I gotta do to make you mine.”

I stir awake. Snuggling into my comforter, I press my face into the pillow. A pillow that doesn’t normally smell like spice and. . . I pop up, and my eyes shoot open. “Shit.” I look around and don’t see anything familiar. My brain catches up and slaps me in the face with reality. The blizzard. The cabin. Easton fucking Cruz.

It looks like I didn’t freeze to death after all. Damn shame because it would have been better than dealing with my current situation, lying in a bed, wearing another one of his shirts and no pants. Did he undress me? That perverted piece of—I throw my legs off the bed, get up, and survey the room. Clothes are scattered, and personal belongings are on the dresser. He seriously wasted no time making himself comfortable here. Well, he has about five minutes to pack all his shit and get out.

Forgoing pants, I storm out of the bedroom in search of him. I find him on the couch, sleeping. In just a pair of boxer briefs, might I add. Like a kid in a candy store, I stare, taking in each delectable part, mentally licking him up and down like a lollipop. If he was sex on a stick before, somebody fan me because he’s reached a whole other level of hotness now. He’s more defined, with miles of muscles wrapped around his body, and has more ink. His hair is messy, the way I loved, and my fingers tingle with the urge to drag them

through it. And that happy trail. Some things never change because it's still the best part of—

“I know that look, and it ain't happenin'.” My eyes whip to his. He stretches, then stands, brushing one hand through his hair while the other slides down his torso.

“What look?” I blink away whatever the hell I just got lost in.

“You know, Callie. Since the first day we met, you've always had that look. The 'I want to eat you alive' look.”

“And you're still full of yourself. I'd rather cut my tongue off.”

Said tongue becomes dry and stuck to the roof of my mouth when his hand dips past his happy trail and underneath his boxers, where he adjusts himself. “Whatever you say, babe.” He walks past me and disappears into the bathroom. I don't move a muscle. Shock will do that to a person. When my nipples finally cease trying to poke through the inside of my shirt, I gather myself and whip around just as he walks out of the bathroom.

“For the record, this look I have on my face,” I point to my face, swirling my finger, “is disgust. I've had almost two long years to forget anything I ever felt or thought about you. Because there is nothing there.”

“Then why. Are. You. Here?”

“Because this is my cabin!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

Easton shakes his head, scraping his palms down his face. “I always thought you were a bit crazy. Used to actually think it was cute. But now you're legit crazy. Guess you did both of us a favor when you walked out—”

“Walked out?” I repeat as a question. “I walked out on *you*?” That part does come out sounding crazy because I'm seconds away from going loco on his ass. “You fucking cheated on me!” He's close enough that I thrust my palms

out and shove him. He trips backward, and I launch myself at him, shoving him again.

“I didn’t fucking cheat. You jumped to conclusions—”

“I caught you, you lying piece of shit!”

“No, you walked into a room and assumed that’s what I was doing! You wouldn’t even let me explain.”

“What was there to explain? Huh? Were you going to tell me that she slipped on your dick? Oops, sorry, *babe*.”

“I didn’t fuck her.”

I scoff. “Sure, you didn’t. Guess you thought I was crazy *and* naïve.” He takes a menacing step toward me but stops. His jaw muscles flex, and his hands are balled into fists at his side. Once upon a time, I used to love it when he got worked up like this. It made him even hotter. But now all I want to do is sock him in the nose, cry my eyes out, and go home.

“I don’t give a shit what you believe anymore. I’ve also had two years to simmer on us. And wonder why the fuck I tried so hard. A year of my life wasted for a girl who couldn’t even give me the time of day to explain.”

“There was nothing to explain—”

“There sure as fuck was! Instead, you found comfort in my best friend. How is Russ, by the way?”

“Russ? How would I know? He’s your—”

“How long after I was out of the picture did you two fuck?”

I gasp at his question. “Dude, fuck you.”

“Again, not—”

“No, fuck *you*! Fuck you! I have no idea what I ever saw in you. But I am so glad I woke up and realized what a fucker you are!”

“Same. Thanks for doing me a favor.”

I open my mouth to yell a rebuttal, but wires are crossing, and sparks are causing my brain to short-circuit. “I—I—Get out of my cabin!”

“You’re in my fucking cabin. You get the fuck out!” Then he turns, his feet pounding on the floor until he opens the bedroom door and slams it behind him.

I stand there for a while, staring at the closed door. His words slowly sink in. And when they do, they hurt. Not a little pinch hurt but a ‘stinging, did someone just stab me in my heart’ hurt. He’s the one who tore the beautiful rug out from under me. He ruined us, not me.

Yeah, I didn’t let him explain. I refused to allow his excuses to change what I saw. My love was so deep that I knew I would be willing to pretend I didn’t catch him with another woman. That he didn’t tear my heart out and spit on the life we created. The future we were planning. I knew it was silly to invest my entire life in us. But I saw forever whenever I looked at him. He was the other part of my heart, and I hated it anytime we were apart. Because his air was my air. I know. It was pathetic. I was obviously so blinded by love that I didn’t realize he was fucking cheating on me.

He might as well have hit me with a truck. I was crushed. I didn’t know a human body could feel so broken without any physical damage. I cried enough tears to fill an ocean. And no matter how much I lie to myself and my friends, I’m not over what he did. Seeing him again brings all these emotions I’ve spent the last two years burying back to the surface. No matter how deeply I try to suppress them, they still have the power to hurt me.

I wipe my eyes and drag my feet into the living room. I notice a few frames on the fireplace mantel. Taking a closer look, I see one of him and Jake. A

group photo with some old friends of his. One of. . .

“Don’t think too much into that one. I like it for the background view.” I cock my head at Easton, now dressed, walking into the kitchen.

The picture is of us on a bike ride up to the mountains. The sunset was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I step back, taking in more personal touches in the cabin. I didn’t notice last night, but this. . . “This is your cabin,” I say.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” I want to turn around and start round three with him, but I walk over to my laptop bag and dig through it until I grab the pamphlet. Then I slam it on the counter.

“What’s that?” he asks, pouring water into the coffee maker. He grabs the pamphlet, his eyes roaming over the images. “The fuck?”

“Yeah.”

“If this is some joke to get me to—”

“Oh, shut up with your egotistical ass. I didn’t do this on purpose to see you if that’s what you think. I was set up.” His brows furrow skeptically. “Look.” I stab at the pamphlet. “Tory and Ashley rented this cabin for me to get away for a few days.”

“This cabin isn’t up for rental.”

“Obviously! They set me up! They knew you would be here and sent me here as a trap.”

“Why?”

“Because they hate me, that’s why. I had no idea you lived here. I just thought I was being sent away to heal or—uhm, get work done.” He stares at me, looking for deceit, which he won’t find. “Look at me like that all you want. But trust me, I never would have come if I knew.”

He grabs the pamphlet and inspects it further. “They created this pamphlet,

convinced you to go on a trip to the middle of nowhere, and you went?"

When he says it out loud, it sounds sketchy and very unlike me. "Listen. I don't care what you think." I snatch the pamphlet from his hands and turn my back on him, shoving it into my laptop bag. "I just want to get the hell out of here and pretend this never happened." Swinging around, I ask, "Where are my clothes? I'd like to leave now."

I wish he would stop staring at me. It makes me feel things, and I can't go there with him. "My clothes?"

"In the closet hanging up."

"Great." I walk off, opening two doors until I find the closet. I grab my things and disappear into the bathroom. Once I'm behind the closed door, I sink to the floor and cover my face. Humiliation causes my eyes to burn, and I try to fight back tears but fail. How could they do this to me? I sound like a broken record, but I simply can't wrap my head around why they would do something so evil. They saw firsthand the agony I went through. I was a pile of wreckage for so long until, piece by piece, I rebuilt myself. And even now, I'm still not whole. I also can't believe I stormed in here, acting like I owned the place when it was his all along. He has to think I'm completely mental. "God, I *am* crazy."

There's a knock on the door.

"I'm in the shower," I say.

"I know you're not. Open the door."

"And how do *you* know?"

"For starters, the water's not on, and I know you're in there sulking. Open the door."

"You know nothing about me," I snap and stand, throwing the door open.

"Oh. . ." Easton extends his hand, and I accept the mug of coffee—my

second favorite liquid.

“Get dressed so we can talk. For real this time.” Then he’s gone.

I change out of his shirt, then decide against it, putting it back and hiding it under my sweater. When I walk into the living room, Easton stands by the window, arms crossed, accentuating his muscular upper body.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I say, grabbing his attention. He looks me over, sending a shudder of nerves through me.

“Why do you need to heal—”

“Please, let’s not. I’m already pretty embarrassed. Whatever reason Tory and Ash had for doing this doesn’t change how we both feel. I’d rather not hash out our past. It should stay where it is. Hopefully, the storm will let up enough to get back to my car. Or let me call a tow truck.”

He wants to argue. I can tell by how his jaw muscles tick like he’s grinding his back teeth, but he holds back and pushes away from the window. “Power lines are still down. No Wi-Fi yet, either. I can probably get to your car with the snowmobile, but that’s just to get anything you need out of it. Another round is headed our way. You’re stuck here for now.” He walks past me down the hall. Opening the closet, he grabs our jackets. “Put these on.” He hands me a pair of snow pants.

“Thanks,” I reply. “How long is for now?”

“Day or two. Week at most—”

“A *week*! No way. I can’t be stuck here for that long. I have work. A life to get back to. Christmas is next week.”

“Thought you hated the holidays?”

I totally do. “Well, I don’t now.”

He sees right through my lie. Shaking his head, he says, “Whatever. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“The snow’s only gonna get worse. Best we head out to your car and grab your things now unless you’re good wearing my shirts until the roads clear up —”

“Nope. Totally ready to go now.”

Easton chuckles under his breath and walks past me. “Then, let’s go.”

Bundled up as much as possible, I follow him outside. To my surprise, there has to be at least four more inches of snow on the ground. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this much snow in my entire life.”

“Isn’t even the start of it.”

I stare at the endless mounds of white. “I’m never getting out of here,” I whine.

“Let’s not sign both our death warrants just yet.” I narrow my eyes at him. What’s so bad for him if I’m here? I’m the one that’s suffering. “Joke, babe.”

“This is your last warning.”

“Whatever, just go watch your step—”

“And I prefer that you not tell me what to do. I know how to—”

“Glad you do, but—”

“Seriously, back off!” I step forward, and my foot presses into the snow. It happens so fast that I barely register when my foot continues to sink, never hitting the step. I squeal as my entire body submerges into a pile of snow.

“What the fuck?”

“Jesus Christ,” Easton muffles. “Lift your arms.”

“I can’t! They’re stuck in the snow.”

“I told you to fucking listen to me.”

“And I’m not a fucking dog!”

“Agreed. Dogs are way more obedient—”

“I swear to God when I get out of here. . .”

“And if you don’t?” I hear the humor in his tone. I try and fight the snow, but it’s compacted around me.

“Stop messing around. Get me out of here.”

“Are you going to behave?”

“Easton!”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” His hands dig in the snow under my arms and pull me out of the snow. “Like I was trying to say, step to your right. The stairs on the left haven’t been built yet. Now, if you’re done being stubborn, let’s go.”

“Asshole,” I mumble under my breath.

He doesn’t wait for me and treks down the ‘right side’ of the stairs to his snowmobile.

“All right, you ever ridden on one of these?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s the same as when you’re on my bike.”

I hate that my mind goes back to that time. Memories of my arms wrapped around him, cheek pressed to his back. How powerful I felt with him on his bike. “I don’t really remember that.”

He shakes his head. “Whatever. Jump on.”

“How am I supposed to hold on to you with all these layers on?”

“Just climb up. Since you’re smaller, you have to sit in front.”

“Like straddle you?”

“Has it been that long for you, Cal?” His low chuckle is going to get him punched. “Sit in front, facing forward.” He reaches out and takes my hand, pulling me up. My leg stretches over, and I plop my butt on the seat. Then he tugs me flush against him. His breath warms my ear as he says, “Technically, I’m the one straddling you.”

I hate that he can feel the shiver that runs through my body, and damn well knows it's not because of the cold. "Can we please get this over with?"

"As you wish, princess." Before I can spit out something rude and insulting, he starts the snowmobile. I squeal, gripping the handles as he takes off down the driveway. I didn't notice it walking here because of the dark, but the driveway is surrounded by ginormous snow-covered pine trees. I gape at the scenery, feeling as if I'm in a painting.

Easton slows when we hit the bend. "Do you remember where your car is?"

"It's to the right, I think. Then left off the main road." He nods and accelerates. "There." I point when I see a larger pile of snow, assuming my little Beetle is under it.

He pulls off to the side and helps me climb off. He lifts the seat, retrieves a small shovel, and starts clearing off a side of my car. When my driver-side door appears, he drops the shovel. "Try getting in. Your locks may be frozen."

Sure enough, they are. I manage to get my key in but snap it in the lock. "Goddammit!" I kick my car. A pile of snow falls from the roof, smacking me in the face. "Just great. Just fucking great!"

"Relax. I'll come back later and try to melt the ice with a handheld heater."

"I don't want to melt it later. I want to melt it now. I want to get my shit and go home now." I'm losing it. Having a serious meltdown in front of my ex-boyfriend, who already thinks I'm crazy. Which I know because he flat-out told me.

"You're—"

"Just don't. I know. I'm crazy."

"You and cutting me off. Jesus. I was going to say you're in good hands. If this happened and you weren't close, you'd be frozen to death in your car."

Which, by the way, why the fuck do you still have?”

“What’s wrong with my car?”

“Same thing that was wrong with it two years ago. It’s a piece of shit death trap.”

“It is not.”

“Babe, from the direction your car is pointing, I’m gonna assume you took a ride on some ice. Which wouldn’t happen if you were driving a safer car.”

“My car’s just fine. And for the last time, stop calling me babe. I’m not your babe anymore.”

Darkness flashes in his gaze, and his lips narrow. “Yeah. Two years now. Let’s go.”

Easton doesn’t wait for me and climbs back onto the snowmobile. He’s pissed. But why? Because I didn’t let him convince me it was an accident and he loved me so much? That we should have pretended it never happened and carried on? Screw that. I wasn’t going to be manipulated by his lies. I stomp through the snow and swat his hand away when he tries to help me up. I climb on, slip, and allow him to grab me before I biff my face against the seat. He wraps his arm around me and helps me swing my leg up, then grips my waist and tugs me into him with less finesse than last time. “Hang on. Would hate for you to fall off.” I would turn around and slap him, but he takes off, and I’m too worried about falling or him purposely throwing me off.

Chapter Four

Easton

When we pull back up to the cabin, I shut the snowmobile off and jump off like it's on fire. Not waiting for Cal, I storm inside and slam my bedroom door shut behind me. My heart thumps against my chest, and I struggle to catch my breath. I grab my hair, hoping to release the tension, but it does shit to help the pounding in my head. Leaning over, I press my hands against my mattress.

Why the fuck is she here?

I should kick her ass out. See how she likes being thrown out without an explanation. I should have known something was up when I ran into Tory a few months back. All those questions. That bitch was always meddling in our business. But it still doesn't explain why they sent her here.

God, she looks good. Angelic. She could have been covered from head to toe in muck and still be the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Time has been nothing but good to her. Her hair is longer, and she looks skinnier, which pisses me off. Why, I have no idea. She never ate a lot when we were together. Claimed she was on a budget diet. Her food consisted of ramen and

whatever shit I would try and bulk her up with. And now, she looks ten pounds lighter, if that's even possible. I wonder who's taking care of her. Making sure she's okay. Not that she needed to be taken care of, but she needed me. She needed me in ways that made me feel powerful. Like I was her world. I would have done anything to keep her safe. Happy. Always mine.

My fingers dig into the blanket, clenching my sheet. *Deep breaths, Cruz.* She'll be gone soon. And things will go back to normal. Quiet. Numbing. Alone.

I gather myself, push down the resurfacing emotions, and leave my room. Callie is sitting on the couch, hands tucked into her lap and doing that little thing she does with her lower lip when she's nervous.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Sucking your lip into your mouth. You're just asking me to fuck you."

"Oh wow. So, you're saying all I need to do is this, and you'll fuck me?"

I reach for her, pulling her into my arms. "Keep that up, and I'm going to do more than fuck you, babe." I press my mouth to hers, taking her bottom lip between my teeth. "You'll never have to be nervous with me. I'll always keep you safe. Happy. Mine."

I tear my eyes away from her and walk into the kitchen. "Want some coffee?" I ask, already knowing the answer. If there is one thing she loves more than me, it's caffeine. *Loved, asshole. Past tense.*

"Yes, please." She stands and pulls out a stool to sit at the counter. A rumble sounds in her direction, and I watch as her cheeks flush, and she grabs her stomach. "Oh my god, not even sure what that was."

Fuck. She hasn't eaten anything since she got here. Hell knows when the

last time she did.

“Hungry?”

“I mean, yeah, I could eat.” Her stomach growls again. “Okay, fine. Yes. That would be great.”

I nod because I can’t trust what might come out of my mouth if I spoke. I grab some eggs and bacon out of the fridge. When the coffee is ready, I pour her a cup and start breakfast.

“So, what brings you out here?” she asks, breaking the silence.

“Work,” I reply, cracking an egg into the pan.

“Work? What exactly does that consist of?”

Flipping the bacon, I turn, lean against the counter, and sip my coffee. “I was contracted to renovate this cabin. The owner has seven rental houses spread out along the county. They all needed work done, so he hired me to restore them. Once I finish with one, I move on to the next.”

Her eyes flicker with admiration. “Wow. That’s awesome. You were always good with your hands.” I see the second she realizes what she said. Her cheeks flush, and she sucks in that damn bottom lip. “How—how long have you been out here?”

“About a year and a half.”

There it is again. Her mind is working. She’s calculating. I notice the second she comes to the conclusion. A year and a half ago, she sent me a message telling me to leave her alone. That she would never give me the time of day again and that we were done.

“Oh. . . well, that’s great.”

I don’t say anything more, give her my back, and tend to the food. “So, how about you? How’s life been for you?”

“Me? Um, pretty boring.”

I make two plates and set one in front of her. “Cal, if there’s one thing you’ve never been, it’s boring.” Her eyes glaze over, and I’m thankful for the counter between us so she doesn’t notice my dick twitch through my jeans. “Okay, simple questions. How’s work? You still at Millbrook Marketing?”

Another look I know well. Sadness. “No. I, uh. . . lost my job there. You kind of had to show up and be present. I didn’t do either, so they fired me. But it’s okay. I really didn’t like it there anyway.”

“You loved it there, Cal.”

“Well, things in my life weren’t really great at the time, and I was struggling to get up in the morning. Show up, ya know.” There’s pain in her voice. Regret. I even sense some anger. I know I shouldn’t ask, but I do.

“How long ago?”

“Wanna take a guess?” she asks. She doesn’t allow me to, even though I can probably guess the exact time. “Anywho, it wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened. Since I didn’t have a job, I couldn’t pay my bills, so Ashley took one for the team and moved in with me to help pay rent until I got back on my feet. Remember Mrs. Carlson?”

“Your eighty-year-old neighbor?”

“Don’t forget nosy. One minute, you were there. The next, Ashley was. I’d come back from a run one morning, and she walked up to me, hugged me, and told me that ‘love is love’ and was glad to see me happy again.

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah. Apparently, she thought I ditched you for Ashley. She was giving me her approval.”

“Jesus.” I laugh, taking a sip of coffee. “And did you?” I ask, like a fucking asshole.

“I mean, Ashley’s hot and all, but I’m as straight as an arrow—well, minus

that one time in college.”

My brows rise at that comment. “Care to explain?”

Shaking her head, she places a slice of bacon in her mouth. “Nope. That story will go to the grave. Only me and Tracy McGregor will know what happened that night.”

At that, I let off a low chuckle. “Wow, and here I thought I knew everything about you.”

Callie wiggles her brow, taking another bite. “Oh, there are many secrets you don’t know.” The comment falls off her tongue, but her face shows instant regret. “I didn’t mean like that—I just meant—”

“Finish your food. I’m going to cut wood. The weather’s supposed to get bad again later.” I put my mug into the sink, shove my feet into my boots, and storm out into the cold.

I don’t bother with a jacket. My blood, now boiling, fuels enough heat to keep me warm. I grab the ax and a log of wood, place it, slam into it, and slice the wood in two. One after another, I chop wood, but no matter how much I destroy, it doesn’t ease my anger. She had secrets, all right. One being the real reason she wanted me out of her life. Because she had already replaced me.

Sweat builds on my forehead. Swing after swing, I replay that day in my mind. Them together. It was not just her betraying me; he did, too.

Swing, chop. Replace. Swing. Chop. Replace—

A scream echoes from inside the cabin. I drop the ax and run inside. Cal is no longer at the table. I race down the hall as another shriek comes from the bathroom. I thrust the door open and pull the shower curtain back. Callie screams and jumps into my arms. “What happened? What’s wrong?” I spit out.

“That thing! Look!” she cries and points to the drain. I follow her finger and see the scorpion circling the drain. I lean in with her still in my arms. She tightens her death grip around my neck. “Relax. I’m just going to shut the water off.”

“Don’t drop me!” she says, panicked.

“It’s just a scorpion. They come in through the drains. They’re harmless.”

“Bullshit! It has claws!”

My chest rumbles, and I take my boot and smash it. “There. Dead. You’re completely safe now.” Her death grip is starting to make breathing hard, yet I don’t tell her to ease up or put her down.

“How do you know? What if another one comes up? If his scorpion buddies find out one of their gang is dead, more will come. They’ll search and see their smashed friend and—”

“Babe, take your lip out of your mouth.” The mouth I’m now transfixed on. My gaze drops further. We come to the same realization simultaneously. She’s naked in my arms.

“Fuck,” I groan.

“Shit,” she moans. “I didn’t—eyes up here!”

“I wasn’t looking. Not that I haven’t seen it all before.”

“Yeah, and you’re not seeing it now.” But I don’t need to see it. Because feeling her is enough to put me over the edge. Her plump breasts pressed up against my chest. My hands cupping her bare ass. And fuck, her nude pussy. She was never a fan of hair. “Close your eyes,” she snaps. Annoyed and now frustrated, I do the exact opposite.

I keep my eyes trained on hers. Untangling her arms and legs from me is a task since she’s holding on tighter than a spider monkey, but then I

practically drop her to the ground. “Like I said, I’ve seen it all.” Then I turn my back, slamming the door behind me.

Chapter Five

Callie

The cold shower does nothing for my overheated skin. I can't tell if it's because I'm humiliated at what just happened or turned on. I was naked in Easton's arms, for Christ's sake! My nipples are rock hard from being pressed against his chiseled chest, and I can still feel his hands gripping my butt. "Oh, God." I cup my face, remembering my legs wrapped around him, and my bare goods— "This is not happening to me." But it is. I'm still stuck in a cabin with my ex, who has gotten a billion times more attractive since the last time I saw him. Everything about him is bigger, sexier, more prominent. And I would like to accentuate the word, *everything*. Even before, he could make my body erupt in flames with a look. One touch and my nerves ignited all over my body, ready and willing for anything. He had that kind of power over me. And it seems like time has not lessened that need and craving I have for him. There's no denying the unfinished business between us is bubbling under the surface, and I need to do something to diffuse it.

But it's not just his sex appeal that's breaking me down. It's his whole aura. From the moment I met him, I wanted to siphon his strength and kindness.

Bask in his humor and the safety he made me feel.

But that was almost two years ago. Things have changed. I just need to remember that I hate him.

He may be the sexiest human being on this planet, but he's an asshole who broke my heart. He ruined me in so many ways, I wasn't the same person once I finally came back to life.

And now, he's acting like he was the one who was hurt. That I'm somehow the bad guy! Imagine. A man who can't accept blame for his own actions. But if he thinks he's just going to put all this on me, he's wrong.

I shut off the water, snatch a towel, and storm out of the bathroom. Without knocking, I barge into Easton's bedroom. He's in the shower. I burst in to give him the same lack of privacy, rip the curtain back, and gasp at what's in front of me. Easton looks back at me with eyes full of lust and passion, his body on display like a masterpiece. Muscles ripple under eccentric tattoos, and water droplets slide down his tanned skin. I'm stunned stupid by every part of him. And then I notice his hand, which is wrapped around his enormous cock.

"Shit!" I throw the curtain back. I open my mouth to say more but decide I should leave. And fast.

I lock myself in the other bathroom and try to catch my breath. Not because I ran like a bat outta hell. Because. . . "Double shit!" I hiss, covering my face. I can't do this. These old feelings coming back, and my body remembering. I can't go there. Not with him. If I do, I know I won't bounce back again. I need to get the hell out of here.

I hurry and dress in my dry clothes. Thankfully, Easton's still in his room, so I rush and gather my things. "Where the fuck are you going now?"

Easton's voice startles me. I whip around. He's dressed, his wet hair

brushed back in a messy wave. “I’m leaving.”

“Oh yeah? Where you going?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere but here.” I grab my laptop bag.

“And where’s that? Your shit car is buried under a mound of snow, not to mention it’s frozen shut. And there isn’t another house for miles. Hate to break it to you, babe, but you’re stuck here—”

“I am *not* stuck here. I refuse to be anywhere near you for a second longer. There was a reason I didn’t speak to you two years ago. I haven’t forgotten. And seeing you again only reminds me why I really hate you.”

“Yeah? And why’s that again? Because last thing I remember is you—”

“Don’t you turn this on me, you stupid, cheating liar!”

“There she is. Poor Callie. Only remembers what she wants to.”

“Oh, fuck *you*.” I grab my purse and shove my arms into my jacket.

“Whatever. Run away. You’ve always been good at that. Just don’t expect me to come after you this time.”

I whip around so fast dots appear in my vision. “I hope you rot in hell. Or freeze. But whatever you do, stay the hell away from me!” I reach for the door handle to steady myself, then throw it open and storm out. This time, I’m smart and use the right side of the stairs. I groan at how deep my boots sink before I hit a step. Gazing ahead of me, I cuss under my breath. There are mounds and mounds of endless snow. I should have stolen the keys to his snowmobile. But I refuse to go back in there. I got myself into this mess. I can get myself out of it. I puff my chest out, raise my chin, and start the trek to nowhere because I have no idea where I’m going. *Don’t panic*. A car will drive by at some point and rescue me.

You got this, girl. You do not need him.

Which is hopefully a good thing because he is doing exactly as he vowed

and not coming after me. “Screw him,” I hiss, ignoring the burn in my thighs. “Why is this snow so high?” When I get home, and after I murder my friends, I’m moving somewhere warm. Where it never snows.

Think about something hot. Fire. The sun. Easton gripping his dick.

God, if there was one thing he was amazing at, it was sex. He knew exactly how to use what he was blessed with. I wasn’t crazy active sexually before Easton, but being with him brought a primal need out of me. He showed me ways I’ve never thought possible to find arousal. He wasn’t into complete kink or anything like that, but he sure knew his way around the female body and what toys would turn me into a wild, moaning animal.

“Knock it off!” I scold myself. He is *not* the answer here. Even though my entire body seems like it’s on fire. Maybe if I unzipped my jacket and let some air in.

I open my eyes and gasp. “Holy shit,” I breathe. Three feet in front of me is a bear. And we’re not talkin’ a small cute bear. A monstrous scary bear. And he’s staring right at me. I don’t move a muscle. Maybe he doesn’t see me. If I stand real still, he’ll get bored and move along. He raises a giant paw and slams it into the snow. “Oh, God,” I whine and close my eyes. “Please don’t maul me, Mr. Bear.”

I don’t know what to do. I’ve never been one for nature. Do I scare him or play dead! Maybe if I throw my laptop bag at him, it’ll scare him off. Or, I can run. *To where? Your death?* There’s no way I’ll get more than a foot or two before he’s on me, ripping the flesh off my back and eating me for lunch.

Fuck, fuck. . . *fuck!* The last fuck is because the bear growls loud enough that I swear I can feel his breath skate across my cheeks. He rises onto his hind legs, and I close my eyes because I don’t care to see the moment he claws my head off.

Two gunshots ring off into the distance.

When I open my eyes, the bear is retreating back into the woods. Easton appears, then proceeds to toss me over his shoulder.

“Run! That bear can change his mind and claw us both.” I rush out. He takes his time, and I try to raise my head to keep a lookout. “Easton, faster. He’s probably really mad now!” God, I don’t want to die like this. At least frozen, they could thaw me out and have a nice open-casket funeral.

“Easton—”

He slaps my ass. “Shut up, Callie.”

“Don’t you dare slap my ass—”

He does it again. “I said shut the fuck up.”

Oh, that bastard. He’s in for it once he puts me down. Well, once he shuts the door and locks it, and no bears can enter. Then it’s on. He walks up the porch steps, enters the cabin, and kicks the door shut with his boot.

He flips me upright off his shoulder, and my feet slam against the ground. I open my mouth to raise hell, but his mouth crashes over mine. Electricity sparks between us, and I swear the ground below me sways. His hand hooks around my neck, fisting my hair, and takes my mouth like he owns it, pressing his tongue past the barrier of my lips, deepening our kiss.

I should say I’m stunned at his move. That this is disgusting and shove him off me. But I do neither. It’s as if two ugly years haven’t separated us, and we’re back to being just Easton and Callie. Two souls connected and desperate for one another. He backs me up against the fire mantel, causing a frame to fall. His free hand tears at my jacket zipper while mine fumble with his jeans. Our kiss turns savage, demanding, and I open wider for him. My jacket is gone, along with my shirt, and I moan into his mouth when he slips a hand inside my pants.

Easton growls in approval when he slips through my slick heat, finding me sopping wet. “Always wet for me,” he murmurs, easing past my lips and pumping one, then two fingers inside me.

My mouth falls open in pleasure. “That’s not for you,” I lie, riding his hand like it’s my job. God, it’s been so long since someone has touched me there.

“Then tell me who it’s for, Cal.” He works me hard and fast, burying three fingers in me until I become delirious with need.

“Nope,” I moan through parted lips.

He sinks three fingers inside me, and my knees almost buckle. “Not yet, babe,” he says and pulls away. My jeans are ripped down my legs with my thong, and his mouth covers my pulsating mound before I can argue. “Your cunt is so wet. You’re dripping for me.”

I snake my hands through his hair and tug. “Not for you.” I bite my tongue, fighting the moan that wants to ripple up my throat. His hands slide around and squeeze my ass, pressing me closer to him. He laps and sucks at me, and I fight not to think about what’s happening. It’s so fucking awesome, and I know when I come, it may last for eons because it’s been that long. But I also know there will be some heavy regret when I come down. I push that last thought away and pull at his hair.

“Still feisty,” he hums against my clit. I clench around him, my pending orgasm close.

“Always still a talker. Please stop ruining this and shut up.” His laughter rumbles against my sex, creating more sensation.

“I’ll stop talking, babe.” And he does. He uses his mouth in better ways, thrusting, tongue fucking my pussy. I lose the battle almost instantly. My body starts to spasm, and I come violently against his mouth.

“Easton.” His name falls from my lips in a part whisper, part moan as my

orgasm rocks through me. Suddenly, his mouth and hands are gone. Then, he's picking me up, and within seconds, I'm tossed onto the couch.

Easton stands above me, eyes wild and chin glistening with my juices, causing a layer of goosebumps to rise. He takes off his shirt and pants, and my eyes land on his engorged cock. His jaw is hard as stone. He looks as if he's teetering on the edge of self-control, which sets me on fire.

"I still hate you."

"Same," he growls with urgency, climbing over me and pushing my thighs apart. The feel of him above me creates this primal urge inside me. His gaze is downright animalistic, and he digs his fingers into the curves of my hips before burying his cock deep inside me. My lips fall open in pleasure as I clamp around him, needing a second to adjust. Slowly, he rears back. His eyes lock on mine, and something travels between us. Lust, hunger. Need. His head dips, and his tongue sweeps along mine. My eyes fall shut, and he powers forward. I cry out in pleasure and grab at his hair, his neck, scraping my nails down his back as he slides ruthlessly through my wet pussy and fucks me. His hands move from squeezing my ass to cupping my breasts, all as he kisses me urgently. There's anger in the way he's fucking me. Regret in the way he kisses me. And desperation in the way he touches me.

It's all becoming too overwhelming. "Easton," I moan his name, pleading for more. I'm so close to skyrocketing off the edge for the second time, and I don't want this to end. I open my mouth to beg for what I'm unsure of, but he silences my pleas with more passionate kisses. His thrusts become primal. Purposeful. He drives into me with such force I swear my brain short-circuits. Another orgasm consumes me, and I cry out.

"Fuck, Cal," he grunts, low and husky, and his stiff cock jerks, spilling inside me.

His forehead falls to mine, and our chests press together. When he raises his head, his dark gaze rakes over me. My skin prickles with heat. There is sudden tension in his corded muscles. He's thinking about the one thing I wanted to avoid. That this was a mistake.

Fuck him.

Anger surges up my spine, and I shove my palms against his chest. "Get off me."

"With pleasure." He pulls out, and I immediately hate the absence of him. He sits up, grabs his jeans, and slides them on while I reach for the closest piece of clothing, his T-shirt, and toss it over my head.

A million things that I want to say swirl inside my brain. But panic has me spitting out, "That was a mistake." He doesn't have to tell me my words hurt. I sense it in the way his shoulders tighten. His jaw clenches, and he shoots off the couch.

"Don't bother. It wasn't much for me. No need to make excuses. We both have regrets. Let's leave it at that." His rebuttal hurts just as bad. Guess we're even. I find my underwear and slide it on. "Gotta chop more wood," he says. He slips on his shoes and, without a jacket, opens the front door and slams it behind him.

What the *fuck* am I doing?

And even more importantly, how will I make it out of here without doing something else I'll regret?

Chapter Six

Callie

I step outside to find Easton by the curb, leaning against his bike. “How’d it go?”

I take each step slowly, keeping my breathing calm. When I make it up to him, I stop. Then I lunge into his arms. “I got it!” A giggle ripples up my throat, and I hug him, pressing kiss after kiss to his beautiful face.

He lifts me in his arms. “Fuckin’ knew you would. Millrose would be dumb not to hire you.”

“I know, but there were so many other people applying. Probably way more qualified than me.”

“Babe, you’ve worked your ass off to get this job. It’s your dream job. They saw that passion in you. No way they were going to choose anyone else.”

I stare up at him. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it. You’re gonna kill it and make a shit ton of money. Then I’ll quit my job, and you can be my sugar momma.”

“Mmmm. . .” I murmur against his mouth. “What else?”

“Shit, if you’re paying, I’ll do anything you want. I’ll be your little pet.”

“I like where this is going.”

He kisses me hard. When I’m out of breath, he pulls back. His intense eyes bore into mine. “Thought you knew by now I’d do anything for you. You’re mine. Forever and a day.”

“Why the added day?”

“Because even forever wouldn’t be enough with you.”

I must have fallen asleep on the couch.

When I sit up and listen for Easton, the only sound I hear is the crackling of the fire. I look out the window and see him outside. How long has he been out there? The gigantic pile of chopped wood is one indicator. His blue lips, the other.

I slide on my boots and open the door, taking a few steps outside. “What are you doing?” I ask, but he doesn’t acknowledge me. “You know, I couldn’t care less if you freeze to death, but if I have a change of heart, you’re a giant, and there’s no way I can drag you inside. So stop being a stubborn mule and get inside before you turn into a popsicle.” I jump when he throws the ax onto the wooden stump. His shoulders rise and fall, then he turns and prowls towards the cabin and up the steps.

“Not the kind of pet I remember being,” he says, not making eye contact and stalking inside. I count to ten, then follow, shutting the door behind me. Easton is standing by the fireplace, his head hanging down.

“Look. . .” I start, not knowing what to say. “I don’t want to be at each other’s throats like this. This whole situation is messed up like *royally*. I would be out of here if I could, but I can’t. And what happened earlier. . . I don’t know what to say about that. For so long, I’ve only known how to hate

you. And if I don't, then. . . I don't know where that leaves me. And I can't—I refuse to go back to the person I was when you broke me.”

He lets off a harsh breath. Squeezing his eyes closed briefly, he lifts his gaze to mine. “You act like you were the only one hurt here.”

“I wasn't the reason we ended. You were.”

“No, you took an assumed situation and ran with it.”

I raise my hands. “Easton, I caught you with a naked woman in your apartment.”

“She wasn't there for me.”

“Are you kidding me! How do you expect me to believe that? This is why I spared myself the excuses. I knew this is what you would have said.”

“Because it's the truth! I came home to her there. She was one of Russ's randoms. She walked out of his room at the same time I showed up. She was so drunk she didn't even realize I wasn't him, and I was just trying to get her off me.”

“Oh, sure. You looked like you were trying real hard to get her hands out of your jeans. She was practically giving you a hand job!”

“The fuck she was!”

I shake my head. “I can't do this. I'm not going down this road again. I've spent way too much time trying to heal.”

“And how the fuck do you think it's been for me, huh? You were my world. My everything. And you dropped me without allowing me to defend myself, without trusting in me, in us. You tore my heart out and didn't even look back. Moved on like we were nothing! So don't you tell me I broke your heart when you shattered mine.”

“I wasn't enough for you, so you had to cheat.”

“And you didn't love me enough to listen.”

“Fuck you. I loved you with every fiber of my being. I loved you so much I thought I was going to die. I wanted to *die*. Do you know how that feels? My world crashed and burned that day. I wanted to fucking die!”

He’s on me, his mouth crashing over mine. The fire between us is uncontrollable. I’m up in his arms, pressed up against the wall. Shoving his jeans down, he tears at my only pair of underwear until it snaps, and he pistons inside me. Each thrust is hard and ruthless. The mixture of pain and pleasure clouds my vision, but I take every bit of him.

“More,” I pant, hooking my fingers into his hair.

“You’re fucking maddening.” He plunges his tongue down my throat, kissing me with unwavering passion. His cock drives into me, and my walls start to tighten. He suddenly grows thicker and spasms inside me.

Each breath is a struggle.

My heart threatens to jump out of my chest.

His is just as erratic.

“We have to stop this hate fucking,” I breathe out. “This is seriously unhealthy. Not to mention messed up.” His lips press against my collarbone. He doesn’t kiss me or move for a moment. “Easton, say something.”

He pulls away and allows my feet to hit the floor. “I think we’ve said enough.” He tucks himself back in his jeans and walks away, shutting himself in his room.

Chapter Seven

Easton

“Let me talk to her.”
“You’ve got to be kidding me. How about you get off my doorstep, or I’ll neuter you with the heel of my shoe.”

“Just let me see her, Tory. I need to fucking see her!”

“And she doesn’t want to see you. Or talk to you. Or anything, you piece of shit! So why don’t you go rot in hell.”

“This isn’t about you, so stay the hell out of it. Callie! Callie, Please! Just talk to me! Please! I love you! I love you, Callie!”

“Stop yelling. You’re going to wake the whole neighborhood.”

“I don’t give a shit. Please. . . please let me see her.”

I’d spent months trying. Begging. Borderline stalking, but Callie never spoke to me. Her friends moved her things out of my place, and whatever I had at hers ended up in flames on my doorstep in the middle of the night. She was done with me. The weeks after were a blur, drinking myself into oblivion. I wanted to feel numb, but no amount of alcohol rid her from my mind. A few months later, I got a call from a man named Sammy Stone. He’d

gotten my info from my current construction company, asking if I was interested in a job opportunity. A two-year contract renovating cabins. My options were to sit around, killing myself with booze and resentment, or take the job. I packed my shit up the next day, leaving my life behind.

At first, the solitude was good for me. I worked until my muscles ached, came home, and fell into bed, too exhausted to think about Callie. And then I did it all over again the next day. Consistency was my lifesaver. Stay busy, stay too tired to think, and I would survive. Each day would get easier in hopes that maybe she would just be an afterthought one day. But that day never came. It's been a year and a half, and I'm so fucking tired.

And then she shows up on my front porch. I thought I was imagining it. Being alone for so long, your mind starts playing tricks on you. It wouldn't have been the first time I thought I'd seen her. Wished her to be with me. But in my dreams, she always smiled. Gifted me those glistening eyes. When the vision in front of me started cussing like a sailor, I knew this time she was real.

Having her in my arms again was complete torture. The reminder of how soft her skin felt. The sweet taste of her pussy against my lips. And those little purrs of pleasure. She was perfect in every way. Being inside her after so long almost broke me. It's as if that instant dominance that seared through my veins every time we fucked, made love, never went away. The bond we shared was nothing we could describe. She owned me just as much as I owned her. Fuck, my cock becomes hard imagining her under me. Those intense, greedy eyes blazing up at me with desire. It also triggers her words from earlier. *We have to stop this hate fucking.* Anger builds, and I clench my jaw. Hate fucking isn't how I would begin to describe it. Incredible. Mind-blowing. The feeling of coming home. I want to storm out there and make her

take back all the bullshit she spewed. She doesn't hate me. And to be honest, I don't hate her. I still love her. I never stopped. Despite what she did, I wasn't lying when I told her my heart belonged to her. And that's never changed.

I inhale deeply. We can't keep doing this. Fighting and fucking, fucking and fighting. It's messing both of us up. She no longer belongs to me. I need to put my feelings aside and stop with these games because I'm playing with fire here.

I debate about giving her space, but the silence worries me. I throw on a clean shirt and head out, ready to rescue her for a third time, but surprisingly, she's in the kitchen, pouring two glasses of bourbon.

"When did you start drinking bourbon?" I ask, grabbing her attention.

"I don't. They're both for you. I'm going to drink this moonshine."

"That shit's strong."

"Perfect. Exactly what I need right now." She slides the two glasses across the counter and then pours half a glass of moonshine. Smelling it, her nose turns up. "Or not. Do you have anything to mix this with?"

"Still in your martini phase?" I smile at her, remembering what a martini connoisseur she was.

"Duh, who loses their love of martinis? I told you, one of these days, I'm going to write a martini recipe book. Make millions. People need to show more love for them. All the combinations you can create? They're endless!" My cock jerks against my jeans. She always got overly excited when she talked about fucking martinis. I thought it was dumb as shit, but man, did it turn me on.

I lift one of my glasses. "Should I assume there's poison in this?"

"Never say never. Cheers." She lifts her glass to mine. Dying with her in

sight isn't a terrible way to go, so I take down the whole glass. "Feel anything yet?"

"No, but should I give you the password to my safe with my millions, just in case?"

Her eyes widen. "You have millions?"

I pretend to fake cough. "I guess. . . you'll. . . never—" I grab my chest.

"Oh, stop it. If I wanted to kill you, I would be way more creative and draw it out. Poisoning someone is the weakest way to do it."

"Wow. I suddenly feel much safer in your presence. Tell me more."

She shrugs, taking a sip of the moonshine. "Well, for starters, I'd wait till you fell asleep. God, this is awful."

"It's not meant for a weak stomach. And what would you do once I fell asleep?"

I watch her as she pretends to ponder, tapping her bottom lip. I clutch my glass, fighting not to drag her across the counter into my lap. "Hmm. . . I'd probably get you naked and draw all over you, like penises or something. Then, take pictures and post them on social media. Public humiliation is basically death by torture."

The way her cheeks are turning red tells me that she's thinking about me naked. She tries to mask it by taking too large a sip and choking, spitting some of it out. "God, I think I just poisoned myself."

My chest rumbles, and I stand, walking around the counter to the cabinet above the sink. "Here. Drink this."

Her eyes light up like I just gave her a new puppy, and she grabs the bottle of wine. "Oh my god! I love you!" She catches herself after the words fall off her tongue. "I mean, the wine. I love the wine. I thought you didn't drink wine."

“I don’t.”

“Then why do you have it?” There she goes with those wheels spinning.
“Oh, was this. . . in case you had a friend over?”

“I don’t have a friend. I just have it.”

“Oh,” is all she returns with. “Well, I don’t either. Have a friend if you were wondering. So you don’t think we’re doing something wrong here.”

There she goes, ruining a moment. “I wasn’t worried. You want the bottle or not?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

I hand her the bottle opener, grab my other glass, and take it down in one sip.

“So, what? You’re mad again? Are you ever not mad?”

“Not mad, Cal.”

“Uh, pretty sure we were on our way to some sort of middle ground until you got all pissy with me.”

“You’re just overthinkin’ it.”

“I’m not. Jesus. Since when did you become so damn stubborn?”

“Since I’ve had a lot of time to think.” I turn and walk over to the window when something hits my back. I look down at the wine cork, then cock my head. “You throw that at me?”

“Shame it was your back and not your eye. If you’re going to make a comment like that, then finish it. What did you have to think about?”

“Okay. Fine. I had a lot of time to think about us. You. What went wrong. Questioned myself. Did I ever do anything to make you believe I would ever stray? Did I miss the signs that maybe, somehow, you’d fallen out of love with me, and that’s why it was so easy for you to walk away—”

“It was *not* easy.”

“Looked easy to me.”

“How dare you? You have *no* idea what I went through.”

“I could say the same.” I hate how she looks at me. Hurt, confused. Like I’m the only bad guy in all of this. And I’m sick to death of being that to her.

“Easton, I don’t want to fight with you. I’m done battling with who got hurt worse.” My fists clench at my sides as a tear slips down her cheek. “I thought we could call a truce. Put it in the past. Because I can’t keep rehashing this. It’s hurting us both, and we both have deep scars to show for it.” She grabs the bottle of wine and her glass. “But that seems impossible. Because you’re too weighed down by that chip on your shoulder.”

She walks past me. I ache to grab her and pull her in my arms, but I restrain myself. Just before she disappears into my bedroom, she calls back. “It’s my turn to slam a bedroom door and hide. Enjoy the couch.” And then, as promised, she slams the door behind her.

Chapter Eight

Callie

I can't run up the stairs fast enough. Easton is going to freak out when he sees the concert tickets I just scored. His birthday is next weekend, and I had to sell a kidney to get them, but it'll be worth the look on his face.

I dig through my purse to find my keys, locate the one to his apartment, and slide it in. Unlocking the door, I push it open and walk in, but I'm brought up short. I gasp at the view in front of me. My keys fall from my hands, grabbing Easton's attention.

"Fuck, Cal, this is not what it looks like."

The woman gripping him, naked, doesn't even bother to look my way. "Yes, it is," she giggles, pushing her hands deeper into his pants.

I can't stop staring. I grab my stomach as if someone just punched me in the gut.

"Get the fuck off me. Cal, please—"

I turn around and sprint down the stairs. I thrust open the outer door, gasping for air, but I still can't breathe. Clutching my throat, I choke on a

broken sob. Easton is behind me. “Cal, I swear to fucking God, that was not —”

“Fuck you,” I hiss, walking away.

“Callie, stop. You don’t understand. I have no idea who that girl was—”

“Stop! Oh my god! Stop! You fucking asshole!” Tears race down my cheeks. This isn’t happening. Please let this be a bad dream. “I just caught you. Like, holy shit, I just caught you cheating on me.”

“Babe, no—”

“You piece of shit!” My fists slam into his chest over and over until I lose my battle and break down. “How could you?”

“I didn’t. I just walked in—”

I push him off me. “We’re done. You hear me, Easton Cruz? We. Are. Done!” He grabs me, but I panic and yell to the guy walking past, “Help. Please, help me. I don’t know this guy, and he’s harassing me.”

“Seriously?” Easton looks at me, shocked.

“Back off, man.”

“Don’t fucking touch me. She’s my girlfriend—”

“I am not. I’m nothing to him.” Then I take off running, hearing him scream my name as I go.

I lock myself in Easton’s room. Ditching the glass, I take a deep pull from the bottle. I keep myself busy by snooping through his things. It seems he’s become a minimalist in the past couple of years because there’s nothing of sentimental value in his drawers or nightstand.

I smell his shirts and help myself to a pair of sweatpants. In the closet, I notice a small shoebox in the corner, hidden behind a pile of boots. I pull it

out, sit with my legs crossed, and pop off the top of the box. My lips part, and I suck in a sharp breath. I reach down and pick up the first photo. It's Easton and me on our second date. He took me to a concert, and I remember forcing him into the photo booth. I told him the best memories are the ones captured in a retro picture machine. Beneath that is a pile of photos. All of me. Of us. I pull out the stack of cards I gave him. Love letters that I wrote to him.

My chest tightens at the two printed tickets I never used. I must have dropped them that day when I walked in. Two tickets to Raging Against the Machine. Still intact. Why has he kept all these things? I shouldn't be going through this. It feels wrong. I return the photos to the box when something else catches my attention.

A small black box.

Cautiously, I reach for it and pick it up, but something stops me from opening it. Like whatever's inside will wreck me all over again or destroy whatever healing I've achieved up to this point. I put it back and shove the box back where I found it, hurrying out of his closet to find where I left the bottle of wine.

Why does he have that? I tip the bottle back. I haven't seen many, but if I were a betting woman, I would say that was an engagement ring. But for who? Once upon a time, I would have thought it would be me. But nope.

Chug. Definitely not me.

Chug. Definitely never me.

God, I hate him.

I take one final chug, fall onto the bed, and bawl my eyes out.

Easton

I toss and turn on the couch and cover my face with a pillow, but nothing muffles the sound of her crying. She's been at it for hours. At first, I sat and drank my bourbon, refusing to care. I wasn't the only one to blame here. And until she realized that, I wasn't giving in. She wronged me, too. She's just not admitting it because she thinks I don't know.

But the more the crying went on, the more it dug at my heart. I hate hearing her cry. It's always been my weakness. I would slay anyone who made her upset. And to know, at this moment, that person is me weighs heavily on my conscience.

I turn over again, but it's no use. I can't take it anymore. Getting up, I prowl down the hall and open the door without knocking. It's dark in the room, but I can see the silhouette of her lying on her side. Without permission, I crawl onto the bed behind her.

I pull her body into mine, her shoulders still quivering, and I fucking hate every second of it. I nuzzle my nose into the crook of her neck. "I'm sorry. I never want to be the reason you're upset." Her body shakes, and I tug her closer, pressing my mouth to her shoulder blade. "Please don't cry. It kills me when you cry." I grab her hip, encouraging her to face me. She's hesitant at first.

"Please. . . I need to see your face." She shifts, and my heart stops when I lock eyes with her. God, she's so beautiful. "I'm sorry. For everything. For ever hurting you." I cup her face, rubbing my thumb against her wet cheeks. "I love you, Cal. I've only ever loved you. I've never stopped."

Her chest is wracked with sobs, and I pull her closer and hold her while she cries. "I love you." I kiss her nose, then her cheek. "I love you, Cal. Do you hear me?" I kiss her temple and brow. I wish I could siphon all the sadness

out of her. Take her pain and make it mine. No matter how bad it's been for me, I've never wanted her to suffer.

She grabs my shirt, tugs me forward, and claims my mouth. I want to slide into her and fuck her until she feels the depth of my love, my need for her, but this isn't about sex. It's about making her really hear my side. "I know you feel it. Don't lie to me, Cal. You feel it. The electricity buzzing between us. It's always been like this. Since the moment I walked into that bar and saw you. And it's never gone away."

I run my lips down her chin, kissing the sensitive part of her collarbone. I cup her breast, rubbing her hard nipple between my thumb and index finger. It's barely above a whisper, but she whispers my name in a soft plea. "The least we can do is be honest with ourselves and stop running away. Tell me, Cal. Admit it and tell me what I wanna hear. I know you're dying to tell me that—"

"I love you," she says in a hoarse sob. "I love you, but it hurts too bad."

I claim her mouth, kissing her with intent. Kissing her so she knows that I won't hurt her. I've always only wanted to protect her and keep her safe. "It's going to be okay."

"It's not. It won't." She cries against my lips. "I won't make it back another time."

"Cal, without you, I'm not making it back at all. Don't you see? You showing up on my doorstep is a sign. Our story isn't over yet. Not even close."

Chapter Nine

Callie

“Move in with me.”
“What?”

“I know you aren’t deaf, babe. Move in with me.”

“I never said I was deaf. I just didn’t know if I heard you right. You want me to move in with you?”

“Practically already live here. What would be the difference?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Russ didn’t sign up to have a third roommate?”

“Russ loves you. Plus, I’ll get rid of him as soon as you say yes to me.”

I slap him against the chest. “You’re not getting rid of Russ. I love Russ. He’s like the brother I never had—” I squeal and suddenly find myself flat against Easton’s mattress.

“Brother or not, I’m gonna need you to not use the word love and another man’s name in the same sentence, or I’ll be spending some time in jail.”

“Wait, are you jealous? My confident, tough-guy boyfriend is jealous?”

“Not jealous. Protective. Need to secure what’s mine.”

My chest vibrates with laughter. “Oh boy, that sounds super hot.”

“Good. Because if it scared you off, I’d have to just come after you and keep you captive. Feed you Pop-Tarts and my cock until you realize you’re madly in love with me.”

“Ahhh, Plan B is kidnapping and Stockholm Syndrome, huh?”

“You don’t even wanna know what my Plan C is. ’Cause baby, you ain’t ever getting away from me.”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “So, I guess I shouldn’t tell you you’re my forever? Spend a little bit more time playing hard to get?”

“You should start practicing saying yes because one of these days, I’m gonna make you mine. And it’s gonna be official.”

“Oh yeah?”

His hand slides down my bare belly to my panties, and a finger slips through my pulsating sex. “There’s no better time than the present. Say it.” He strokes me harder. “Come on, babe. Practice makes perfect.”

His fingers feel so good. “Yes. . .”

I stir awake at the memory. My eyes flutter open to see Easton next to me. He’s awake on his side, staring at me.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” I reply.

“I think we need you to—”

I press my finger over his lips. “Please, let’s not. Last night was pretty intense. I just. . . need some time to digest. Is that okay?”

He reaches out, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Yeah.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome to sleep longer. I gotta get up and take care of some things.” He continues to stare at me like he desperately wants to stay into bed and spend the day devouring my mouth. But after a few beats, he pulls back and gets out of bed. I sit up and watch him dress. Then I notice the large tattoo along the side of his ribcage. I inhale sharply, reading each letter. *Callie.*

I hold my breath until he leaves the room and fall back against the mattress.

It’s just a tattoo. But when? Why? He didn’t have that when we were together. Which means he got it after. Why would he put something so permanent on his body?

My head spins, but I blame it on the wine mixed with the emotional rollercoaster of last night. I get up, brush my teeth, and pee. Staying in the comfort of his oversized T-shirt, I walk out to the living room. The smell of bacon causes my stomach to growl. “Seriously, you need to get this place inspected for aliens.” I cover my belly.

“I’ll add that to my list.” God, his smile is infectious. I have to look away before I jump his bones. I busy myself, looking at all his pictures, loving that he has one of us still on display.

“Missed seeing you in my T-shirts.” I gaze over my shoulder at Easton. My cheeks warm, loving the way his eyes rake over my body.

“Missed wearing them. I forgot how comfortable they were.” This is a lie because I *totally* did not throw out the one I still had of his and wear it on the regular. “So, you said you fix these places up. What’s wrong with this cabin? Seems pretty perfect to me.”

“There were a lot of exterior renovations. One being the stairs.” His lips curl into the sexiest smile. He’s smart and doesn’t say anything more about those damn stairs. “The roof needs patchwork. But because of the weather,

I'm working on refurbishing the floors and repainting the walls in the second bedroom."

"Ahh, I see. How much longer do you have out here?"

"Not sure. I'm ahead of schedule, so maybe a few more months. But if they offer me more work, I'll stay."

"And when you're done, what do you do? Will you come back home?" I say home like it's a place where I am. Or at least it was.

Something passes in his expression, but he's quick to mask it. "Not sure."

I want to kick myself for asking. We've been getting along for five seconds, and here I am, already asking if he wants to come home and see how things go. Wait. . . do I *want* him to come home to see where things go? Shit. I turn around, breaking eye contact, and distract myself with another photo frame. "So, what else?" I ask, picking up the photo of us.

"I gotta check on the generator. With all the heavy snow from the night before, I'll need to dig it out of the snow. Can't have anything go wrong with it if we lose main power."

"Cool. Hey, whatever happened to Jake?" I love his dog. And until this moment, I haven't realized he's not here.

"He's down the hill with Sammy."

"Sammy?" My shoulders tense. He has a woman friend who has his dog, and I'm here—

"Yeah, babe. Sammy. The guy who hired me. He gets lonely, and he and Jake have formed a bond. I let him take him here and there to keep him company. He has a lot of land for Jake to run. Sometimes that damn dog refuses to come back to me."

I let out a slow yet relieved sigh. "Oh, cool. And yeah. I wasn't thinking anything—"

“Cal—”

“Just drop it, Romeo.” I place the frame on the mantel and walk over, taking a seat at the counter.

He shakes his head. “Here, eat up.” He slides a plate across to me, and my stomach instantly growls, reminding me I skipped dinner. Again.

“This looks good, thanks.” I shove a slice of bacon in my mouth. “What can I help with today?”

“You?”

“Yeah, me. See anyone else here?”

“Since when does Callie Baker like to get her hands dirty?”

I take another bite. “A lot of things have changed about me, Easton Cruz,” I reply and wiggle my brows.

“Noticed the tattoo on your thigh hasn’t.” I gaze down at my exposed thigh. The one and only tattoo I have with Easton’s initials.

“Don’t hold out hope for that one. Costs more to get them removed than put on. I’ve almost hit my fundraising goal, though.”

“Wouldn’t bother. It looks good on you. Always has.”

I shrug, trying to hide how his compliments affect me. “Nobody even knows what it is. Whoever asks about it, I tell them that EC stands for extra cool, which is pretty legit.”

Maybe that wasn’t the right thing to say. Easton’s smile falls, and his eyes darken.

“Who gets to see that?” The question is asked by a man ready to slay.

“Oh! No. Not like that. I tried teaching swim lessons at the YMCA last year. My therapist said it could be a good coping skill. It was just a bunch of curious kids. Couldn’t really tell them they were the initials of my broody ex. So I lied.”

“Hmm. . .”

He takes a sip of his coffee, his eyes trained on me. I wish I was in his head right now to get an idea of what he’s thinking about. I said no talking about last night, but we’ll need to at some point. A lot was said. Truths revealed. He still loves me. And I confessed a truth I’ve been harboring for almost two years. That I still love him. It felt strange to admit that. I’ve worked so hard to pretend I don’t. The bigger issue is where do we go from here?

“Hmm yourself. I’m gonna get dressed. Hide my extra cool tattoo. Meet you back in twenty?”

He nods, and I jump off the stool to escape his heavy stare.

“Easton?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“Do you ever think about the future?”

“What do you mean?”

I turn in his arms. His eyes look tired. A man fell off the rig at his site today and died. I should have gone home and let him sleep. I know the accident is affecting him. It’s affecting me too. “The future. Where you see yourself in ten years.”

He tugs me closer, pressing his forehead to mine. “What’s going through that head of yours?”

“Nothing. . . sorry. I think I’m getting my period or something,” I say, wiping my tears. “It’s just. What happened today? What if that was you? What if—”

“Hey, it wasn’t. I’m right here.”

“I know. But I can’t stop thinking about what if. I can’t imagine you not coming home one day. And I see you coming home to me for a really long time. And if that happens, I don’t know—”

I start to cry. Easton cups my cheeks, gently kissing my nose, cheek, and forehead. “Callie Baker. I will never leave you. There will never be a day that I don’t walk through that door to you.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“Nothing will ever keep me away from you. I would fight anything and anyone who gets in my way. Even death. No one is messing with our future. And the way I envision it, it’s a damn good one.”

Easton must have needed less than twenty minutes because when I walk out of the bathroom, he’s already in the bedroom, hard at work. And shirtless, might I add. “Is that part of the job?” I ask, grabbing his attention. He straightens and wipes a bead of sweat from his forehead.

“Is what?”

“Being shirtless. That how you always work?”

“Usually just me, babe. No one else around to complain.”

And who’s complaining now? Not me. Wiping the drool off my mouth, I ask, “What can I do?”

He nods to the can of paint. “Think you can handle a little painting?”

“Pfft. . . do you know me?”

His chest rumbles with humor. “Yeah. Why I asked.”

I wave him off. “Move over. I got this. What needs painting?”

“Start with priming that wall.” He watches me with wary eyes as I get to work. When he feels confident I can paint within the lines, he brings his

attention back to laying the floor. We're quiet for the first hour. Painting takes a lot of concentration. Every so often, I sneak a peek at him.

Why is a man who works with his hands so damn sexy? Tory's a sucker for a man in a suit, and Ashley wants that fairytale prince charming who will give her that white picket fence. Me? I loved a man who worked with his hands. The laboring type. Hell, it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen, watching his muscles flex as he steadies the nail gun and shoots the nail into the floor. His concentration. The way his brows knit together. The way he's kneeling that makes his washboard stomach clench and flex. His happy trail—

“Shit.” I look down, realizing my paintbrush is dripping paint onto the floor. I kneel to clean up my mess.

“I got you.” Easton drops the nail gun, grabs a towel, and leans across me to wipe the floor. I would help, but I malfunction when his thick bicep brushes against my breasts. The smell of sweat and pine teases my senses, and I bite my bottom lip. “Gotta be careful.” He pulls back, catching the daze in my eyes. “The primer will soak into the wood and show through the stain if you don't wipe it up quick.”

My brain is screaming for him to wipe me up with his tongue. “Get that lip outta your mouth, or we're not getting anything else done.” That's a shame. I slowly release my lower lip, and he just as slowly retreats, picks up his nail gun, and gets back to work.

The next couple of hours go by as slow as molasses. I knew I said I enjoyed a man who knew how to use his hands, but I'm starting to get jealous of all his power tools. I was the one who suggested we table anything concerning us, so I can only blame myself if I'm mad he isn't trying to jump my bones.

It's for the best, anyway. The lines of right and wrong are becoming blurred. Great sex cannot be the reason we give in. We have serious issues to

work out. And even if we manage that, it doesn't mean anything for after. What would after even be? A future? Reconciliation? I snicker at that insane thought.

“You good over there?”

“Me? Yep. Peachy.” I dip my brush into the paint for the third consecutive time.

“All right. Let's go.”

“What? Where? I'm not done.”

He stands. “I know that look. Let's go.”

“Uh, I don't think so. I have no interest—”

“Not talkin' about sex, babe. Even though you can lie out your teeth all you want. Change of scenery. Get changed. Gonna take you on a little adventure.”

“Adventure?” I ask, dropping the brush. “What kind of adventure?” The last part comes out strained because the way he says adventure has my mind in a tailspin and my lady parts clapping for joy.

“Gonna have to wait and see. Clean up. You have ten minutes.” Then he walks out of the room.

Fuck!

Ten minutes isn't enough time to shave my entire body. But he did say no sex, so I'm half banking that's the case. Half banking he likes a woman with hairy legs.

Also, what does one wear on an adventure? Survey says jeans and a sweater because that's all I have. It's on my agenda to ask Easton if he can attempt to get into my car again since I have no underwear.

I walk out of the bathroom twelve minutes later. Easton is already by the door. “How do you get ready so fast?”

“Magic. You ready?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure what I should be ready for.”

“Get your jacket and snow pants on. I wanna show you something.”

“This isn’t where you take me into the woods and kill me because of my horrible paint job, is it?”

“No, that’ll be later. Come on.” We head outside to the snowmobile. “Did you want to rock paper scissors for who straddles who?”

“Did you want to know how having my fist in your mouth feels?”

He laughs and climbs on. Taking my hand, he guides me to the sitting position in front of him. Just like before, he tucks me up against his chest. “Hang on,” he says, zipping through the forest. After a bit, I relax and enjoy the scenery. Easton squeezes my waist, getting my attention, and points into the distance.

I jerk against him. “Oh, hell no!” I yell, staring at a mother bear and her cubs.

“Don’t worry. We have other plans.” Easton follows some trails through a ravine until we come to a stop. “Where are we?” I ask.

“Wait and see. Climb off.” He helps me off the snowmobile, and we take a few steps until my mouth parts, releasing a soft gasp.

“Easton, wow. It’s. . . beautiful.” I stare out at the scenery. We’re surrounded by snow-covered trees that teeter off a cliff, offering a view of a white landscape for miles.

“It sure is.”

“How’d you find this place?”

“Not really sure how I fell upon it, but it’s pretty damn gorgeous.”

“Do you come up here often?”

“Yeah. I do a lot of thinking up here.”

I look up at him. “What do you think about?”

“Not sure you want to go there, Baker.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agree, staring off into the ravine.

“Places like this make me glad I left the city. Makes you appreciate the little things and see life through a clearer lens.”

I want to ask him so bad what he means, but he’s right. Once I open that can of worms, there’s no shutting it. “Hmmm. . .” is all I say and return my eyes back to the stunning view. “Well, I can see why you come here. It’s very peaceful.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

And I do. The feeling of peace reminds me of times when my life wasn’t so hectic. When there weren’t a million voices in my head. When I wasn’t drowning in sadness and self-doubt, when once upon a time—*Shit!*

I yelp as a frozen ball of snow smacks against my face. I whip around to Easton. “What the hell!”

“I’m getting real sick of seeing you with that lip tucked between your teeth, Baker.”

Oh, that fucker. “Oh yeah? I’m getting sick,” I bend down, scooping a ball of snow into a weapon, and I stand, “of your stupid mouth!” I aim and fire, smacking him in the chest.

“Is that all you got?” he says, taunting me.

“Oh, there’s more where that came from.” I bend to scoop another snowball when Easton tackles me and we both fall into the snow.

“What you gonna do now, Cal?” He looks down at me, waiting. “What’s your next move?”

“Probably knee you in the balls.”

My eyes fall to his mouth, and his lips form into the mischievous smile I’m a sucker for.

“Sounds like a good time. But right now, I’m gonna kiss you.” He says it like he’s warning me. Giving me an out. When I don’t speak, he lowers his lips to mine. They’re cold yet soft, and he kisses me gently as if he’s worried I’ll break. The thing is, there’s a chance I will.

Forgotten is the snow around us. How fucked up our situation is. Or what lies ahead once we’re rescued. The only thing that matters is him kissing me right now.

I can’t tell you how much time has passed. It could be years or seconds, but it’s not long enough when he slowly pulls away.

“Glad to see my balls are still intact.”

“You’re still young. I’d hate to ruin you for any other woman.”

“When you gonna learn, Baker? There’s only one woman for me. Always has been.” He jumps off me and sticks his hand out. “Let’s go.”

I prefer to lay here and replay what he just said over and over because what the fuck?

“I think I see a bear—”

“I’m up!” I shoot up, grabbing his hand and letting him pull me to my feet. Then I push him. “Seriously, let’s go. Enough nature for me.”

I want to punch him in his throat for laughing, but at the same time, bottle it up and save that beautiful sound forever. I memorize the way he feels wrapped around me on the drive home. When we get back to the house, it’s imperative I figure out how to make SOS smoke signals because I need to get the hell out of here before I fall too far back into a rhythm of the way we used to be.

Chapter Ten

Callie

“How could he do this to me, Russ?” I let out another sob.
“I don’t know, Callie. He didn’t appreciate what he had. I swear I could kick his ass for this.”

“You should, and then kick it again,” I cry.

“I hate to see you like this, but you had to know. I love you too, and I couldn’t take it watching what he was doing.”

“I don’t understand. What did I do wrong? Why didn’t I see the signs? Is this the first time? Has he been doing this the whole time we’ve been together?” I grab my stomach as bile travels up my throat.

“I don’t know, Cal. But what I do know is you deserve better. Fuck him.”

“I never wanna see him or talk to him again.”

“Good. You shouldn’t. I’m always here for you. For anything.”

I stare up at Russ through my tears. “Thank you. Thank you for always being such a good friend to me. I don’t know if I could’ve gotten through this without you.” I barely finish my sentence because he leans forward, smashing his lips over mine.

Dinner was always one of my favorite times with Easton. Bedtime was number one on my list for obvious reasons, but watching him in the kitchen was so sexy. And it wasn't him holding a spatula or flipping a burger. It was because he could cook.

"I'd offer to help you, but you know the last time I tried—"

"Never seen someone set a stove on fire boiling water."

"I told you I wasn't a cook."

"Speaking of cooking. Who's in charge of feeding you? You look like you've missed one too many meals."

I look down at myself and back at him. "What's wrong with how I look?"

"You're too skinny. You're not eatin'."

I grab my drink and stand to walk over to the window. "I eat plenty. I'm just limited in what I can make." Mainly ramen, microwave meals, and candy bars.

"I know your diet. You need to eat more."

"Thanks, Dad." I stick my tongue out at him and look out the window. "It's crazy how clearly you can see the stars at night. Definitely don't get this view in the city." I gaze at the stars, lost in the night sky. "I'd probably take up astrology if I got to see this every night."

"Who says you can't?" I turn, looking at Easton with a questioning gaze. "Just saying, the city isn't for everyone. There's a whole world out there."

"Yeah, well, I like where I'm at. Work's there. My friends are there. Leo, my favorite barista. I can't imagine what he'd do if I left." I sip my drink, wondering what it would be like here. Finding peace. Enjoying the serene

wilderness. And the more I think about it— “Yeah, hell no. My attention span requires way more action.”

Easton bursts out in laughter, and I swear if I was wearing underwear, they’d be drenched. He slides a full plate of food across the counter. “You did require a lot of entertainment.”

I scoff. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I walk back and take a seat. God, this smells good.

“Just that you were never one that was content lying around. Always needed me to entertain you. The girl with *lots* of energy.”

“Whatever. I could totally just sit and chill. I loved our movie nights.”

“Which part? The movie or what we did while we were supposed to be watching the movie?”

My cheeks blaze. Okay, I walked right into that one. “I actually hated movie night. What is this? It smells horrible,” I lie just as my stomach growls. Jesus, I need to get those little aliens under control.

“Pork chops with asparagus and scalloped potatoes.”

“So gross,” I say, already filling my mouth. I moan into my second and third bites. “You still suck at cooking.”

“I remember when you sucked at a few things, too.”

I choke on a bite of asparagus. “Too far, dude. We’re not going there. This whole getting-along thing seems to be working for us, so let’s leave our weapons at the door.”

“You calling that mouth of yours a weapon, Baker?” His eyes flicker with mischief.

“You wish. So, what else do you do for fun?” I ask, changing the subject.

“You’re looking at it.”

“Wow, you turned into such a bore. Wish Jake was here. Miss that guy.”

His eyes drink me in, and he says, “You know the saying is man’s best friend, not girlfriend’s, right?” He sips his beer, wearing his sexy as hell grin. “I’m sure he missed you too. Thought he was going to insist on staying with you when I left.”

I try not to entertain his comment. We’re getting along, and it’s nice. “I would have taken him in a heartbeat, and we would’ve spent our nights drinking martinis and talking mad shit about you.”

He shakes his head, sporting a smile. “I’m sure you would have.” We spend the rest of the evening in mindless chatter. Laughing about simple times. Bar stories. Anything and everything that didn’t touch the ‘us’ topic. When it hits almost midnight, I yawn.

“It’s getting late.”

“Yeah.” I yawn again. “Wanna thumb war for who gets the bed? Or you can just be a gentleman and give it to me.”

“Not a chance. Best out of three.”

I don’t stand a chance because of his giant hand size, and Easton ends up winning all three, that bastard. I smile, knowing he won’t make me sleep on the couch even though I lost. He’s always been accommodating that way.

“There’s a pillow and blanket on the recliner. See ya in the morning.” He walks off.

“Wait, seriously?”

“Seriously. Night.” Then, he shuts himself inside his room.

I can’t believe he seriously just did that. “Jerk!” I grumble to the closed door and throw myself back on the couch. Shimmying out of my jeans and bra, I grab the blanket and pillow and set up my makeshift bed. I lie on my side and close my eyes. The problem is, I can’t sleep. I sit up and check the

hallway. The light's already off. "He's really just going to sleep while I'm out here."

Whatever. Hope a bear crawls through Easton's window and eats him in his sleep. Which would be lovely, but that just makes me worry a bear might crawl into a window in the living room and eat me.

I flop onto my back. "Bears can't open windows."

Can they?

I twist and face the couch. They *are* pretty strong. It's possible they can smash it. Hmm. . . *And nope*. I'm up and scurrying down the hall. Without knocking, I open the door and tip-toe into Easton's room. Without invitation, I climb into the bed and wiggle under the covers. I ignore his low chuckle and lay on my side, giving him my back. "Shut up."

"Still afraid of the dark, Baker?"

"I was never afraid of the dark." I was just always afraid to be alone. "Now shut up and stay on your side of the bed if you want to make it through the night." With that, I tuck my hands under his comfy pillow and fall asleep instantly.

Chapter Eleven

Callie

“S eriously, watch the movie.”

“I am.”

“You’re not.” I giggle and slap his hand away.

“Sorry, my hands have a mind of their own. They wanted in the second they saw you in these tiny shorts.”

“Yeah, and if you keep doing that, we won’t watch any of the movie.”

“Babe, we’ve attempted to watch the same movie three times this week. You could care less about this movie. Sit on my lap.”

“No, we can’t. Russ is home. He can walk out and catch us.”

“Fuck, Russ. Babe, sit on my lap. My cock needs to be inside you.”

“Easton—”

“If he walks out, it’ll look like we’re cuddling. Which we will be. I’ll just have my cock up your wet cunt while I bounce you up and down on my lap.”

My lips part at the visual. He knows I won’t stand a chance after that offer. I slowly slide onto his lap. Under the blanket, he pulls down his sweats, pushes my skimpy pajama shorts to the side, and slides through my slick heat.

“That’s it, babe. Oh yeah.” He lifts and then drops me down on his dick. “God, you sure do love this movie.”

I moan, gripping his thighs. “Fuck,” I bite my lower lip. “It’s getting to the good part.”

Easton chuckles through a moan, increasing the pace. “God, you’re so perfect. Take my cock, babe.”

“Easton. . .”

A moan travels up my throat, and I stir in bed. My body is on fire, and I tug the blanket off my legs to relieve the crazy pressure between my thighs. I slide my fingers down my belly but am stopped by a giant hand around my waist. My hips are pulled backward, and I feel something massive between my butt cheeks. I moan again, rubbing my ass against it.

“Unless we’re calling quits on this truce bullshit, you better stop grinding into my dick, babe.” My eyes shoot open, and the room comes into focus. Yep, this isn’t my room. And I’m definitely not having a sex dream. Holy shit. “Stop squirming. You know he likes to sneak in.”

“Shut up,” I hiss, trying to catch my bearings. My sex is throbbing, and I’m fighting not to press into his erection. Because that’s all it would take since I’m not wearing underwear. “You go any further, and I will mutilate you.” *Please don’t listen to me. Please don’t listen to me.*

“I wouldn’t think of it. Spending all this time with you has made me realize you’re more like a sister to me anyway. No attraction.”

“Shut up. You don’t have a sister.”

“But I imagine it’d be like this. Innocent cuddles. No spark.”

“Your dick is like a steel rod poking me in the ass, so no attraction, my ass. You want me.”

“Morning wood, babe. Comes with the territory.” He releases me and rolls off the bed, disappearing into the bathroom. Asshole!

Wait. . . is he really not attracted to me? I can’t remember the last time, if ever, he’s been able to resist me. He has to be messing with me. He kissed me yesterday. There was passion. But he didn’t go any further. He didn’t even attempt to have sex with me. What if he’s *not* into me anymore?

Whatever.

He sucks, anyhow.

I climb out of bed and stomp toward my bathroom. I take a cold shower because it’s needed and dress in Easton’s sweats and a T-shirt. Our day is pretty similar to yesterday. We work in the spare bedroom and then drive to the ravine. Today, he doesn’t try to kiss me, which irks me, and he cooks another fantastic dinner when we return home.

We’re back to our game of thumb wars, and I lose for the second night in a row. “Oh, come on. Your hands are huge! We should just switch off.”

“No, you cheated and took half the bed last night. You’re couching it tonight.”

“Fine. Your bed’s horrible anyway. Worst sleep of my life.”

“Bet your morning was even worse.” He winks and saunters off, closing the door behind him. He seriously has a death wish.

I make it ten minutes longer than last night before I pull back the covers, threaten his life, and fall asleep.

I will give it to Easton. He has one hell of a bed. My body is sprawled out, and I've never slept so well. Not because I'm sprawled out on his bed but because I'm lying across Easton's entire body. God *dammit!* I pop an eye open, and my first visual is his chest. Sculpted pecs covered in tats. My stupid arm is wrapped around his torso, resting on a bed of abs, and my leg is tangled with his while my damn crotch is nestled against his muscular thigh. And leave it to my hyper-aware body, on its own accord, to grind into it.

Why does the universe hate me?

Easton mumbles something in his sleep. I release a small squeal when he cups my ass. *What is he...* Squeezing, he pulls me closer to him, nuzzling his nose into the lining of my neck. Another tug. My hips raise, and I swear, one more inch, and I'll be straddling him. I should feign sleep. Unconsciously slip onto his gorgeous dick.

Shut up, Baker!

"Callie," Easton whispers and tugs me even closer. My eyes shoot open, but his are still closed. "I want you, Callie," he murmurs. Holy shit, he's totally dreaming. About me. Eep! I allow my body to relax. He fills both hands with my butt cheeks and drags my body on top of his. Fuck, this is a bad idea. I should wake him up because I'm about to legit have sex with a sleeping person. He tugs me up, causing my sex to brush along his erection, and an accidental moan slips off my tongue. His fingers dig into my hips, dragging me down and repeating the same motion. The friction alone is going to make me come.

In the third round, I assist, working my hip against him. "Callie." A hand slides into my hair, and he brings my head down, his lips brushing along my neckline. His warm breath skates along my ear, and he murmurs, "Really

enjoying how far you're letting this go, but if you wanted to get off, you could have just asked."

Fucking. ASSHOLE!

I rip myself from his hold and fly off the bed. I trip and fall, which is the least of my humiliation, and whip around to see him smirking back at me. "You seriously are an asshole."

"Oh, come on. Get back in here. I'll let you finish. I know you were close."

"I'd rather get mauled by a bear."

"Sure about that?"

No. Bears seriously freak me out. "Yes. And I would enjoy every second of it." He slides his hand beneath his boxer briefs and begins to stroke himself. *Look away, Baker!* "You're gross."

"Prove it. Come here."

"That doesn't work on me anymore."

"What exactly doesn't work on you?" he asks while his hand works back and forth.

I lick my lips. "That. Stop it." I'm not a sex fiend or anything. But Easton has a very nice cock, and I never passed up an opportunity to be acquainted with it. Whether it's sex or oral. And right now, I can't stop thinking about—

"Callie—"

"Fuck off!" I snap and storm out of the room.

After *another* cold shower, I get dressed and find Easton already working. He doesn't acknowledge me when I enter the room, so I do the same and get to painting. Thirty minutes pass, and I can't handle the silence any longer.

"I just want you to know I'm not attracted to you either. This morning was out of desperation. Yeah, I went along with it, but I have needs too. Ones that aren't being met because I'm here and not at home." I wait for his reaction to

my bullshit. “Hello? Do you hear me? I don’t like you.” He’s bent over, nailing in a board. “Whatever, I don’t care. I couldn’t even rub one off in the shower because I was so disgusted by what happened earlier. I can’t wait to get out of here. Gonna go on a sex spree! Hello!”

Easton turns to me. Then he pulls an AirPods out of his ear. “You saying something?”

UGH!

“You’re disgusting.” That pretty much sums it up.

“Got it.” Then he slips it back into his ear and returns to nailing.

“God, you’re such an asshole,” I say, knowing he can’t hear me. “And I thought I wanted you again. Thank God you stopped that,” I grumble and pick up my brush. “*Prove it,*” I mock his comment earlier. “You only wish I proved it. I would have blown you into tomorrow. You would’ve blacked out from pure enjoyment.” Because people have talents. One of mine just happens to be that I suck a dick like a champ. Well, his dick. I haven’t sucked anyone’s dick since his. “It’s been a while. A year and a half, to be exact, but it’s like riding a bike, right? You wouldn’t be able to walk after a round with me. You and your egotistical *bullshit.*” I slap the brush against the wall. “God! Why did I admit I loved you? I’d take it back in a heartbeat if I could. Ugh.” I finish with a grunt and stab the brush into the paint can too aggressively because it erupts, splashing paint all over me. “Shit!”

I look up to see Easton staring at me. His jaw is so tight it’s ready to snap, and his gaze is downright murderous. “The fuck, Cal?”

“What? It’s just a little paint. Get over it.”

“I told you that shit’s gonna fuck up the stain. You gotta clean it up.” He drops his nail gun, and it clatters against the floor. He darts toward me, and I barely have a second to prepare before he throws me over his shoulder.

“Easton, what the hell? Put me down.”

“Sorry, Cal. Can’t have this shit ruin my favorite shirt.”

I slap his back. “This shirt sucks! Put me down!”

“Let you wear my clothes, and then you go and disrespect my shit. Not cool.”

Oh, my god, he’s officially a walking deadman. “You’re crazy. Put me down, or I’m going to—Easton!” I screech when the shower turns on, and he steps into it. “You’re so dead!” I yell as the cold water hits my back. He flips me, and the second my feet hit the shower floor, I prepare for a fight. But the words never come because he fists a handful of my hair, and his mouth crashes against mine. Instant pleasure shoots to my core. Need crackles between us. That minefield of desire we’re always teetering over ignites, and the ground below us shakes. “Getting real sick of this tart tongue of yours, Cal.” He sucks my bottom lip between his teeth and bites down.

“You love my tart mouth,” I breathlessly moan, kissing him back.

He hooks a finger into the hem of his shirt and rips it off me. His sweatpants are next. Then he pushes me up against the shower wall and drops to his knees. “What I love more is your wet pussy.” He grabs a handful of my ass and thrusts his mouth against my sex. His tongue licks up my slit, and I have to slam my hands against the shower wall to hold myself up.

A low sound of pleasure ripples off my tongue. “Easton,” I beg, swollen with need. He grinds my pussy against his face. A single finger slips inside, then two. Over and over, he gifts me his glorious tongue and fingers until I lose control of myself. The floor beneath me sways. My legs clench, and I sink my hands into his thick hair. A burst of heat coils in the pit of my core and ignites, and I bite down on my lip. My orgasm comes over me with a vengeance, stealing the air from my lungs.

“Shit,” I rasp out, trying to catch my breath. Easton stands, his gaze electric and penetrating as he looks at me. He struggles out of his wet jeans, and goosebumps prick down my spine. Lust drunk off the sight of him, I push him up against the wall. “My turn.”

“Fuck,” he growls. “Not for long. I need to be inside you.”

I’m so turned on I’m going to combust again the instant he’s in my mouth. I slide to my knees and wrap my hand around him. I use my thumb to caress the throbbing vein along his shaft and lean forward, pressing his crown into my mouth, eager to suck the precum off him. God, I missed the thrill. The power I felt having him like this.

His fingers rake through my hair and squeeze. “Cal,” he breathes out, and I look up to see him watching me. His hungry gaze lingers on my lips, and he watches me slide my wet lips over the crown again. I relax my throat and take him deep while keeping eye contact. “Fuck, Cal.”

I love how he says my name in that hoarse growl. It ignites an even wilder need within me. I suck hard, bobbing back and forth. The grip on my hair tightens, almost bringing tears to my eyes, but it only makes me want him more. Easton takes control, pistoning his hips and fucking my mouth. A gargled moan falls off my tongue as I lick and suck his glorious cock, until suddenly, he pulls me off him.

“I want to come inside you.” He pulls me to my feet, his dark gaze raking over me. Then, he turns me away from him, and my palms slap against the shower wall. “I gotta fuck you hard.” Digging his fingers into my hips, he positions his engorged cock at the entrance of my sex, and I cry out in ecstasy as he buries himself inside me.

He does exactly what he vowed to do and fucks me hard. My ass slaps against his groin with each quick, ruthless thrust. I am so far gone. I’m

delirious with need. “More. . . more,” I pant, crying out when he drives into me at a piston pace.

“Still. So. Greedy.” His grip turns brutal, igniting another orgasm. Spasms rock my body over and over. “Fuck,” Easton grunts, and his cock jerks, coming hard inside me.

My legs instantly give out. Easton hooks an arm around my waist to keep me upright. My own arms feel like jello, and I rest my head against the tile, hoping my heart doesn’t give out. Easton leans in, pressing kisses along my shoulder blade and neck. He sucks on my earlobe and says, “So, my dick’s the only one you’ve had in your mouth the past two years?”

“Oh, my god.” If my face weren’t already flushed, it would be maroon now. “How did you—I thought you had your AirPods in?”

“Hadn’t turned on my music yet, babe.”

“Oh my god, so you heard everything?”

“Every juicy detail. Gotta say. Made me happy to hear certain details. Pissed me off about other shit.” He bites my earlobe. “Thought you weren’t with anyone back home?”

“I’m not. I was lying to rile you up, which didn’t even seem to work.”

He tugs me closer. “Oh, it worked, alright. Saw fucking red thinking about anyone having you like this. Been seeing red for a year and a half now.”

His comment jolts my heart, and I quiver in his arms. I adjust myself and cause him to slide out of me, but I need to see his eyes. To know if he’s being truthful or feeding me lies. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you still think about that? It’s been almost two years.”

“Because I’ve never stopped thinking about you. Not a single minute goes by that you’re not at the front of my thoughts. My dreams. I meant what I

said the other night, Cal. I love you. Never stopped. Never will—”

I lift up on my toes and kiss him. I’m hoping the shower masks the tears that start to fall. I kiss him, using my lips to express how wrecked I am without him. My heart has always beat for him. And he’s the only one on my mind when I lay in bed at night. Because I haven’t stopped loving him, either.

“I love you, too. I lied earlier. I love you so much,” I confess through my tears. I keep kissing him because I need him to know. To feel it. To understand just how crazy in love I am with him.

I feel him get hard again, pressing against my stomach. I become crazed with emotion. He reads me like a book, always knowing when I’m in need, and lifts me into his arms. Just as crazed, he slides back inside me.

“Love you, too. Cal. You’re mine. Always.” Then he makes the sweetest kind of love to me. Even after the water runs cold, we fuck. Make love. Whisper sweet words of affirmation to each other. And when I let go for the third time, I silently vow that maybe I won’t kill my friends anymore because this has turned out to be the sweetest bestie betrayal ever.

Chapter Twelve

Easton

“Don’t just stare at it. Tell me what you fucking think, man? Think she’ll like it?”

Russ shrugs. His lips are turned. “I don’t know. Don’t you think it’s kind of soon?”

“Hell no. I would have done it that night at the bar if she wouldn’t have thought I was some kind of fucking stalker. Dude, you’re supposed to be happy for me. Why the frown?”

“Just think it’s a fast move.”

“Well, my man. When you know, you know. Gonna head home now and set the mood. She’s out running some secret errand. I’ll keep you posted. Wish me luck. . .”

“Try this.” I reach over the counter.

“What is it?”

“There’s a small shop in town that sells real maple. Gave me a recipe to make candied bacon. It’s life-changing.” She accepts the bacon.

“Martinis are life-changing. I don’t know about bacon. Which. God, I miss martinis.” She takes a bite and groans. “Okay, maybe martinis *and* candied bacon. This is so good.”

“Told you.”

“Speaking of martinis, any update on the weather? It doesn’t seem to be snowing. Think they’ll start working on the roads soon?”

“Not sure. You ready to bail?” I keep my face passive despite my jaw being ready to snap. The thought of her leaving after this morning . . .

“No. Just thinking about that martini. Why? Are you thinking about how nice it will feel to throw me out?”

I hand her another strip of bacon. “Only place I’m throwing you is onto my cock. Eat up. We can try and get into your car today. Unless going commando is your thing.”

She chuckles, causing my dick to jerk against my jeans. “I’ve always valued the purpose of underwear. But if I had to sacrifice something. . .” she says, shrugging.

“Good, I like you like that. Easier for me.” Her eyes flash with that hungry look. The one she’s been wearing all morning. Fuck, I’ve been inside her five times now, and I’m already aching for more.

“Okay, well, I’m going to go pee, then get dressed. Any chance you know if the WiFi will be up anytime soon?”

“No, why?”

“Just work stuff. Technically, this was a ‘working’ vacation. I have deadlines to meet.”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks.” She smiles, hops off the stool, and saunters down the hall. I watch her disappear into the bathroom.

There’s a crackling sound, then two beeps come from the corner of the living room. My eyes dart to the CB, and Sammy’s voice comes through the speaker. “Easton, come in. You there, Easton?”

Fuck. My eyes flash to the closed bathroom door. I storm over to the CB, picking up the receiver. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“You good up there? Think Jake is itchin’ to come home. I can haul him up there later—”

“Actually, I’m gonna need you to keep him a few more days. Got a lot of equipment out. Nails and sharp shit. Don’t want him around it.”

“All right then. You okay?”

“Yeah, hey, I gotta go. I’ll reach out in a few days.” I click off, drop the receiver, and then tear the plug from the wall.

“Hey, who are you talking to?”

I whip around. Callie is standing in the hallway, minus my sweatpants, her hair in a cute messy bun. “No one. Myself.”

“Oh, okay. Gonna steal another shirt since you ruined the other one.”

“*I* ruined? I remember you getting paint all over it.”

She shrugs. “I’ll be better with the next one.” She turns, pulling my shirt over her head, dropping it to the ground and giving me an excellent show of her peachy ass, and disappears into my room.

“Fuck.” I run my hands down my face. I’m playing a dangerous game here. I just hope I win in the end.

The car trip is a bust. Her locks won't open for shit. Doesn't help she cracked her key in the lock, but even trying to rig it open doesn't work. We make our daily trip up the ravine to the cliff. Watching her stare off into the distance like she was meant to be here turns my need for her into an obsession, and I end up fucking her in the snow.

Now I have her sprawled out on the floor in front of the fire, making sure her sexy little ass doesn't catch any frostbite.

"Easton?" she says, and I tuck her back closer to my chest.

"Yeah?"

"Where do you think we'd be right now if it weren't for, well, you know. . ."

I inhale slowly, calculating the right answer. "I don't know, Cal. Happy. I know that. We'd be together. That's all that would have mattered."

Her chest rises and falls. "Yeah."

We're silent for a moment until she turns in my arms. There's sadness in her eyes. "Why the sad face?"

"You said you only have a few months left here. When you're done, are you coming home?"

Her lips press together, waiting for my reply.

"Depends on what you mean by home."

"What if I say home. To me?"

Heat spreads across my chest, and I swallow the lump in my throat. "Then I'd fucking be there." I drop my mouth to hers. "Home isn't a place for me, Cal. It's wherever you are."

"Really?" she asks, her eyes glistening with tears.

"Stay. Stay with me until I finish the cabins."

"You want me to *stay*?"

“Yeah. Cal, I just got you back. I can’t imagine losing you again. Not for a second. Not for three months. Stay with me.”

“But I have a job—”

“You work remotely, right? You can do it down here. If you need to go into the office, we’ll make the trip into the city for a night or two. Cal, I love you. I want everything with you. Stay. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

“This is crazy.”

“Well, I’m crazy about you.”

“Shit. I don’t—I mean, we just…” This is crazy. “I—okay. Shit, yeah. I’ll stay.”

I squeeze her against me and swallow her squeak, taking her mouth hard. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For you. Making me whole again.”

She pushes me so my back is pressed against the rug and hurles on top of me. “Oh, shut up. Since when did my sexy, rough-around-the-edges boyfriend become such a sap?”

“Fuck, Cal.” I wrap my hand around her neck and pull her to me. “Like the sound of that.” I kiss her hard.

“Yeah, sounds kind of strange. I should probably not say it—*ouch!*” She yelps when I slap her ass.

“Not a chance. Say it again.”

“No—*shit!* Okay, boyfriend.”

“Again.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to bunk up with my *boyfriend* in the middle of the woods.”

She giggles as I land kiss after kiss all over her face. “I can’t imagine what

my friends will say when they hear about this. I'm never going to live this down. Tory especially. That gloater."

"This is all that matters." I slide my sweats down, open her thighs, and press my cock through her slick heat. "This is the only thing that's ever mattered."

Chapter Thirteen

Easton

“You piece of shit!” I barrel at him, taking him to the ground. My fist rears back, and I punch him in the nose.

“Fuck you. You don’t deserve her.” I take a punch to my temple but land another to Russ’s chin.

“And what? You do?” His knee meets my groin, and I jerk and groan. He throws me off him and shoots up.

“You treated her like a possession. Like some prize you won. She’s more than that.”

“She is a fucking possession. She belongs to me!” I hurl myself at him, slamming my shoulder into his gut.

“And now she’s not.” He grunts when I punch him in the stomach. He gets a few shots into my kidney. I push off him. My chest is heaving. Blood drips from my lip.

“Why?” I cry out. My anger turns into anguish at the loss of her. “She was mine. I would have never—”

“Not anymore. You were going to fuck it up sooner or later.”

“I never would have hurt her. I never touched that girl.”

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t there. But it never stopped you before.”

“That was before! Before I met her—” My voice cracks before I end that sentence. *“She’s gone.”*

“Leave her be, man. She’s better off.”

“Go fuck yourself. I want you out.”

“Be gone by lunch. . .”

Callie

Three days later. . .

“You know, I could get used to this.”

Easton cocks his head back, catching my silly dance and grinning. “What’s that?”

“This life. Wake up and have glorious hot sex. Get hand fed by my ridiculously hot boyfriend”—I emphasize the boyfriend part—“and work on the cabin.”

His laughter is my drug.

“You enjoy fixing the cabin up?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “I like being productive. And being with you. Plus, I get a ride to the cliff if I do a good job. That’s probably my favorite part of the day.”

He wipes his hands on his work towel and stands. “That’s your favorite part of the day,” he questions, slowly prowling toward me. I know now to put the brush down when he gets like this, or I’ll ruin another shirt.

“Why the glum face? Thought you’d like that,” I rasp and step back. His eyes darken, and I know I’m in for it. A burst of arousal heats my core, and I

suck in my bottom lip.

“Get that fucking lip out of your mouth, babe.”

“Or what?”

His frown turns into a breathtaking smile, and nervousness skitters through me. “Should I have said when I’m sucking your cock?”

He lets off a dark chuckle, snatching me and pulling me to him. His breath tickles my flesh, and he whispers, “Your favorite part of the day should always be when I’m fucking you. Wanna hear *my* favorite part of the day?”

If I had on panties, they would be soaked. “Yes,” I breathe.

He drags his hand down my belly, under his shirt, and sinks a finger in my tight cunt. “It’s when you’re moaning my name.” He pulls out lazily, pushing in a second. “It’s when you’re begging for more of this.” Over and over, with a slowness that’s complete torture, he fucks me with his hand. I reach out and hold onto his shoulder to stay upright. He hooks his fingers and presses against my clit, and I cry, his name falling off my tongue. “And my most favorite part is when you come for me. And only me.”

A burst of sensation surges up my spine, and he plunges three fingers past my swollen heat. He’s suddenly fast and deliberate, knowing exactly how to make me shatter. “Fuck, Easton,” I moan, my eyes falling closed as my body spasms through my orgasm.

“Yeah. This is definitely the favorite part of my day.”

I’m still clutching his shoulders as I come down. He pulls his fingers from my quivering sex, placing them on his lips. “Nothing can be any sweeter.” Then he sucks off my arousal.

“Okay, fine. You’re right. My favorite part of the day is working.”

“Watch it. That was just a preview of what I’ll make you do to get the answer I want.”

I wiggle my brows at him. “Don’t tempt me with a good time.”

“God, you’re maddening.” He drops a kiss on my lips. “And I love every fucking thing about you.” I melt into him. My friends are seriously never going to let me live this one down. “Okay, enough work. Let’s get you fed.”

“I swear you’re trying to beef me up so no other man will want me.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me out of the spare room. “I’m feeding you because you need more meat on your bones. You’re too skinny. I want something to hold on to when I’m fucking that ass from behind.”

I have absolutely nothing to say about that.

I follow him into the kitchen. Easton turns, catching the flushed color of my cheeks.

“Relax. I’ll make us some sandwiches. Then we can head out.”

“After a comment like that? The last thing I can do is relax.”

Easton lets off a sexy chuckle. “Fine. I’ll be quick. Maybe I’ll let you drive the snowmobile today.”

“Really?”

“Hell no.”

“Jerk,” I mumble under my breath. I twist around, hiding my smirk, and walk over to the radio. “Care if I turn this on?”

“Uh, sure. Go ahead.”

I plug it in and turn on the small radio. It takes me a minute to find a working station, but then the static is replaced by music. “Bingo.” An old Smashing Pumpkins song plays, and I turn it up. “I love this song,” I say, singing the words. I dance around the living room while Easton watches me. He looks happy. At peace. It mirrors exactly how I feel. “What’s got you all smiling, Mr Cruz?”

“Love seeing you here. Missed you, Cal. Promise you. I’m not leavin’ you

again. Ever.”

My heart does a double flip. “Same,” I reply, my voice hoarse. I continue to dance, breaking our connection because it’s too intense. The song ends, and another one plays. This one I also know well.

“Damn, good song. Woulda sold a nut to see them live.” My shoulders tense at his comment. “Callie—”

“It’s fine.”

“I didn’t mean that. . . the tickets.”

I wish I could, but I can’t hide the pain in my eyes. The tickets I bought for Rage Against the Machine. The ones hidden in a box in his closet. “Callie, say something.”

“I have nothing to say.”

“Yes, you do. Say it.”

“I have nothing to say!” I raise my voice. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s in the past.”

“But, it isn’t. That look on your face says it’s very much lingering in the present.”

“Well, what do you want me to say? That all is well in the world, and anything in the past is in the past?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s not really how I work. I can’t erase the pain or what you did to me.”

“Here we go. It’s all about what I did to you, which was nothing. We can’t move on if you continue to want to bring up the past.”

“I continue to bring up the past?” I say, my tone dripping with venom. How dare he? “I’m sorry. Is my pain a problem for you?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. Please explain.”

He throws the dish towel onto the counter. “It means we can’t fix the past. But we can move on from it. I am. I’m over being angry with you. I’m willing to bury the—”

“There’s nothing to bury for you! Jesus, how many times do we have to rehash this? You’re not the victim here. Is your ego that big that you can’t—”

“Oh, enough of this innocent-act bullshit.”

My mouth parts in shock. “Excuse me? How is it bullshit? I’m not the one who ruined us—”

“And neither am I! If you’d let me explain, you’d know I was innocent. Bet you can’t say the same for yourself—”

“Listen here, you jerk.”

“Just admit it.”

“Admit what? That I was all wrong about you?”

“That you’re not innocent either!”

“You are seriously crazy.”

“Admit it! You fucked Russ behind my back.”

I take a sharp breath. “Are you *serious* right now?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I know all about you two.”

“And what do you think you know? That he was your best friend and the only one who cared enough to tell me the truth?”

“If that was the case, he would have told you I didn’t do shit.”

“He told me you’d been cheating on me with that girl for months. Months!”

“And you expect me to believe that? You obviously knew Russ had a thing for you. Was that your plan all along? To play us both? Convince him that I was a—”

“A *cheater*? No, he didn’t have to convince me because I saw it with my

own eyes. He just did me a favor by showing me more proof that our entire relationship was a lie.”

“Bullshit.”

“I saw pictures! He showed me.”

“This story just keeps getting better and better. So, what, he convinces you that I’ve been cheating on you with some bogus pictures, and to get back at me, you fuck him?”

“Nice try. You’re not turning this around on me.”

“Why, ’cause you don’t wanna admit it? The bigger question is, how long were you two fucking around behind *my* back?”

“You are absolutely insane.”

“Answer the question, Cal.”

“I’ve never touched Russ. He was my friend.”

“Don’t tire yourself out with this sweet girl act, babe. I’m not believing it.”

“I don’t give a shit what you believe.”

He slams his palms against the counter, causing me to jerk. “I fucking saw you. I saw you two together. You were wrapped in his arms, lip-locked. My ass you were just friends.”

He’s lying. Creating lies to confuse me. I never kissed. . . My brain dredges up a memory from a night a long time ago. The last time I saw Russ. “No, it wasn’t what it looked—”

“Finally, the truth.”

“It *is* the truth. It was only one time. Russ was consoling me about what happened between us. He’d just shown me the photos, and I was a complete wreck. He told me everything would be okay, spewing some weird shit, and before I knew it, he was kissing me.”

“Oh, putting the blame on him now?”

“Yes, because I didn’t kiss him back! Clearly, you didn’t stick around because I pulled away almost immediately. I told him I didn’t have those kinds of feelings for him. I never would, and it was never like that with me and him. We argued because I thought he was my friend. He got mad and stormed off. I’ve barely heard or seen from him since that day.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“And I don’t care if you do. I don’t need to prove anything to you. You know what, I don’t know what we were thinking. This was a mistake.” I turn my back to him, trying to catch my breath. “This is why we can’t do this.”

“Cal, we can.”

“No, we can’t because there’s always gonna be something that brings us right back to the past.”

“Ask me about it. Ask me about that day. I will answer everything. Anything you wanna know.”

I turn to face him. “I don’t want to know. I don’t wanna hear it.”

“Why? Because you’re afraid that maybe I’m right and you’ve been wrong? That you jumped to conclusions? That I didn’t do anything wrong, and *you* fucking blew us up for nothing?”

I suck in a sharp breath. “So you’re saying I did this to myself?”

“Callie, I’m saying I did nothing wrong. And if you don’t want to hear my side, I don’t know how to prove my innocence.”

“Don’t bother. Your words mean nothing to me. I will always look at you and remember that day.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Wow, was she that good? Ever think about her while you’re up on the cliff? Have regrets about what I messed up for you when I walked in and—”

“I was going to fucking propose to you that day!” he yells. His words stun

me. “I came home to get ready because I was going to cook for you, then get down on one knee, pour out my fucking soul to you, and ask you to marry me.” Each word is a slap to the face.

“No.”

“Yeah.” Oh, God. The little black box in his closet. “You walked in on some random girl I’d never seen before. She came at me, and seconds later, you opened that door. She was on me, but only because it happened so fast. I was just as shocked as you were.”

“No,” I repeat myself.

“Yeah. Believe it. I did nothing but love you. That day, I was going to make you completely mine because I couldn’t imagine another second without you. And then you lost faith in us and walked away.”

“I saw her—”

“I don’t give a shit what you saw! You know what? You’re right. This isn’t workin’.”

He storms out of the kitchen and slides into his winter boots.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Away from this. It’s taken me a long time to be okay with my life. To feel numb. Then you show up and make all that pain come back tenfold. I’m done begging for something that meant little to nothing to you.”

Easton opens the front door and slams it behind him. I stand motionless in his living room. I don’t know how much time passes before my legs finally work, and I run into his bedroom, throw his shoes out of the way, and rip open the top of the shoebox. I stare at the small black box. I open it and cover my mouth as a sob rips out of my throat.

Inside is the most beautiful princess-cut diamond ring. He was going to propose to me. But I jumped to conclusions and allowed someone else to

convince me of a lie. He's right. I didn't trust him enough. I walked away.

I grab my stomach, feeling as if someone punched me, crumble to the floor, and sob my eyes out.

I don't know how much time passes, but Easton still isn't back when I retreat from the closet. I glance at the clock on the wall. It's been over two hours, and I know he left without a jacket. Pushing back the window shades, I look outside. He took the snowmobile. But where could he have gone? It's too cold to be out this long without a jacket. I try to convince myself that he's a big boy, but as more time passes, I worry. He's mad. But not angry enough to freeze to death. He'd come back and throw me out before doing that.

I watch out the window for him. My nerves are pretty shot, and I know something has to be wrong. Dressing in my snow gear, I grab his jacket and head outside. It hasn't snowed, so I follow the tire tracks. They veer toward the cliff. Knowing it's a hike, I inhale for strength and head out.

I follow the trail for no more than five minutes when I see it. The snowmobile is turned over on its side. "Easton?" I call out and immediately start to sprint. "Easton!" I yell, but he doesn't reply. I knew something didn't feel right. I run and almost trip when I see blood. "Oh, God. Easton!" I scream when I hear his faint voice in the distance. I follow the sound and find him propped up against a tree, surrounded by blood. "Oh, my god." I run and drop down next to him. "What happened? How badly are—is all this blood yours?" I frantically survey his body. He's scraped up pretty bad along his forehead, but when I scan his body, I see that most of the blood is coming from his leg. "Holy shit."

"There's a branch through my leg," he groans.

“I can see that,” I say, panicked. “What do I do? Okay, I can tip the snowmobile over and drag you. Can you walk? Maybe I can carry you. I’ll drive us back. I don’t know how—”

“Callie,” he says my name. His voice is so weak.

“Oh, God, you’re bleeding a lot.”

“I need you to run back to the house—”

“I’m not leaving you!” I say, frantic.

“I need you to. Inside on the end table.” He stops to catch his breath.

“There’s a CB.”

“Easton, I can’t leave you.”

“Plug it in. Press it and call for Sammy.”

I start to cry. “No, I won’t leave you.”

“If you don’t, I’ll die out here. Go. Tell him. . . there’s been an accident. . . tell him to hurry.”

Fuck. Fuck! “Okay, I’ll run fast. I’ll be right back. Here.” I put his jacket over him. “I’ll—”

“Go. . .”

I’m up and running back down the trail. My legs burn, but I refuse to slow down. When I enter the house, I trip and skid to the floor but drag myself back up, find the CB, and plug it in.

“Hello? Hello, is anyone there? I need help!”

“Yello?”

“Hi! We need help. Easton Cruz has been in a bad accident. He’s bleeding. He needs medical help,” I rush out.

“Easton? Alright. I’ll call for help. You sit tight.”

“Thank you,” I barely get out because I’m back out the door. By the time I reach Easton, he’s passed out. “Easton!” I scream his name. He doesn’t

respond, so I slap him. His eyes flutter open. “Please, stay awake. Help is coming.”

“Callie.”

“Please, stay awake. You’re going to be okay.” I cry. Tears rush down my face. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. That I didn’t trust you. This is all my fault.”

He reaches for my hands and squeezes, but it’s so weak. “It’s not. Maybe I didn’t try hard enough to make you listen.”

“No, you did. If I had just listened, we wouldn’t be here. You wouldn’t be here.”

“I’ve only wanted to be with you,” he says through chattered teeth.

“I’m so sorry. Please, just hang on, okay? Please. I love you. I love you. Please don’t die on me. I’d never survive it.” His eyes slowly close, and I slap him again to keep him conscious. “You’re my world too, Easton Cruz.” I can barely understand myself, I’m crying so hard. “You said so yourself. It was fate, me showing up on your doorstep. It’s our second chance. We deserve this chance. Please. Easton!” His eyes close. I slap him, but it doesn’t wake him. In the distance, I hear sirens and engines rumbling. I look behind me and see a herd of snowmobiles and lights.

“Over here!” I jump up and wave my arms. When they get near, a man jumps off and runs toward me.

“Where is he?”

“Over here. He’s hurt bad.” He’s quickly assisted by a pair of medics and two other men, who lift him from the snow. Easton howls out in pain, but I’m thankful because that means he’s conscious. “We got you, son.”

“Miss?”

“Yeah?” I turn frantic to the man calling for me.

“Jump on the snowmobile with Frank. He’ll take you down. We gotta hurry.”

It feels like a lifetime before someone comes out and escorts me back to Easton’s room. When I enter, he’s lying in bed. He has a bandage on his forehead, and his leg is in a cast. “Oh, Easton.” I burst into tears. I rush over to his bedside, and without minding his injuries, I climb in. “I’m so sorry. You must hate me.”

He cradles his arm around my waist and kisses the top of my head. “Babe, I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have stormed out like that. I’m the asshole.”

I raise my head. “Are you okay?”

“Just a broken leg. Stitches and some cuts and bruises.” I burst out into another fit of sobs. “Hey, it’s okay. If it wasn’t for you. . . Callie, you saved my life.”

“I felt like something was wrong. I’m so sorry. For everything I said. I do want to get over the past. Because I can’t imagine a future without you.”

He grabs my cheeks and kisses me hard. “Me either. When I get out of here, we’re makin’ plans, okay? You and me. And none of this not trusting bullshit. No more lies.”

I nod. “No more lies.”

“Love you, Cal.”

My eyes glisten with tears. “I love you too.”

There’s a knock on the door, and I try to slide off Easton, but he holds me in place. “Not going anywhere, babe,” he whispers into my ear.

“Glad to see you’re doing good, son.” The man from earlier enters the room. “This one over here saved your life.”

“She saved my life the moment I met her. Sammy, this is Callie.”

His brows perk. “You’re the infamous Callie. Heard a lot about you.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask and glance up at Easton.

“You sure are something special. Glad to have finally met ya.” His eyes land back on Easton. “Jake’s at the house. He was getting restless. Like he knew something was wrong.”

“I swear, that damn dog has a sixth sense.”

I gaze up at Easton. “Is it sad that I want to leave you here and go see Jake?”

His smile warms my heart. “No, babe. I’m used to being second fiddle when he’s around.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “But gonna warn you. Things are gonna change. That dog does not sleep in the bed with us. No room.”

“Oh, come on. He can fit between us.”

He digs his fingers into my hips. “Not a chance. You’re on me anytime we’re in that bed.” I blush, embarrassed Sammy is hearing this conversation. I reroute the topic and look over at Sammy.

“How are the roads? Do you have any idea when the phone lines will be back up and running?”

“Phone lines?”

“Yeah. The phone lines. Seems the storm has stopped. I’m hoping the roads will open soon.”

“Honey, ain’t no phone lines down.”

My brows scrunch in confusion. “But the blizzard. Everything’s been down.”

Sammy grabs his chest as he chuckles. “Girl, that wasn’t a blizzard. We’re used to the snow up in these parts. If you really wanna see snow, you should —”

I break out of Easton’s hold and sit up. “No. The blizzard. It’s why we’ve been stuck at the cabin. Easton said we had to wait until. . .” I turn back and look at Easton. There’s a sudden pinch in my gut. “You said everything was shut down. That we didn’t have access to anything. . .”

He doesn’t say anything. Why the hell isn’t he saying anything? “Easton?”

“Not sure what you’re talkin’ about. I talked to Easton a few days ago, and he said everything was good.” My head whips to Sammy’s, guilt washing over his features. My lips part, and I feel as if someone punched me in the stomach.

“Wait.” I slide off Easton.

“Callie, wait—”

“There’s been no outage?”

Sammy shakes his head. “Not that I know of.”

Slowly, I turn to face Easton. “You. . . lied to me?”

“Callie, I can explain—”

“You lied to me.”

“I didn’t want you to leave. I panicked. I did what I thought was right to get you to stay. You showed up on my doorstep out of nowhere. What the hell was I supposed to do?”

“Not lie to me,” I say with a calmness and conviction that I barely recognize.

“Callie, don’t. We said no more—”

“Lies. Yeah. And that whole trust thing. I fell for it, and it happened again.”

“I couldn’t let you walk out of my life a second time.”

“Well, this time, you can *definitely* blame yourself. Excuse me.” I walk out of the room. Easton yells for me, but I don’t stop. I can’t. I need a moment to process this. He lied to me. Deceived me. He made me believe I was stuck there without a choice in the matter. Would I have left if there wasn’t a blizzard? Yes. In a heartbeat. And he took that choice away from me.

I hold my chest, my heart slamming against my ribcage.

“He’s a good man.” My head whips to my left, where Sammy is standing. “He’s told me a lot about you. It’s been a hard road for him. If he lied to you, it was out of love. That man loves you somethin’ fierce. Remember that when you go running off.”

“I—”

“Before you leave, I’d appreciate it if you helped me get him home and settled.”

I nod. “I’ll help you get him home. But once he’s settled, I’m leaving.”

He stares at me for a beat, then nods. “You do what you need to do.” He turns to walk back into Easton’s room.

I call for him. “Thank you for being there for him.”

“You don’t need to thank me. Like I said, he’s a good man.” Then he disappears into the room.

“Callie, can you help me get Easton up the stairs?”

“Of course.” I grab Easton’s arm, but he shrugs me off.

“I don’t need help from either one of you. I got it.” He wobbles and grabs the arm rail.

“Stop being so stubborn, son.”

The stubbornness comes from the fact that I don't think he wants me to be the one helping him. He knows what's coming.

I kept my distance at the hospital because I couldn't be near him. Any time he tried to talk to me, try to convince me that he had a good reason for lying, I made excuses to leave the room. Because nothing he was going to say would change the decision I've made. I was leaving.

When Sammy opens the front door and a ball of fluff runs out, a massive smile blasts across my face. "Jake!" I squeal as he runs toward me, his tail wagging. "Hey, buddy! Remember me?" I assume that's a yes since he's practically licking away the first layer of my face. "Awe, I missed you, too. Have you been a good boy? Has anybody been rubbing behind your ear like this? Just like you like it? Oh, that's a good boy."

"When you're done making out with my dog, you can move out of my way so I can get to the couch."

I narrow my eyes and shoot Easton a dirty look. Leaning forward, I kiss Jake on his nose and whisper loud enough for Easton to hear. "Good luck with that one, buddy." Then I stand and move out of his way. He doesn't look in my direction as he hops inside, adjusting his crutches and dropping onto the couch.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No," he says flatly.

My fists ball against my side. He's the only one at fault here, yet he's acting mad at me. "You know what—"

"Callie, I forgot to mention, Bill towed your car to his shop. They were able to thaw the lock enough to get the key out. Bill is working on getting a new key made."

"Okay, thanks." I can feel Easton's eyes on me, but I refuse to give him

what he wants.

“Oh, and there was a call for you on the main line for the cabin rentals. A girl named Terry?”

“You mean Tory?”

“That could be it. Pretty frantic. Said she was supposed to hear from you and didn’t. I explained that you were okay. But I reckon by the way she was yelling, she didn’t believe me. Said she’s on her way up.”

Oh, great.

“Well, if there isn’t anything else. I’m gonna be on my way. Easton, I hope you’ll stay away from that ravine for a bit.”

“Have no reason to be up there anymore.”

That dig was meant for me, and it sure hit its mark.

Sammy turns to me. “Callie, it was a pleasure meeting you. Hope we cross paths real soon.”

“Thanks, Sammy.” I give them a hug, and he’s out the door. Silence quickly washes over us. I don’t know what to do or say. My hands fidget at my side. “Uhm. . . Did you want me to—”

“So, you’re leaving?”

“I am. I think you know it’s best.”

“I think the exact opposite. What I *think* is that we—”

“Easton, don’t make this any harder than it already is.”

“Harder? You’re the one that’s choosing to leave.”

“I need to. I. . . I need time to think.”

“What the fuck do you have to think about? Do you love me?”

“That’s not fair. This isn’t about love. You know how I feel.”

“Right now, I don’t. Because you’re choosing to leave. Callie, please. Just listen to me. Put yourself in my shoes. You would’ve done the same thing.”

I want to spit out that I wouldn't, but a part of me knows I might.

"You know, I would've understood if you came forward after a couple of days. Because you're right, maybe I would've done the same thing. But a week, Easton? Were you ever going to tell me?"

"Probably not, if it meant you stayed with me."

"And you would've been okay with that secret? Restarting our relationship with a lie? It makes me wonder what else you're holding back."

"Nothing. And you know that."

"Right now, I don't. And that's why I have to leave."

"So this is it? After everything, you're just gonna fucking walk away from us?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I need distance. This has been a lot for me."

"Well, it's been a lot for me too. And yeah, I fucking lied to you. But I'm not the one giving up. Again. You are. I can't keep doing this back and forth, Callie. I know if you walk out the door, we're done. So, make your choice. We work this out together, or you run away just like last time."

"Are you serious?"

"I need to protect myself too."

"Right, right."

The slamming of a car door halts my thoughts, and I strain my neck to look out the front window. I don't know what else to say, so I walk away, open the front door, and walk out on the porch.

"Jesus Christ, snow is so fucking stupid," Tory says as she shuts her door. I gaze to the passenger side as Ashley climbs out, then back to Tory, who sees me and screeches, "Oh, my god! You're alive!"

Tory starts walking towards me. I don't know what, but something comes over me. My emotions are running so high, and I don't know whether to cry

or scream. Instead, I must black out for a moment because the next thing I know, I'm darting down the stairs and lunging at her. "You fucking bitch!" She squeals as I take her down into the snow.

"What the hell, Cal?"

"How could you do this to me? How could you do this to me!" I scream. I grab her by the lapels of her jacket and shake her.

"Dang, so I take it didn't work?"

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" I pull her up from the snow just to slam her down again.

"Okay, shit, sorry!"

"What the hell were you thinking?" I screech at the top of my lungs.

"Cal, we just wanted our friend back. We couldn't sit around and watch you fall apart anymore."

"I wasn't falling apart."

"Oh, please. Yes, you were. You were so lost. Ever since Easton, you've been a ghost."

"I didn't ask you to meddle in my life."

"Somebody had to. No matter how hard we tried, you weren't getting better. We had to do something." She takes a few breaths. "I ran into Easton a few months back."

My eyes widen at her confession. "What?"

"Cal, he looked worse off than you. It was clear neither one of you had moved on and were both miserable. And you ask what we were thinking? We were *thinking* that we were willing to risk our most important friendship and put you both out of your misery. I'm sorry it didn't work, but you know what? If you didn't do this, you would've continued to live your life as this

shell of a person. Always with this what-if shadow following you around. At least now you know.”

I stare at her, taking in her confession. My chest becomes tight. “I hate you both.”

“I’m sure you do. Kind of figured that would happen if this blew up in our face. But we love you enough to risk it.” She looks up at me, sincerity in her gaze. I struggle to wrap my head around how they could have done this. And then I allow her words to sink in on why. They did this because they love me. Because they would rather risk our friendship to make me whole again.

I retract my vow to murder my best friends. My lip starts to quiver, and tears fill my eyes.

“Uh, oh” and “Oh shit” echo in the crisp air.

“I need you to take me home now,” I choke out.

“Okay.”

“Like, I need you to take me home right now,” I say, tears rushing down my face.

“Okay, honey. But you have to get off me first.”

“Because I really need to go home!” I scream.

“Callie, get the fuck off me!”

I snap out of it. “Oh yeah, sure.” I climb off and fall back into a pile of snow.

“Hey. It’s going to be okay.” Ashley pats me on the head.

I look at her, a lump stuck in my throat, and I shake my head. “I don’t think it is. Please take me home.”

Tory pats my leg. “We got you. Let’s go home.”

Ashley settles me into Tory’s passenger seat while Tory runs in and gets my stuff. When she returns, I ask if she spoke to Easton. She says no, but I

know she's lying by the look on her face. Feeling emotionally beat down, I let it go. That will be a battle for another day. Or life.

Chapter Fourteen

Callie

Three days later. . .
“Try this one.”

“Please, no.”

“Just try it. It’s way better than the other one.”

“Callie, I love you, but if you make me try one more of your martini concoctions, I’m going to throw up, then cooter punch you.”

“Dude, what’d my cooter ever do to you?” I ask.

“What did my stomach lining ever do to *you*? You’ve been torturing me for three days straight.”

“I wanna make sure I’m getting the recipe right.”

“Well, girl, you’re not. This is awful.”

“It’s because you don’t like martinis.”

“No, because I don’t like my martinis to taste like a vegetable garden.”

“Oh, you’re being dramatic. It’s a Bloody Mary martini.”

“Whatever, that was *not* a Bloody Mary martini. Maybe you should stick to fruits.”

“Whatever yourself. If you’re not gonna help me. I’m sure Ashley will.”

Tory lets off a boisterous laugh. “Girlfriend, there’s a reason she’s not calling you back.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because she refuses to talk to you until you’re out of this martini creation phase.”

“Whatever, give me that. I’ll try it.” I take a swig of my newest martini concoction. And then spit it out. “Jesus, that’s awful.”

“Thank you. Can we be done now?”

“Ugh, fine. Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you. You told me you saw Easton a few months back.”

“Yeah, and?”

Dammit, she’s going to make me ask it. “You know. What did you guys talk about? What was he wearing? Did he—”

“See!” she points at me. “That’s the exact reason I did what I did.”

“Tory, please.”

“I saw him up at Ray’s. He was sitting alone at the bar. Looked super sad. Like a guy who hadn’t gotten over a heartbreak.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I went and talked to him, duh. I asked why he was there. He said he was in town picking up some materials for a job. So, of course, I went all out, asking him every question under the sun and learned about the cabins and where he’d been the past year and a half. We chatted for about forty-five minutes, and he just had this look to him the whole time. A look that said he wanted to ask me about someone specific. But you know me, I always make men work for it. I refused to give up any information unless he grew a pair and asked. When I got up and said goodbye, he looked at me with the saddest eyes and

asked, 'How is she?' And that's when I knew he was still just as fucked up as you are."

"I wasn't fucked up."

Tory rolls her eyes at me. "Let's not rehash this. I hated what Easton did to you—well, what we thought he did—but I felt really sorry for him. He looked so. . . broken."

"What did you say when he asked?"

"I just answered honestly. Said you were still just as broken up as him." She raises her shoulders. "Then I got it in my head that I wanted to save the world one relationship at a time, so I conspired with Ashley to get you to his place." I stare at her, not sure if I want to strangle her or have a full-out sob session. "I really am sorry. I thought you two would have gotten past your bullshit."

"Yeah. Me too."

"You ready to tell me what happened while you were there?"

I sit back on my stool. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Why don't you start with the look on your face when the door opened to Easton Cruz. By the way, can we talk about how much hotter he's gotten? Damn, heartbreak looks good on him."

"Can we not?"

"You're right, sorry. Okay, start from the beginning. Wait, hold on. Let me make a real drink. I have a feeling I'm gonna need it."

By the time I finish, Tory has hearts in her eyes, and she's sipping her third vodka. "Dude, that story. And I can't believe Russ. What a douche."

“I know. All this time, I just thought Easton didn’t love me. That I wasn’t good enough. And he was innocent all along.”

“Did you know I almost banged Russ one time?”

“Ew, you did not.”

“Totally did. It was the night we all went to Ray’s for your birthday. We got super wasted. Remember when we shared the Uber home, and I said I would take a separate ride home?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Snuck into Russ’s room. We fooled around for hours. He was too drunk to have sex, though. It was a blessing in disguise, I guess. Can’t imagine waking up to that level of regret.”

I shake my head, still in disbelief. “I just can’t believe Russ would do that to me. I thought he was my friend.”

“Well, it sounds like your friend was in love with you and very jealous.”

“He was not.”

“Oh, come on. Stop being so naïve. He literally set Easton up to look like he was cheating on you. And those pictures? Were they even legit?”

“What do you mean? It was Easton and that girl. She was all over him.”

“Was it, though? Do you know how easy it is to alter images nowadays? Hello, we’re living in a world of AI.”

“So you’re saying those were fake?”

“Obviously. If Easton says he didn’t do it, those pictures technically don’t exist in real life.”

“Oh my god.” I cover my face with my hands. “What did I do?”

“Since you’re drunk, I say it’s not what you *did* but what you should do now.” That smile. Nothing good ever comes from that smile.

“Oh great, and what’s that?”

“I say we go confront that asshole.”

“That sounds like a great idea. Not. I don’t even know where Russ lives now. I haven’t talked to him since that day he made a pass at me.”

“Pfft. If you exist, you’re on the internet.” After a quick search, Tory yells, “Bam. Let’s go!” She gets up and grabs her purse.

“Dude, I’m hamboned right now. I’m not driving anywhere.”

“Hell no. Who said anything about driving?” She taps on her phone. “There, Jerry will be here in three minutes. Let’s go.”

Seventeen minutes later, we pull up to Russ’s apartment. “Oh my god, I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. This is your chance for answers. Closure. Possibly revenge.”

I twist in the backseat. “Revenge? What do you exactly think’s gonna go down here?”

“Well, you can confront him. Ask him why he lied and sabotaged your relationship. I guess we could have brought him some of your martini concoctions. Those would be a good form of torture—ow! I’m not the one you should be violent with.”

“Stop mocking my martinis.”

Tory rubs her upper arm. “Fine. Geez.”

“What if I start by asking why he tried to ruin my life?”

“That’s a great start.”

“And if he denies it?”

“How can he deny it? You have proof. But if he does, knee him in the balls.”

I look back at her. I have no urge to physically harm him. I just want to talk. Understand why he did what he did. “I just need closure. Okay, I’m

going in.”

“Want me to come with you for support?”

“No, I got this. Keep Jerry busy.”

I exit the car, walk up to the apartment building, find Russ’s number, and press his buzzer.

“Yeah?”

“Russ, it’s Callie. Let me in.”

“*Callie?*”

“Open up. I need to talk to you.”

“Yeah, sure. Of course. Come on up.” The buzzer sounds, letting me in. Like a woman on a mission, I take the stairs two at a time, rehearsing what I’ll say. *Why the hell did you lie to me? How could you do this to Easton? How did you get those photos? How can you live with yourself?* Question after question races through my mind by the time I hit the third floor. Out of breath, I slam my fist on his door. It quickly opens, and he steps out. “Callie, wow. I can’t believe—”

I rear my fist back and punch him square in the nose. “That’s for meddling with my life.”

“Jesus!” he howls, cupping his nose.

“You know, I thought you were my friend. But I guess I was wrong about you the whole time. Because a friend would have known my heart was with Easton. But instead, you selfishly took two lives into your own hands and single-handedly ruined what could have been a beautiful life.”

“Cal—”

“He was the only one I wanted. Ever. It would have always been him.”

I turn around and walk away, rushing down the stairs and cradling my fist. Fuck that hurt.

Two weeks later. . .

I roll over on my couch and grip my stomach. Maybe a career as a martini connoisseur is not in my future. Ever since recipe night, my stomach's been in knots. The alien invasion in my belly is real. "Ugh," I groan and sit up. My phone dings and I reach for it, staring at another text from Tory.

Tory: Dude, stop sulking. Wanna go out tonight?

Me: No. And I'm not sulking. I think I'm coming down with something.

I refuse to admit I may have poisoned myself with a bad martini mixture.

Tory: Still? You said that like a week ago. You can't still be sick. You hungover? WTF You told me you weren't drinking! <insert middle finger emoji>

Me: I'm not. I haven't had a sip in two weeks. I'm sore and can't keep anything down. Probably have the flu or getting my period.

Which reminds me. . .

The last time I took my pills. I skipped a week, add those three days and, shit. . . when was the last time I—

"No." I quickly sit up. I search for my period tracker—"No, no. . ." This has to be wrong. I'm super careful with my pills. *You mean the ones that were frozen shut in your car for a week?*

Tory: Nice try. You can't have the flu this long. And we're on the same cycle.

Dare I ask when she got hers.

Me: I know. My boobs kill. I'll probably get mine soon too.

We can't be that off.

My phone rings. Shit. “What—”

“I ended my period last week. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just—”

“Haven’t gotten your period. Cal—”

“Jesus, I know! Stop.”

“You’re not—”

“Finish that sentence, and I will end your life.” Because there is no way that I’m. . . I’m. . .

“Tory!” I cry out.

“On my way, girl.”

My breakdown is a blur until Tory knocks on my door. I open the door, fall into her arms, and wince because my boobs are really damn sore. “This can’t be happening to me,” I sob.

“It’s going to be okay.”

“Tory, what if I’m. . .” I can’t even say it out loud. It’s been almost three weeks since I spoke to Easton. I said I needed time, but I’m not even sure that would fix us. I haven’t tried to reach out, nor has he. Which just tells me I did the right thing by walking away. After everything, we’re just. . . done.

“Calm down. We can only find out and go from there.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a pregnancy test. “Let’s go, Baker. Time to pee on a stick.”

How did I get here? I mean, I know *how* I did, but why me? “What happens if I am?” I ask, fearing the answer.

“Then we figure it out together. We won’t know unless you soak the stick. Hey, it’s okay. I’m here for you. Ash is here—”

“Please don’t tell her about this. I don’t want her judging me—”

“Oh, shut it. Ashley would never judge you. And shame on you for thinking

that. You have two of the most amazing best friends. Whichever way this turns out, we've got your back. Got it?"

"You two are still on probation." I wipe at the tears soaking my cheeks. "But, yeah. I do have some pretty amazing friends."

"Duh, now pee." I smile and grab the box. I nervously take out the test, pull off the cap, and do as instructed. Setting it on the sink, I flush and close the toilet seat.

"So, what now?"

"We discuss the weather. Or Easton. Have you spoken to him at all?"

"No. Nothing."

Tory nods, assessing my answer. "Do you plan to? I mean, if the test is positive. Are you going to tell him?"

So many answers float inside my head. Yes. No. Maybe so. "I don't know. I wouldn't even know how to feel about it, ya know? Once upon a time, I dreamt of having kids with Easton. They'd have my smile and his eyes. We were gonna have two girls and two boys and name them after our favorite things, like Rage and Merlot. But now. . . I don't know how to feel." I gently cup my belly. A little mini Easton could be growing inside me.

"And if you're not?"

I shrug, pulling my hands away. "Then I'll be relieved. I never want to bring a child into a world already set for failure. Two homes, separate lives. Parents who can't get along for a sliver of a second."

A life I never wanted. Because I just wanted him.

"Hey, stop crying."

"I can't. It just comes. And no matter how much I fight it, I have no control over it. My emotions are like an out-of-control rollercoaster. One minute, I've accepted we're done, and the next, the pain in my chest is so bad I can't

breathe. I just wish he never came back into my life. At least then, it was tolerable. The ache. It was dull, and I could pretend I wasn't hurting. That I was okay. But now, I can't even do that. Because I just want him. And I know I can't."

Tory reaches for me, and I fall apart. "It's going to be okay, Cal. You just have to have faith it will."

"I think I'm over having faith." I cry in her arms until more than two minutes have passed. I'm afraid to look, so I stay close until she figures out my game plan.

"You can't hide in my armpit forever. Time to face the music."

"Why not? Also, are you using a new deodorant? It smells very florally."

"Baker. It's time."

I don't want it to be, but I know I have to face the music. I pull away. "Ready?"

"No."

"Great. On the count of three, we'll look at the test together, cool?"

I nod, taking in a deep breath. Tory counts down from three, and when she runs out of numbers, she grabs the test and places it between us. We're both quiet as we stare down at the results. Life as I know it flashes before me. The past, the present, and the future.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I breathe. "Just. . ." An unfamiliar emotion settles inside me. "I guess I'm happy, yet a strange part of me is disappointed."

"Because you wanted it to be positive?" she asks.

I look up at her, more tears filling my eyes. "Yeah. Is that silly of me?"

"Not at all."

"I love him. I don't know how not to. And if my life goes on without him,

then maybe. . . I would have at least still had a piece of him.”

“Cal, this doesn’t have to be the end. You’re meant for each other. This stubbornness has to stop. On both your ends.”

“It’s not us being stubborn. It’s us being realistic. This is how it has to be. We may love each other, but there’s a toxicity between us. We fight—”

“And make up. Cal, just hearing your story, God! You two have insane passion. I would die for something like that. Don’t kill the messenger, but you’re the one holding yourself back.”

I pull away and wipe my cheeks. Inhaling a breath for strength, I straighten my shoulders. “I’m not. And now that I know I’m not pregnant, I can truly move on.”

“Cal—”

“I’m serious, Tory. This time, it’s over. And I’m going to ask you only once. Stay out of it. No more meddling.”

“But—”

“Promise me. No more. You let this die.”

She chews her lower lip until she finally agrees. “Fine. No meddling. It’s dead and buried. Wanna go on an ice cream and horrible reality TV binge?”

“Now you’re talking my true love language.” I take the test and toss it in the garbage. “There’s a new season of *Temptation Island* streaming. Nothing like watching hot mess couples who are worse off in the love department than you are.”

“You know, if you just talked—”

“No meddling!” I say, cutting her off. She raises her hands in surrender, and I push her out of my bathroom and down to the corner mart so she can pay for all the ice cream.

Chapter Fifteen

Easton

“**A**nd I swear to all the gods above, you rat me out—”
“Not gonna rat you out.”

“Cause if you do—”

“Tory, fuck. How many times do I have to say that I won’t mention this call?”

“She has to think you came to your senses on your own. Jesus, you two are like a pair of pathetic, sad little puppies.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, you heard me. You both. Too stubborn to see what’s right in front of you. It’s called destiny, loverboy. Your future. She loves you, and you love her. So why are you two being so stupid about it?”

“I’m not being stupid. I was giving her space to think.”

“She doesn’t need space, you dummy. She needs you. She’s a mess. And you need to come fix her.”

A mess couldn’t nearly define the wreckage that’s been my life the past three weeks. Having Callie back in my life was like being reborn and given

another chance to live. And her walking out that door again was. . . I close my eyes. “I love her, Tor.”

“I know you do. Why do you think I’m meddling? And I promised not to meddle. I’m breaking some serious friendship code—twice now for you. But I can’t take any more of this. I love her too much. She needs you. So you need to prove to her that you need her too.”

“I do need her. More than anything.” God, I miss her. I was allowing Cal the time she needed to do her thinking. Even if Tory hadn’t called, the self-imposed time limit I gave her was almost up. I promised I would let her be. But knowing this gives me confidence that what I planned—what I’m about to do—is the right move. The only move.

“Then come fix our girl.”

“On it. Just stick to the plan.”

“Again, never heard from me—”

I hang up. I look down at my packed bags and Jake, who’s wagging his tail. I think he can sense what we’re about to do. Probably because I’ve told him my plans nonstop over the past three weeks. “You ready to get our girl back?”

Jake butts his head against my palm and barks. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s get out of here.” Sammy brought me to the doctor yesterday, and I swapped out my cast for a walking boot. I get the truck packed and start the trek home. *Home*. A place I haven’t considered that to be in almost two years.

But I know it’s not about the place. It’s about who you’re with. And wherever she is is where I want to be.

The drive goes by too slowly. I'm anxious. Worried. My girl's always been a wild card. This could go in my favor. Or not. I gotta take the lead on this one because this only ends one way.

I pull into an apartment complex and park. "Gotta take a little detour, buddy. Sit tight." I climb out and jog up the building stairs just as the doors open.

"Oh, hell no. You here to break my nose, too?" I stall as Russ steps out of his building.

"Say again?"

"Yeah, your girl came here a few weeks back, avenging your honor. Had some choice words, stated her case with you, and then broke my nose. Well, she broke my nose first."

"She was here?" Getting a better look, I notice his still swollen nose and the bruising under his eyes.

"Listen. I get it. I fucked up. But that was a long time ago. I'm over it. You should be—"

My fist to his jaw tells him I'm not over it. His head shoots back when I split his lip, and he howls. "The fuck!"

"That's for fucking up the best thing I ever had."

Damn, that felt good. I turn around, jog back to the truck, and hop in. I'm sweating with nerves by the time I park in front of Callie's building. "Okay, boy. Sit tight. You know what to do if I need ya. Wish me luck." Jake barks.

The door to her building is propped open, thanks to her "non-meddling friend," and I head inside. When I reach her apartment, I take a long breath and knock.

From the other side, I hear Tory. "I'll get it. Don't get up. Not that you're going to." She whips the door open. Seeing me, she winks. "Oh shit. How did

you get in here?”

I roll my eyes.

“Who is it?” Callie asks in the distance.

“Um, I think you need to see for yourself.” Tory leans forward and whispers, “Never spoke to me, remember.” She quickly pulls back when Callie steps up to the door. She looks just as beat down as I feel, and it pisses me off that I gave her this much time. I should have come sooner. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and I want to snake my arm around her and do what I’ve been aching to do for weeks.

“Wh—what are you doing here, Easton?”

“It’s time to talk.”

“I told you—”

“Yeah, and I gave you time to think. Time’s up.” I walk into her apartment, forcing her to take a few steps back. “You asked me before where I thought we’d be if shit didn’t get in our way, and I gave you a bullshit answer. I’m gonna give you an honest one now. The real answer is you’d be my wife. You’d be wearing my ring and be mine.” I step closer, ignoring her sharp gasp. “I let this bullshit between us ruin that because I didn’t fight for you. I wasted two years. *Two years*, Callie. Time I could’ve been making you happy, making you smile. Basking in your sweet taste. I lost that time once, but I’m done with that shit.”

“Easton.” She says my name as her eyes shimmer with tears, but I can’t stop until I get it all out.

“I should’ve made you listen to me that day. Made you see the truth. All that time we lost because I didn’t step up.” She tries to speak, but I cut her off. “Back at the cabin, I never should have let you leave. I should’ve locked you up until you listened to reason. Tied you to the bed if I had to. And

before you even start going off about how I lied, I'd do everything all over the same way. I may have lied to you, but I don't regret keeping you there. Because every single second with you back in my arms was like breathing again. So, go ahead and be mad about that, but I refuse to apologize for going after something I want."

"Easton—"

"No. I'm done giving you your space. You've had plenty of time to think, and from now on, I'm calling the shots." I reach into my back pocket and pull out the black box. Then I drop to one knee. She gasps and covers her mouth. "Callie Baker, you stole my heart the day I walked into that bar. They always say a woman changes a man's life. And damn, you've changed mine. I know what it feels like to be with you and how it does to be without you, and I swear to God, I'm done with the second.

"I promise I'll never lie to you. I vow always to love you and love you hard. And if you say yes, I swear to God, I'll spend the rest of my life proving just how deep that love runs. You own me, Cal. Heart. Soul. Everything." I pause to take a breath. "Now, I'm going to ask you to marry me. I know you love me, and goddammit, I love you. Let's spend the rest of our lives proving it to each other." I open the box, and her eyes land on the diamond ring. "So, what do you say? You going to say yes and marry me? I'm not above throwing you over my shoulder and kidnapping you until you come to your senses. "

I figured I would render her speechless. So I give her another beat or two before I step in.

"Get that lip out of your mouth, babe."

"You're like. . . proposing to me *right now*?"

"Yeah, I am."

She blinks and drops her gaze to the ring. “But. . .”

“Just say yes, Cal.”

She looks at me, then at Tory. “Don’t look at *me*,” Tory says and throws her hands up.

Her eyes are filled with tears when her gaze falls back on me. “I thought you didn’t want this anymore.”

“Not a second goes by that I don’t want everything from you. Your love, your kindness. Your touch, comfort, quirky habits. I’d vow to drink martinis with you every fucking night—”

“Careful what you wish for,” Tory mumbles. Cal jabs her finger at her friend, silently shutting her up.

“This is our destiny, Cal. You and me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Say yes, Cal.”

She steps from foot to foot, her damn lip still between her teeth. I’m giving her three seconds to give me an answer. Then I’m taking matters into my own hands. I get to two when she lunges at me, taking me to the ground. I wrap my arms around her and tug her close.

“Easton, I thought I ruined everything.”

“Say yes, Cal.”

“I should have stayed. Argued until we worked—”

“Say yes, Cal.”

“I never should have—”

“Dammit, Cal—”

“Yes. Yes!” She spreads kisses like a mad woman all over my face. My chest swells. I tug her closer, cup her cheeks, and claim her mouth. I kiss her like my life depends on it.

“Finally!” Tory says. “I knew this is how it would end up.”

Callie pulls away and looks over at her. “Wait. . . how would you know?”

“Well, I mean. I just assumed if, by some chance, he came here. . .” Callie squirms out of my arms and stands.

“Did you know he was coming here?” Tory gives herself away, looking guilty as fuck.

“What? *No!* How would I—”

“You meddled.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You *so* meddled.”

“I *so* didn’t—”

I reach out, trying to grab at Callie before she attacks, but she’s too quick. I shake my head as the two girls fall to the ground. “Seriously, you’ve lost it!” Tory squeals.

“You’re a filthy, dirty liar,” Callie screams.

“I plead the Fifth. Get off me!”

“No! You promised!”

“I had my fingers crossed behind my back the whole time.”

I’m giving them thirty more seconds until I pull them apart. Before I have to, Callie pauses, stares down at her friend, and, just above a whisper, says, “Thank you.” Then wraps her arms around her.

“You’re welcome,” Tory returns, choked up.

“Should I hand one of you the ring? You’re kind of stealing my moment, Tor.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, get off me crazy.” Callie crawls off her, and they both stand. “I got shit to do anyway. Call me when you wanna start wedding

planning.” She hugs Cal and walks past, waving. “Behave, kids.” She winks at me on her way out.

“Are you. . . here just because Tory called you?”

I take in her worried gaze. “Tory called me, but I was already en route to get you. The call just made what I was about to do a little easier.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I was prepared for you to say yes and prepared if you said no.”

She wraps her hands around my neck, and I pull her to me. “And if I said no?”

I kiss her and say, “I would’ve called for backup.”

She laughs. “Dare I ask what backup entails?”

I cock my head, put two fingers in my mouth, and whistle. “What are you— Oh my god, Jake!” she squeals and drops, treating Jake to her signature ear rub. “Hey, buddy. Wait a minute, he’s your reinforcements?”

“Hell yeah. I know you couldn’t say no to Jake. And he and I are a package deal.”

She slowly stands. “Sneaky.”

“I play to win.”

“And did you?” Her eyes glimmer with hope, and I see the most amazing future ahead of us in the reflection of her beautiful gaze.

“Yeah, babe. I won.”

Epilogue

Callie

Eighteen months later...

“I said no.”

“That means nothing to me.”

Easton rolls his eyes. “Clearly.”

“Just let me drive.” I toss my hands up, frustrated.

Easton huffs and says, “And again, I said no.”

It’s settled. He wants to die. “I swear to God, if you don’t let me drive, I’m going to throat—”

“Jesus, really, Cal? I’d like to see you try. You could barely walk ten feet to get to the snowmobile. Gonna bet my left nut you don’t have the energy to even lift your arm to swing.”

How *dare* he. Just because I’m breathing heavily doesn’t mean I don’t have the strength to pummel him. “The snow is very deep for the record.”

“Oh, *that’s* the problem?”

“Yeah, asshole. It’s thick snow.”

He shakes his head, not even flinching at the name-calling. Probably because he's used to it by now. My hormones have given me a select vocabulary lately when I don't get my way. He crosses his arms and waits. Ugh. . . I hate this part. "Sorry. You're not an asshole. But just let me drive. I'll go slow."

"Babe, you never go slow. You think you're some sort of speed racer. And do I need to remind you that you're almost eight months pregnant?"

"So you're saying I can't drive because I'm *fat*?" My lower lip quivers.

"Here, we go." He walks up to me, snaking his arm around my waist and tugging me into him. "You're beautiful. And carrying the most precious gift inside you. And because of that, I don't need you going off the hinges and taking the snowmobile out. If you want to go up to the cliff, we'll take the ATV."

My pout deepens. "Can I drive the ATV?" I wait, offering him my saddest eyes, until I watch him give in.

Sweet!

"I'm serious. If you go faster than fifteen miles—"

"Thirty—"

"*Fifteen*. And if you disobey me, I'll bend you over and turn your ass into a cherry."

Well, *that* wasn't the right thing to say if he's threatening not to do something. "Get that damn look off your face."

"What? You threaten me with a good time, then expect me to listen? Wrong move, buddy." He tugs me closer, his lips dipping to brush against mine.

"I'm not your buddy."

"Pal?"

"Watch it, Cal."

“Lover, playtoy, bedroom bestie—*okay!*” I squeal when he tickles my ribs.
“Don’t. I’m going to pee myself.”

“Then say what I want to hear.”

“Fine. Husband.”

“Thank you, wife.” He sucks my bottom lip between his teeth. I can’t deny the rush I get every time he calls me ‘wife.’ How proud I am to call him my husband. Easton has always been wild. A take-what-he-wants kind of guy. It’s what drew me to him.

And eighteen months ago, he did exactly that. I didn’t need a big white wedding with everyone I’ve ever met watching us exchange vows. I just needed him. And maybe Tory. And Ashley. Well, okay, my parents came too. Oh, and Jake! We tied the knot at the courthouse and spent the entire night at Ray’s, celebrating the best day of our lives. The first day of our forever.

Life has a funny way of showing us what we can endure. Good and bad. There are lessons in pain and rewards in pleasure. A part of me will never recover from those years spent without Easton. But he made me his forever that day, and I know I’ll never endure that pain again. Eighteen months ago, he vowed his soul to me. Mine to him. And it’s been a crazy, wonderful, perfect ride since, even down to the unexpected surprise.

“*Babe, you home?*”

“*Yep. In the kitchen.*”

Easton walks in and slows, taking in the martini in front of me. “You know it’s only ten in the morning, right?”

“*Sure do.*”

He also notices it’s full. A martini untouched in my presence is a sure sign of trouble.

“Uh oh. What happened? Is it work?”

“Nope.”

“Then, what’s wrong? Thought you had an interview for a job this morning. Babe, we gotta be on the road to the cabin before the snow starts.”

“Yeah, already did the interview. Threw up mid-speech, and luckily, the guy offered to reschedule.”

His eyes widen. “You what? Thought you and Tory just watched movies last night.”

“We did.” I bite my bottom lip, fighting the tears.

“Then why the fuck do you look so upset with a martini in front of you at ten in the damn morning? Did something happen? Are you sick? Did you—”

“I’m pregnant.” There. I said it. Cat’s outta the bag. Shit, he doesn’t look good. “I know. I’m sorry. We had all these plans. I’ve been really good with my pills. How on earth did I mess it up and get—”

“You’re pregnant,” he cuts me off. He hasn’t moved a muscle, and it’s freaking me out.

“I am.” Tears rush down my cheek.

“Like, for real, pregnant. You’re not fucking with me?”

“Please don’t be mad,” I sob. I suck in a quick breath when he rips me from my chair into his arms.

“You’re fucking pregnant,” he repeats.

“Yeah.”

His eyes drop to my stomach. They linger, emotion welling in his eyes. “We’re having a baby.” He whispers. Then he screams, “We’re having a fucking baby!” He twirls me in his arms, his smile creating another wave of tears. “God, I love you. I love you so damn much. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“You. This gift. Our perfect life. I’ll never have enough time to show you how much you mean to me.” He kisses me with an intensity that sends shivers down my legs and curls my toes. “Love you, Cal.”

“Love you, too.”

He pulls away and, with a serious look, asks, “Thank fuck. Does this mean we get to go on a martini hiatus?”

He may have regretted the promise of drinking martinis with me in his speech that day.

“Not a chance. Someone has to keep up the momentum.”

If I thought Easton was protective over me before, being pregnant with his child took it to a whole new level. He was this dominant creature, wanting to slay whoever came near his woman. But put a baby inside her, and holy smokes, he became a fire-spitting dragon. A *hot* fire-spitting dragon. It was such a turn-on. God, we had sex on every single inch of our apartment. My cheeks flush at all the places outside, in public, at bars. The list goes on and on. Easton was a powerhouse, and I was most definitely there for the ride.

Until now.

When he tells me no.

“So, you’re gonna let me drive or what? If not, I can always find someone else who’ll let me. That cute guy working at the general store, maybe.” His palm presses to the middle of my back. It doesn’t take much for my skin to become heated. His hand lowers and massages the palm of my ass, then slaps me.

“I know what you’re doing here, babe.”

“Do you?” my voice cracks.

“Remember when you used to talk shit just to piss me off so I’d do this?” His palm makes contact again, and I grunt. “You used to get me so worked

up. I'd see red imagining anyone looking at you, let alone touching you. You'd tease me, and it killed me."

"Maybe you should just let me drive then."

"Maybe I shouldn't, and we take a pass on going up to the cliff and me fucking you in the snow."

God *dammit!* He's got me here. Snow sex is the best sex. "Nah, that would be dumb."

His chest rumbles, and he lets go of my lip, kissing the tip of my nose. "That's what I thought."

I open my mouth to argue, but he puts his finger against my lips. "And since I know what my wife wants, I'm going to let her drive." He raises the key to the ATV and dangles it in front of me. "And if she goes a sliver over fifteen, snow sex is off."

I snag the keys before he changes his mind. "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Cruz, but I accept the offer."

He always wins. My sexy, perfect man.

My forever.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to start off by thanking myself. It's not easy having to drink all the wine in the world and sit in front of a computer writing your heart out, drinking your liver off and crying like a buffoon because part of the job is being one with your characters. You truly are amazing and probably the prettiest person in all the land. Keep doing what you're doing.

Second most important, thanks for *nothing* to my toddler who made this book take forever to finish because he's so damn needy. Momma loves you.

To my wine collection. Thank you for taking the wheel and writing some scenes when I didn't have the courage to. (Next time, maybe not so many underlined red words for me to decipher in the morning.)

To Abba Zabba. You my only friend...

No thanks to my neighbors. You really need to stop convincing me to drink when I have deadlines.

Thanks to all my eyes and ears. Having a squad who has your back is the utmost importance when creating a masterpiece. From betas, to proofers, to PA's to my dog, Jackson, who just gets me when I don't get myself, thank

you. This success is not a solo mission. It comes with an entourage of awesome people who got my back. Thank you to Molly Wittman, Jennifer Kreitz, Kristi Webster, Holly Sparks, my review team, and anyone who I may have forgotten! I appreciate you all!

A warm thank you to Molly at Novel Mechanic for having superb insight and editing.

Thank you to All By Design for this cover. This design is the first representation of a story, and she nailed it.

Thank you to my awesome reader group, Club JD. All your constant support for what I do warms my heart. I appreciate all the time you take to help my stories come to life within this community.

And most importantly every single reader and blogger! THANK YOU for all that you do. For supporting me, reading my stories, spreading the word. It's because of you that I get to continue in this business. And for that I am forever grateful.

Cheers. This big glass of wine is for you.

About the Author

USA Today Best-selling author, J.D. Hollyfield is a creative designer by day and superhero by night. When she's not cooking, event planning, or spending time with her family, she's relaxing with her nose stuck in a book. With her love for romance, and her head full of book boyfriends, she was inspired to test her creative abilities and bring her own stories to life. Living in the Midwest, she's currently at work on blowing the minds of readers, with the additions of her new books and series, along with her charm, humor and HEA's.

J.D. Hollyfield dabbles in all genres, from romantic comedy, contemporary romance, historical romance, paranormal romance, fantasy and erotica! Want to know more! Follow her on all platforms!

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