



NO MORE SECRETS



USA Today Bestselling Author
ELLA GOODE

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A SECRET BABY BOOK

ELLA GOODE

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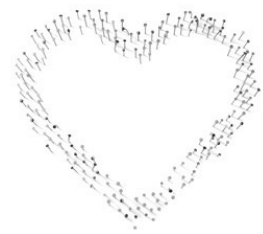
Also by Ella Goode

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SUMMARY

When I was 17, I was in love with a gorgeous girl named Fischl. I was going to marry her, start a family. It was my one and only dream. Only dreams are just that. Dreams. Reality was my sister dying, me suddenly being the father of a baby boy, and Fischl disappearing. I tracked her down years later, but when I found her, my dream was destroyed.

I raised my sister's son as my own and did my best to forget about the woman who stole my heart. It almost worked. My kid is great, my construction business grew into an empire, but my bed's been cold for almost two decades. When Fischl re-appears, I decide that I've waited long enough. To hell with keeping secrets or doing the right thing, I'm going to have her.



CHAPTER 1

COOPER

I GLANCE AT THE CLOCK. IT'S TEN MINUTES BEFORE THE HOUR, AND MY SON IS still not downstairs. I rub my forehead before yelling, "You've got ten minutes!"

Next year he's going off to college, but he seems woefully unprepared. I send an apology to the big man upstairs. "You know I'm doing my best," I say to the empty room. Of course, there's no response. I don't take it personally. If there had been one, I'd be worried.

The silence is disrupted by the thud of feet against the ceiling and then the slamming of a door. Seconds later, a whirlwind swings into the kitchen, grabbing the orange juice from the table and twirling toward the dishwasher at the same time as the blurry form downs the drink. My eighteen-year-old comes to a stop, opens his mouth, and releases a loud belch right in front of me. I push him slightly to the side and pull open the dishwasher. He dumps the cup in and pats me on the back. "Thanks, Dad."

His large paw snatches up the breakfast sandwich I put together, and then he moves to the mudroom to shove his feet into his sneakers. In between bites of egg, cheese, bacon, and bread, he says, "Ms. Cotton wants you to come in to talk about my progress."

I make a face. I didn't like teachers when I was in high school, and now that I'm over at least a decade out of school, I do my very best to avoid them. "Why? I thought your grades were all up."

"They are, and that's the problem. The tutor you hired for me over the summer did too good of a job, and now Ms. Cotton thinks I should move into an advanced class. I told her no, and she said she'd talk to you about it."

"Do you want to take an advanced class?" I ask, trying not to push my aversion to schooling on to my kid.

“Hell no.”

“But it’s good for you? Or good for your college stuff?”

Dunc points a long finger at me. “Oh no, you don’t. You said I only needed to get my grades up so I could graduate with a B average. I’m doing that. I did not agree to harder classes.”

“Okay. Okay.” I raise my hands in surrender. “Just tell her no then.”

“I did, and she still said she wants to see you. Tomorrow. Honestly, I think she wants to get in your pants. I kind of told her you’re a lost cause, but she wasn’t listening.” He shoves the rest of his food into his mouth and heads out the door. “She’s pretty for a teacher, if that means anything. I know it doesn’t though!” And with that last indictment, he’s gone.

I pull the screen door shut and clean up the dishes. Duncan is correct. No matter how pretty the woman, I’m a lost cause. He doesn’t understand it. He says that even his female friends think I’m a “dilf” and I should take advantage of that. To which I replied that doing so would get me jail time. He rolled his eyes and said, “You know what I mean.”

And I do. He means I should be out there dating or, at the very least, getting laid. I’ve tried to explain it to him a couple of times about how I fell for a girl when I was sixteen and that she was the one for me, but his eyes glazed over. The one true love thing doesn’t really make sense to a teenager. It was hard for me to make sense of that when I was sixteen and laid eyes on Fischl. After seeing her at the sub shop picking up food for delivery, I never wanted another woman again.

A pang of aching loneliness spears through me. I give myself a good shake and finish my chores before heading off to work. No need to sink into the pit of memories. I’ve made my peace with the past. I had six perfect months with the girl of my dreams. That I didn’t get more than that is a product of just cursed luck. You can’t expect someone to wait a lifetime for you. It’s just not reasonable.

I drive over to the Riverside Development project and take a look around. Everything appears on schedule.

“Hey, Coop.” My foreman waves me over. “You busy?”

“No, I’ve got time. What do you need?” I’m already rolling up my sleeves.

Alec, my foreman, glances down at my feet. “Good, you’re wearing boots. One of my roofers called in sick. Are you okay with handling some asphalt today?”

“Get me a tool belt.” Nothing like some real work to tire my brain out so I don’t spend all day thinking about Fischl. Most days fly by when I’m busy. The slow days are when thoughts of what might’ve been, what I could’ve done, creep in. Like, when I saw Fischl with her kid and her husband, could I have kidnapped her and the kid and run away to some remote cabin in the woods and kept the two of them locked up forever? What would I do for money? How would Dunc survive? In a fantasy world, Dunc, Fischl, and I would be a unit, and that kid by her side I saw that day in the park would be mine. Fischl’s and mine. Not Fischl and that weak-chinned, suit-wearing, going-to-be-bald-before-he’s-forty, pasty-faced nothing that she was hugging. Can’t really say he’s nothing, though, because he ended up with Fischl, and my bed’s been empty for since she disappeared.

“You okay, boss?”

I jerk around to see Alec holding out a brown tool belt. I paste a smile on my face. “Just enjoying the sun.”

His gaze shoots to the clouds. “Sure, boss,” he replies, but I can tell inside he’s wondering if I’m all there.

I’m not. I never will be. Part of me is with my girl, Fischl, the one I gave my heart to at sixteen.



CHAPTER 2

FISCHL

“YOUR FAMILY IS SERIOUSLY WEIRD,” I TELL SEBASTIAN, DROPPING THE approved designs from the city onto his desk. I’ve been working for him since Van and Sadie entered kindergarten.

I’ve met a lot of architects over the years, but he’s the best. I’m not only saying that because he’s one of my favorite humans in the world. He’s actually more than human.

Sebastian was a guardian angel when I needed one. He came out of nowhere when I thought the world was going to rip the one thing from me that was mine: my baby boy Van. He saved us both. I don’t know what would’ve happened if he hadn’t come along.

“All these years and you don’t have a better word for my family than weird?”

“I’m trying to be nice,” I mutter. “Glass houses and all.”

“Fischl.” Sebastian’s hand snaps out to grab my wrist. “We’re family. Fuck the rest of them.” I’ll never get tired of hearing him say those words. Not only are we best friends but we are our own little family.

“Sebastian, I’ll never make you do anything you don’t want, but no one is buying what we’re selling.” I shake my head, wondering where he comes up with some of his ideas.

I met Sebastian when I was barely seventeen. He’d come to rehab or whatever messed-up name our religious nut families called the place they sent girls in my situation to. He was looking for a girl he’d knocked up. She wanted to give their baby girl up for adoption, but Sebastian wasn’t having it. In the end, the girl signed over her rights to him.

It turns out my best friend had banged his way through half the cheerleading team in high school. This was all information I found out as he

sat holding a baby in his arms next to me in the nursery. We bonded at that moment. When he finished telling me all about it, I looked him dead in the eyes and asked if he was going to accept that he was gay.

After a long moment of silence, we both burst into laughter. It was the first time I'd laughed in months. A small pressure having lifted off my chest. We've basically been inseparable from that day forward.

"It's not you making me do anything: I'm asking you to do it for me."

"I, ah—" I stall. I shouldn't be. This is an easy yes for me. Sebastian and I might as well be married. His daughter even feels like she is mine.

Sebastian comes from a wealthy family. They had mixed emotions about him showing up back home with a kid, but he was twenty and had his own place near the college he attended. There was a trust already established in his name, so finances weren't an issue for him. But he had to follow certain guidelines in order to maintain that trust. Continuing to get an education was one of them.

He promised his family he would finish getting a college degree. That settled them some, but they'd been prickly toward me at first. Sebastian didn't care what they thought; he moved me right into his place.

I took care of our babies while he buckled down to get his college degree finished. With time, his family came around a little more. Even more so when I agreed to let Sebastian pretend we were engaged.

Wearing the ring felt wrong, but it did help keep men away from me. That last thing I wanted was a man. One that would fill my head with lies.

As long as it appeared that Sebastian and I were together to the rest of the world, that kept his family off our asses. And we never told anyone differently. The only thing that mattered to us was that our kids grew up in a happy and healthy environment.

That had been working great for awhile but now people are starting to pressure us to actually get married.

"I'm only asking for you to think about it. Plus, I could adopt Van. You both would forever be secure," he points out. Yes, having Sebastian's last name would carry weight to it.

Hell, Sebastian had his architect company up and running the day he graduated and was certified. That was another thing his parents weren't too happy about; they wanted him to go into business or law. But it was clear early on that Sebastian was going to be a gifted architect. And he is. He got so big that we're expanding. At first, Sebastian was coming to this new city

all on his own to open another branch of his architectural firm, but the kids didn't want our family to be separated. They've always been each other's best friend, so they weren't scared of a new school like I would've been at their age.

I should honestly be jumping at marrying him, but something is holding me back. I know exactly what it is, but it feels selfish of me to admit it. I need to let go of the past. Of him. I remind myself of that every day. Yet I still hold out hope that someday our paths will cross.

That he had a change of heart. That he made a mistake. God, I'm pathetic. I saw the papers that had been sent to the center. He was handing over his rights to our baby. So that I could give him up for adoption, but that hadn't been what I'd done.

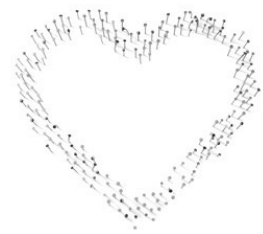
Those papers had been a smack in the face. I didn't expect papers to show up. I thought he'd find me, but nothing. For years, I held out hope that he'd come, but he never did. He was never who I thought he was.

"Promise me that you'll really think about it."

"I promise."

Sebastian isn't the love of my life, but he's never let me down. He's safe, and I know how scary it is to not have that. Not only for me but my son too.

At least I know with him I can't get my heart broken again.



CHAPTER 3

COOPER

“MR. DONOVAN. I’M HANNA, YOUR SON’S HOMEROOM TEACHER.” A WOMAN who looks hardly older than Dunc approaches with her hand held out.

I know I’m supposed to shake it, but it feels wrong somehow. I doff my cap and then hold my hands up. “I’ve been roofing all day and only scrubbed the topmost layer of grime off. You probably want to keep at least a desk or five between us.” I look around. “Which one is Dunc’s desk?”

She points to one in the back corner next to the window. Dunc’s a better student than me. If I had sat in that chair, I would have been daydreaming about escaping every minute instead of excelling in school. I wander over and take a seat. The desk is low, and my legs barely fit underneath. Dunc must be cramped as hell. I swing toward the wall and stretch my legs out, understanding why he chose this spot. It’s not for the scenery but for the extra space.

After collecting a few papers on her desk at the front of the room, Ms. Cotton waltzes toward me and pulls up a chair right next to mine. She’s so close I can smell the roses of her perfume. It kind of irritates my nose. I press a knuckle against one nostril to suppress a sneeze.

She lays the papers on the small desktop, her fingers brushing mine. She leans forward far enough that I swear I could feel the swell of her tits against my arm. “Duncan is a bright student, and I think he should take AP Calc. If he passes the examination, he’d be entitled to college credit. I’ve suggested this to Duncan, but he didn’t seem interested. Do you know why that is?”

What had Dunc said? That Ms. Cotton wanted in my pants? I don’t have a lot of experience with women, so I don’t want to read anything into this, but maybe he’s right. Do I scoot my chair away? Do I stand up? I clear my throat. “Well, I suspect it’s because he’s been planning on joining the

construction firm after school and doesn't see a lot of need for, ah, AP Calc." Whatever that is.

"But he's not certain what he'll be doing. Perhaps he'd like to venture into architecture."

Those assholes? I hope not. Architects dream up wild things without paying even a dot of attention to practicalities. They sell those dreams to clients and then those clients get mad as hell when I tell them that the design has more flaws than the Hoover Dam.

"Sure, if that's what he wants."

"So you'll talk to him about this or if you don't feel comfortable talking to him, I could come over to your house. I make a mean lasagna." She tilts her head and brushes her hair over her shoulder.

I watched an animal documentary on the Discovery Channel once, and it said that when birds play with their feathers, they're trying to attract attention. Probably time to bring this chat to a close. I scoop up the papers and get to my feet. The little desk starts to tip over, and I lurch forward to catch it. At the same time, Ms. Cotton is reaching for the desk. I end up with both the desk and a handful of Ms. Cotton. I drop them both and step back. The metal legs make a clattering noise against the linoleum. Ms. Cotton's cheeks are red, and her shirt is mussed.

There's a cough behind us. I turn to see a pretty girl standing in the doorway. Her hand is over her eyes.

"I was—" I start.

"The desk fell—" Ms. Cotton says at the same time.

The girl backs away. "I didn't see anything." She laughs a little and whirls around so her back is to us.

I run a hand through my hair. Hope this doesn't get back to Dunc. I'll have to explain it when he gets home.

"Sadie, did you get the homework?" another voice, a deeper, masculine one says.

"I'll come back later," the girl says. She's just out of the doorway, so I can't see who she's talking to. Not that I really care.

I dip my head to Ms. Cotton. "Sorry about that, ma'am. Dunc will tell you that I'm kind of a clumsy lug."

"I highly doubt that. You run one of the most successful businesses in the city. I know you're very bright just like your son."

"I can't take credit for that." For all intents and purposes, I'm Dunc's dad.

He calls me Dad. I raised him, but I'm listed on all his forms as his guardian. I've never adopted him because that required terminating his parents' rights, and I couldn't do that to my brother and his wife. It wouldn't be right.

"You're so modest." Ms. Cotton beams at me.

"Just go in there and get it. It's school hours so Teach shouldn't be doing anything but working on lesson plans and grading tests." The male voice gets louder.

Ms. Cotton's cheeks grow pink again, but this time I don't think it's embarrassment but irritation. She turns toward the door and opens her mouth, but before she can get a word out, I hear a thud.

The girl's backpack falls out of her hand to the floor.

"What in the hell, Sadie—" The male's voice trails off. I look up and am knocked back on my heels.

"Holy shit, Van, he looks like you," the girl says.

Her voice feels like it's coming from the end of a tunnel. I shake my head, trying to dislodge the odd sensation, trying to get a grip on what's in front of me. If I had a long-lost son, it'd look just like this kid. Long-lost...

"How old are you?" I blurt out.

The boy's lip curls. "None of your fucking business." He grabs the girl's hand, and the two disappear from the doorway. My feet get unstuck, and I burst forward, only to be halted by Duncan's sudden appearance.

"Dad? You look like you saw a ghost."



CHAPTER 4

FISCHL

I CAN HEAR VAN AND SADIE BICKERING BEFORE I ENTER THE KITCHEN. I'M guessing their school day didn't go as planned. The second Sebastian and I enter the room, they both stop speaking.

They have been as thick as thieves their whole lives. It's why when Sebastian opened a new firm in River Oaks, we all moved here together. They might not be blood, but you'd never know it. Those two even gang up on Sebastian and me.

"I assume the second day of your new school wasn't as good as the first?" I felt bad sending them to a new school so late in life.

They're seniors, so it wasn't the ideal situation to move them, but I thought it might be okay since they had each other. Plus, Sadie wasn't feeling her old high school. Van, on the other hand, didn't care where he went to school.

He has always been more quiet, not that he misses anything. He likes to take in his surroundings. So often he reminds me of his father. When I first met Cooper, everyone told me he strolled through life not giving a shit about anything except what was in his path.

I didn't see that in him... until it was too late. I try not to dwell on that part.

I'd been in Cooper's path at one time, so I was treated differently. He was always sweet and loving to me. I ate it up. My parents had always been cold. There was never affection shown toward me. Cooper showered me in it, and I soaked all of it in. So much so I ended up pregnant.

It seemed like in a blink of an eye I wasn't in his path anymore; he was on to other things. What those other things are, I have no clue. I told myself I'd never forgive him the day those documents turned up showing he'd

signed his rights away to our baby. I only pray I don't run into him.

River Oaks isn't far from where I met Cooper, but that was a lifetime ago. Even if in my dreams it feels like yesterday. Sometimes I swear I can still taste him on my lips or feel his lips against me. I know it's insane to even think of him in that way after everything, but unfortunately, the heart wants what it wants.

Those papers giving away custody of our son had flipped a switch in me. I went into protective mode. I promised myself I'd never waste another second on him or another man that could hurt me in that way.

Van is my world now. As much as I hate Cooper, he gave me one of the greatest gifts I'll ever have. Our son. He also gave me a family. It wasn't one I pictured, but Sebastian, Sadie, Van, and I do fine together.

"Sadie has a crush," Van blurts out.

"Van!" Sadie hisses at him. Her whole face turns bright red. She may be outspoken, but she's shy when it comes to these sorts of things.

"Really?" I perk up. Sadie has never had a crush. Not that I know of, anyway.

"He's a dick," Van mutters.

"Oh." Okay, that's not so good.

"He is not! He was nice to me." I'm not sure which one of them to believe. If anyone knows a girl can be blind to what a boy wants from you, it's me.

"Well, I asked around. They say he's a dick," Van clarifies. It does not surprise me that he's done his research on this kid. Van doesn't miss much, if anything.

"You're listening to gossip?" I give him a stern look.

Maybe I should have listened to gossip once upon a time. I shake that thought away. No, then I wouldn't have my Van. I wouldn't change one second of what happened if it meant not having Van. It doesn't matter if it left a hole inside me that I can't fill. It was worth it. Even in those moments that might have been fake for Cooper, I'd felt cherished.

"I poked around. She's my baby sis." Van shrugs, confident it's his God-given right to do so. I won't admit it out loud, but I love how protective he is over Sadie.

"You're like two seconds older than me." Sadie rolls her eyes at him. "Why are you even snitching on me?" she growls. Sometimes I'm not sure how she's not my daughter because Sadie sounds so much like me at times.

“Cause I saw how he was staring at you.” Van doesn’t sound the least bit happy about it.

“He was staring at me?” Sadie’s face lights up.

Van isn’t wrong. She really does have a crush. I worry about her. She has a tender heart and always gives people the benefit of the doubt. And sometimes people take advantage of that. Again, she’s a lot like me.

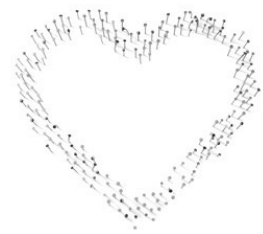
“It’s fine. We all have our first crushes.” I try to cool the room.

“But never a second?” Sebastian whispers beside me so only I can hear him. I elbow him in the side. As much as he wants us to marry for his family’s sake, he also hates that I close myself off to the opportunities of dabbling in the world of dating, if only for fun. He does but very discreetly.

In fact, I’ve pondered a few times why he picked River Oaks to expand his business. I’m pretty sure he’s seeing someone, but he’s not giving up any details. I don’t push for them. If he wants to tell me, he will. Both of us know what it’s like to have family push into your life when you don’t want them to. As close as we are, some wounds never heal. The scars left behind may fade, but they always remain to remind you every day.

Van and Sadie don’t have those scars. They will be all up in each other’s business to make sure the other is okay. Sebastian and I might not be able to do that, but thankfully we’ve given our children a life without those wounds.

We gave them what we never had. Unconditional love.



CHAPTER 5

COOPER

DUNCAN IS QUIET ON THE WAY HOME.

“Did I embarrass you at school? I didn’t mean to,” I say to break the silence. “The kid, the one with the girl, he caught me off guard. You know him?”

“No.”

The answer is abrupt. I glance over to catch a glimpse of my boy’s face. It’s grim. He doesn’t want me talking about this boy. I clam up too, but that doesn’t stop my thoughts from whipping around my skull like a whirlwind. The boy was Duncan’s age. If Fischl and I had a kid, he would have been about his age.

But Fischl wouldn’t have hid that from me, right? And when I went to see her, she had a girl with her, not a boy. It must be some freak occurrence. Everyone has a doppelgänger that exists in this world, and that boy is mine.

“Should we stop and get burgers?” I suggest as we near home. I’m not in a condition to whip something up for us. My mind has been all over the place.

“Sure. Can we get it to go? I’m not up for being in a restaurant.” He props his elbow onto the window opening. I’m not sure what is up with him, but I don’t press.

I whip into the nearest burger joint, and we place an order for carryout. As we wait, Dunc scrolls through his phone as if it contains the secrets of the universe. It probably does. Kids these days live on their phones. I barely know how to send emojis. I think my fingers are too big. I was made for an analog era.

“Your teacher wanted me to talk to you about moving you to her AP Calc class. She says that you could get college credit and all.”

“We talked about it this morning. I’m not going to college,” he says without looking up from his phone.

“Just because I didn’t go doesn’t mean you should stick around here.”

He casts me an annoyed glare. “You pushing me out?”

“No. Of course not.” The house would be dead empty without him there. I get a particular ache in my chest when I think about it. “I’m only saying that going to college is for stuff other than just learning. It’s experiences.”

“How would you know?”

“Isn’t that the point? I don’t know because I never went. I don’t want you to miss out on anything. Working construction all your life is hard, and there could be an easier, more interesting path out there that you wouldn’t know about if you didn’t go to college.”

“Even if I was going to college, why would I need to study math? Besides, you’re successful and don’t have a degree. I thought the whole plan was for me to work for you and take over the business.”

Our number gets called. I head to the counter and grab the bags. When I return, he’s halfway out the door, so I wait until we’re back in the truck to reply. “Construction can be boom or bust. I wouldn’t mind seeing you in something more stable.”

“Like architecture?” he says sarcastically.

“No.” Then I sigh. “I guess, yes, if that’s what you’re interested in.” I can’t let my unreasonable hatred toward someone stand in the way of Dunc’s dreams.

“I wasn’t interested anyway.”

Speaking of new people in town...my mind swings all the way back to the two students. Is there a connection? “The two kids that showed up. I haven’t seen them before.” Dunc’s been at the same school for four years. I recognize most of the kids but not these two.

“Yeah.”

“They siblings?” They didn’t look alike. One of them looked, well, like a younger, slimmer me, and the other one had blondish-red hair with hazel eyes.

“I don’t know. Better not be.” Dunc’s voice is terse as if the topic isn’t to his liking.

Better not be? “Wonder where they came from.”

“And whether you can build them a house?”

I grin. “That, too.” He seems to be loosening up.

“Maybe I’ll check around tomorrow. Since I’m supposed to be taking over the business and all.”

“Hey, not so fast. I’m not even close to retirement.”

“I don’t know, old man.” Dunc’s bad mood seems to have evaporated. “You looked slow this morning.”

“Fuck, everyone is slow in the morning, even you, chucklehead.” I park the truck and then rub my knuckles over his head.

He allows this for all of two seconds before ducking out and yelling over his shoulder, “Last one in has to give half his fries to the other.”

When I get inside, he’s already at the table, and half his burger is gone.

“I feel like I’m not feeding you enough,” I joke.

“You can go get me more,” he says around a mouthful of food.

“You can drive, too.”

“I got homework. Ms. Cotton loaded a bunch on us today.”

“That’ll take you all of a half hour.”

He shrugs, but the knowledge sits uneasy on my shoulders. He is good at math. Really good. Like maybe engineering good. Maybe I’ll ask Ms. Cotton some advice about bringing Dunc around to these advanced math courses while he still can with it only being the start of the new school year.

“The girl you left to take care of me, how long had you known her?”

Dunc’s question takes me by surprise. I didn’t leave anyone. She left me. The burger gets stuck in my throat, and I start coughing hard enough to make my eyes water. Dunc jumps up and pounds me on the back. Once I’m able to swallow the lump, I take a long drink of my soda. My voice is hoarse when I say, “What brought that about?”

It was more that I never got the chance to track her down. I was young and my older sister had died leaving my nephew for my mom and me to raise until I lost her too. It gutted me when Fischl disappeared. I’ve loved three women in my life: my sister, my mom, and my Fischl. All have been taken from me.

Dunc’s ears turn pink, but he faces me down like a man. “I was wondering whether it was a month or a year or what? Like what kind of woman got a hold on you strong enough that you couldn’t bear to take another one to bed? How does that happen?” He sounds almost angry.

“I don’t know, Dunc. I don’t know anything about the matters of the heart. All I can say is I took one look at her and it was like a bell went off in my head. She’s the one, it rang. That bell was right. I’ve never been

interested in another woman since.” That’s the best way I can describe it. I think one has to feel it to truly understand.

He stares—actually, it’s a glare—at me for a long moment of silence and then he says, quietly but fiercely, “Fuck.”



CHAPTER 6

FISCHL

“CAN YOU JUST DRIVE?” SADIE PLEADS WITH ME.

“Honey—”

“Please.” She gives me those big gray puppy dog eyes. I’ve never seen eyes like hers before.

Sebastian says the shade belongs to her birth mother. It really doesn’t matter, though. When it comes to the kids, I’m a giant softy. It doesn’t take them much to convince me to do what they want. I’m only grateful that they are good kids and don’t take advantage of it.

“Okay,” I give, taking the key back from her. Van had to go into school early today, so I’m taking Sadie.

Sadie’s seventeen but still doesn’t have her license. The girl is going to go her whole life with a permit. We actually had to renew her permit because she wasn’t ready to take the driver’s test.

That’s because she never wants to drive. It’s crazy to me because she got a hundred on the written test, but that’s as far as we’ve gotten her to go. When it comes to actually operating the vehicle, she does whatever she can so she doesn’t have to.

I don’t know if I’m supposed to push her to face the fear or give her time. My own mother was so strong in her ways that I find myself doing the opposite, wanting Sadie and Van to take the path they want. I don’t want to force any of my stuff on them.

Sure, I want them to have the core things that make them good humans, but I also want them to have free will. Sebastian and I agreed early on we aren’t making human clones as our parents tried to do with us. They are who they are, and we can only give them a safe area to find themselves.

“I don’t even know this area yet,” Sadie says when she drops into the

passenger seat. "I could make a wrong turn and run into something."

I know it's just an excuse, but I let her get away with it. She will drive when she's ready. And if she never gets to that point, then there are enough options out there that she can easily get around.

"That's not really how that works." I hit the button to open the garage and pull out.

"I know." Her shoulders drop. "I don't know why it freaks me out so much." She pulls on one of the loose strings of her jean shorts.

"We'll get there," I reassure her. "We could go back to a parking lot and practice some more."

"And go in circles?" She rolls her eyes, and I know it's at herself.

"It's fine. We never get alone time anymore."

"You and Dad have been busy." She's not wrong. Before we moved to River Oaks and Sebastian expanded the business, we had more time together.

"It's been a lot, but I think we're all catching our stride. How about you? You like it here?"

"Yes," she says without hesitation.

"Make any friends?" Sadie shakes her head, but I think that's more than fine with her.

One of the reasons it was a no-brainer for me when Sebastian suggested we move to open the new branch was because of Sadie. I knew she needed a new start.

Sadie was struggling with some of the other girls. Ones that had been her friends for years but all started being cruel to her. I'm not sure what happened, but I could tell she was unhappy. I do know that some of those girls made it a point to come over to see Van.

Van doesn't take too kindly when he thinks someone is taking advantage of his sister. He ended up in a few fights with some boys that had joined in on teasing Sadie. I could never get the full story out of Van or Sadie about what had happened, but I think some lies had been spread around. A few of them even suggested that she and Van were too close.

"Everyone has actually been nice." Her response is genuine, and it fills me with a sense of relief. It makes the uprooting of our lives worth it.

"How nice?" I peek over at her. No way did I forget what she and Van were bickering about when Sebastian and I walked in.

A boy has caught her attention. That is new. I want to be excited for her. She's never shown interest in a boy before. I was the same way until one

knocked me off my feet before leaving me pregnant. I was so sure he'd come save me, but he did the opposite.

"It's nothing." Sadie knows what I'm talking about. This is far from nothing, but I won't push for now.

"How about you? Are you and Dad going to do this fake marriage, or will you both actually find love?" Sadie challenges.

She's always given pushback about Sebastian and me faking it. It's not out of ill will. I know she wants us to find true love.

"I do love your father," I retort. She rolls her eyes again, but this time it is directed at me. "Sadie. I have all the love I need."

The moment the words leave my lips, I regret them. It wasn't till I heard myself say it that I knew it was a lie, and I never want to lie to my son or Sadie. I try to be as honest as I can without hurting them. Thankfully, Van doesn't ask about his father.

"Liar," Sadie snips playfully as she bends over to kiss my cheek. "Love you." She bounces out of the car. It's nice to see her happy going into school.

"Love you too," I call after her, watching her head inside the building until a thick body blocks my view of her. My breathing freezes when my eyes lock with Cooper's. He's got a backpack in his hand. I swallow, realizing he must be bringing it to his own child. I've been in his position more than once when Sadie or Van forgot something they needed at home for school.

For the first time in my life, I don't feel sadness and heartbreak when it comes to Cooper. All of it turns to rage and hate.



CHAPTER 7

COOPER

SOMETIMES WHEN YOU'RE ON THE TOP OF A ROOF AFTER SPENDING HOURS bent over with the hot sun cooking your back and the asphalt shingles burning your hands, you stand up, and the whole world starts spinning. I've seen men drop to their knees and puke up their entire lunch, and some just kind of collapse into a heap. I overhead one of my men say it's vertigo, a temporary loss of balance. That's how I feel right now. A loss of balance. My whole world's spinning. The breakfast I made a couple of hours ago is crawling up my throat.

I've thought about her every day. Maybe this is a mirage. Maybe there was something in the water I drank. Maybe it's not here. Maybe there are two doppelgängers in this town. Wait... A cold sweat breaks out.

The car in front of me lurches forward. I jump back, barely avoiding getting run over. My eyes narrow while the woman behind the wheel turns pale. I stride over to the driver's door and wrench it open. Fischl balks and tries to back up, but I reach inside and haul her out. She's no match for me. Never was. The girl didn't weigh more than a few sacks of concrete back in the day, and she's not much heavier now. I throw her over my shoulder and arrow toward my pickup.

"Dad?" I hear behind me. I pause and spin around to see Dunc standing about ten feet away with a puzzled expression. I sprint toward him and shove the forgotten backpack into his arms. "If I'm not home tonight, don't worry. I'm taking care of something."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Stop. This is kidnapping!" Fischl yells, beating her hands on my back. Her knees make contact with my gut. It's painful, but I don't care. You could hit me with a bulldozer, and I wouldn't let go. "Someone call the police."

“Don’t you dare,” I order, not really knowing who I’m talking to.

Fischl screams for help all the way to my Ford, but no one stops me. I dump her into the back and then slam the door in her outraged face. She tries to escape, but I always have the child safety locks on—old habit from when Dunc was little and thought opening the car door on the highway was huge fun. Lost about five years off my life when that happened, but now I’m grateful because how else would I be able to get into my pickup without Fischl scampering off?

“This is against the law,” she screams as soon as I climb into the driver’s seat.

“I don’t care.”

“My kids are going to call the police.”

Her words cause my hand to slip as I’m jamming my buckle into the latch. I end up scraping the hell out of my fingers. “Kids?”

She freezes and snaps her mouth shut.

“How old are they?” I demand, staring at her in the rearview mirror.

Her lips stay zipped. I want to climb into the back seat and kiss her until all her secrets fall out, until she begs for my forgiveness, until she’s naked and under me, her pussy wet and her lungs screaming for mercy.

I scrub a hand over my face and start the truck. This is madness. I’ve gone completely crazy, but my insanity is not solved by sitting in the parking lot. I pull out, trying not to run over a bunch of teenagers in my hurry to get someplace where I can find out the truth.

My question about the kids has silenced Fischl, and it’s the non-answer that tells me all I need to know. The doppelgänger is not a doppelgänger. He’s my fucking son.

My throat aches from the howls that are lodged there. All those years ago, she disappeared, only to show up in this town with my kid.

“Why?” The word escapes me. “Why?” I shout. “Why? Why? WHY?”

In the back seat, Fischl snarls. “Why? Because you didn’t deserve him. You’re a bastard, and I didn’t want my son to be tainted by you!” The last words are screamed.

I jerk into the nearest empty lot and slam on the brake. “Me? I’m the bastard? You’re the one who ran off with my kid, didn’t even tell me and then turned up in my town years later. I’m the one who should be calling you names!”

“Don’t yell at me!”

“Don’t yell—” I stop shouting because sirens are wailing outside. I look and see a cop car pulling up. Big Ed climbs out and ambles over to knock on my window. I lower it slightly.

“Coop,” he says and tries to peer into my back seat.

Fischl comes up next to my shoulder. “Save me, Officer! I’ve been kidnapped,” she yells.

Big Ed arches his eyebrow. “Got something you want to share, Coop?”

“It’s not a kidnapping,” I reply as evenly as possible. It’s a challenge. I grip the steering wheel tightly so I don’t end up doing something I regret.

“Well, you don’t seem to be the type to need to lock up a woman, but since she’s saying that you’re not letting her go, I think the easiest way to resolve this is by you unlocking your doors and stepping out.”

“Can you just write that there was a domestic disturbance but that everything was resolved?”

“I’d like to.”

“I built your house.”

“And it’s a fine one, but the mayor called me. I guess this gal’s husband is old college buddies with him. Donated some money to his election campaign or something. If it were up to me, I’d be buying a donut right about now, but since it’s not...” He trails off.

I glance down at the steering wheel and contemplate how many years in prison I’d be willing to endure if I took off right now. Quite a few, I think. I start the truck. “Sorry, Big Ed, but this one stole my kid. I’m not giving her back just yet.”



CHAPTER 8

FISCHL

“HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND!” I SCREAM AT HIM. “YOU’RE GOING TO GO TO jail. Just let me out like this fine officer said.”

“Fine?” he grumbles. It’s an all too familiar sound.

I can’t believe he’s giving me a hard time about a word I used to describe the officer when he just kidnapped me. Actually, I can believe it. Cooper was possessive from the second I met him. Until he suddenly wasn’t. I’m not sure what changed all those years ago, and I’m also not sure what has once again changed for him.

“You stole his kid?” Big Ed asks. Of course, he would point that out. Men always stick together no matter what.

“This is bullshit. I didn’t steal shit. I got the papers. You signed over your rights. The only name on his birth certificate is mine, and I fought to have that. I fought for him when they wanted me to give him away. So fuck you!” I’m not about to take shit from either one of them.

Both Cooper and Big Ed stare at me with wide, shocked eyes. I try to seize the moment and make my escape by diving into the passenger seat. My hands wrap around the handle to open the door, but Cooper’s giant ass arm comes out and stops me.

How has he gotten bigger? He already had a broad frame when we were kids. But now he’s all man. Not that I’m looking or anything. I’m just trying to size him up and figure out my next move.

“I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about,” Cooper grits out.

“Don’t curse at me, asshole!” I hiss at him. I’m so mad my hands start to shake. I try to get myself together, knowing exactly what’s coming next. But it’s too late, the stupid tears begin to roll down my cheeks before I can calm myself down. “Let me out.”

“Coop.” Big Ed finally speaks again. “Maybe you should let her out so you both can calm down.”

“I’m not going to hurt her.”

“Too. Late.” I snap out each word. Cooper stares at me, and I think that maybe he’s going to let this go.

This is a mess already. Sadie saw what happened. She’s going to ask questions, and then Van will ask them too. I know she already called her dad based on what Big Ed said about the call that was made to the mayor. It didn’t go unnoticed by me how Cooper’s grip had tightened on the steering wheel when Big Ed said the word *husband*.

“I can’t. I let you go once.”

“You did. You let me go. Now—” I’m cut off by the sound of screeching tires. I whip my head around to see Van’s Jeep pull in behind us. He’s out of his vehicle almost before it comes to a stop. Oh crap. Things are about to get real interesting now. This is not how I would have ever wanted to tell him about Cooper.

“Hey!” Big Ed shouts at him.

“It’s my son!” I shout.

“Well, shit. He does look like you,” Ed mutters to Cooper.

“Where is my mom?” I quickly wipe my cheeks, trying to hide that I was crying. I don’t want Van to see me upset. Nor do I want his first interaction with Cooper to be on a negative note.

“Let me out.” Cooper’s arm doesn’t move. “Please. Don’t meet him this way,” I beg. Finally, he lets go. “I’m fine.” I step out, reassuring Van that there’s nothing to worry about.

“Fine? Sadie said someone kidnapped you.”

“It was a joke. He’s an old friend.” My laugh is forced. I hate myself for it.

“Mom—”

“Did you leave school? You can’t walk out of school. You’ll get in trouble.”

“What’s going on?”

“We’ll talk about it later.” I can tell he doesn’t want to leave. “I took Sadie to school, but you’re taking her home,” I remind him.

“I know, Mom.”

“Okay, then I’ll see you tonight.”

He gives me another skeptical look but gets back in his Jeep. Probably

because there is a cop here so he thinks I must be fine. I let out a breath of relief when his Jeep turns around and heads back toward the school. I drop my ass back down into the passenger seat sideways with my feet still outside.

“I have a son,” Cooper whispers. I thought we already established that, but it might be sinking in for him finally.

“You have two.” I glance over my shoulder at him. My eyes drop to his hands but don’t see a ring.

“And you have a daughter with your husband?” He glares at me.

“I do have a daughter.” What I don’t have is a husband. Sebastian and I are only engaged technically. We still haven’t made it official.

“Wait, did you have twins?”

“No.” I roll my eyes at him. Why does he almost sound hopeful?

“So you had another kid with another man?”

“I’ll leave you two to talk.” Big Ed steps back and heads to his patrol car but doesn’t go anywhere.

“Sadie is Sebastian’s daughter. She and Van are a few days apart. They’re not twins, but they might as well be.”

“Van.” He repeats the name. I take another breath before I turn to face Cooper.

“You were young. I get it. You weren’t ready for a kid.” It’s hard to force those words out of my throat because he clearly went and had one with someone else. Did he choose her over me?

“I got you pregnant.” He runs a hand down his face.

“We weren’t careful,” I remind him. A small smile pulls at his lips like he’s remembering our time together.

“I wasn’t careful. Whenever I touched you—”

“Don’t.” I cut him off. “Neither of us had done it before. We both had a part in it. It was stupid, but I don’t regret it. I got Van, Sadie, and Sebastian.”

“Sebastian, the fuck kind of name is that?”

“Sebastian has been there for Van and me. I would have been on the streets without him.” My anger starts to return.

“You think I would have let you and my son live on the streets!” We’re both getting heated again. This is pointless.

“We don’t need to rehash this. I’ll talk to Van about you. I won’t keep him from you, and I won’t hold it against you for signing away your rights to him. You were younger. I’m sure you might see things differently now that you have your own kid.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t sign fucking anything. I only found out today you had *my* son.” I close my eyes. His words hit me like a brick wall.

“She lied,” I whisper. Why did I ever believe her?

“Your mother.” Cooper grits his teeth. He hated my mother too.

“This is a lot, Cooper. I’m sorry. I need some time.”

“You’ve had enough time.” He reaches over me and shuts the door. His arms brush against my breast. Memories flash through my mind. My body is growing hot. This is so not the time for this.

“Are you married?” I ask, wondering about the mother of his other son.

“No.” He throws his car into drive. “You’re not going to be much longer either.”



CHAPTER 9

COOPER

FISCHL'S SCREAMING, AND BIG ED'S FOLLOWING ME WITHOUT HIS LIGHTS ON. I think he might be afraid I'm going to do something to her. I'm half afraid of that myself, but not for the same reason. Just the small brush of my arm against her breast and I'm burning up. Back in the day, the truck was our spot. I'd take my Ford to the quarry where there wasn't anything but sand piles and us. We'd roll down the windows and put on some blues. While the saxophone wailed in the background, we'd explored each other's bodies along that bench seat. I'd taken her virginity and—crazily enough—given her a baby. It shouldn't surprise me. I couldn't get my condom on half the time because I was in such a hurry to be inside her. And she was as hungry for me, pushing my fumbling hands away, throwing the condom out the window, lowering herself onto my cock and riding me like I was a wild horse she wanted to tame. I was hers in every way, though. I would've done anything for her. I loved Fischl. I would've welcomed our child.

Her accusations ping pong in my head. I signed away my rights? That doesn't make sense.

I never got any papers to sign. I never even knew my kid existed. In what world would I have abandoned a child? I raised my sister's son as my own. I sure as hell would've taken in Fischl and our boy, too.

None of this matters. The past is the past. It's time to look forward. Fischl has to get a divorce. I'm taking back custody of my son Van. We're going to be a family like we should've been years ago.

I pull into the driveway and park. "Welcome home, baby."

"Don't call me baby. I'm not your baby." She stares out the window. "Nice house."

I can't tell if she's being sarcastic because there's a weird note in her

voice.

“Glad you like it since you’ll be living in it from now on.”

“In your dreams,” she snipes.

“Yeah, well, I guess my dreams are coming true.”

I don’t get why she’s mad. I’m the one who got robbed. I’m the one who should be enraged, but my initial anger has passed. Now I just wanna move on to the part where we’re together as a family. I have some concern about Duncan and how he’s going to take it. Thankfully, the house is big so that the two boys can have their own spaces as they work out dominance issues between themselves. There’ll be conflict ahead, but the boys will work it out. They’re brothers, after all.

I help her out of the truck as much as she allows, which is basically me holding the door open and her ignoring my outstretched hand. She looks toward Ed’s cop car idling on the street.

“He’s not going to help me, is he?” she asks.

No point in lying to her. “No, he’s not.”

“I should report him to his boss for failing to protect and serve.”

Suddenly I remember that her soon-to-be ex has a relationship with the mayor. “Ed’s a good guy. Don’t be messing up his record with unnecessary complaints.” I take her by the arm and nudge her toward the back door of the house. I give Ed a wave and make a mental note to give a donation in his name to the Widow and Orphan’s Fund. Probably the smarter course of action is to donate directly to the mayor, but since he’s buddies with the soon-to-be ex, it makes me think poorly of him. I think I’ll hunt down whoever his opposition is and make a donation there instead.

Fischl lets me lead her into the house. Her eyes take in the mudroom which is, admittedly, a bit messy. From the number of boots and tennis shoes on the floor, you’d think five guys lived here instead of two, but I’m proud of the cabinetry work in here. The walls are lined with mahogany stained natural to allow the beauty of the wood to show through. The floors are travertine tiles with a warm gold hue. “There’s a laundry room through the door there.” I point toward the end of the room.

She sniffs and puts her nose in the air. “I don’t really care.”

Her eyes say something different. They dart here and there, taking in all the details. I give her a slight push to move on from the mudroom into the large kitchen with the double islands and the big sunny breakfast nook that overlooks the pool in the backyard. The travertine gives way to long, quarter-

sawn white oak floors. Calacatta gold marble covers the counters. Big lantern-like iron lights illuminate the space. It's a showy place, but it's warm and lived-in. There's a cake on the counter that's half eaten and two loaves of bread waiting to be cut into slices for sandwiches or French toast.

"What woman did you get to decorate this place?"

"No woman. It's all my work. Well, mine and Dunc's. We picked out all the finishes together. It's our second home. We lived in my mom's house after she died until my business made enough money that we could build this place. It's big enough for you and Van to move in immediately. I've got a lot of extra space."

"Your mom died?" Fischl's head jerks around, and a pair of confused, hurt eyes meet mine.

"Yeah. She died a year after Cindy passed."

Fischl stumbles. "Cindy died? When did that happen? How?"

"The day you took off. She and Paul were in a bad crash. My mom was babysitting Dunc that night, and it was a good thing because if he had gone with them, he wouldn't have survived."

"The same day?" Fischl turns pale as marble. I help her into one of the chairs at the island and then go get her a glass of water. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Because you were gone." I place the water in front of her. "I went to your house to tell you, but you were gone, Fischl. I never left you. You left me."



CHAPTER 10

FISCHL

I STARE AT THE ONLY MAN I'VE EVER LOVED. IT'S A DIFFERENT LOVE THAN I've ever felt. It goes to my soul. I love my son, Sadie, and Sebastian down to the bone, but there is something about Cooper that is a different kind of love. It's been that way since the beginning. I can't explain it.

That's the lie I tell myself, not wanting to admit what I think it is. Because I know if I admit that we are soulmates, that our hearts were destined to be united, that there will be no coming back from that. It's the only reason I ever played with the idea of really marrying Sebastian. I wasn't going to get my soulmate, so what would it ever matter?

"I'm sorry," I whisper, feeling stupid. I adored Cooper's mom. She was the kind of mom I always wanted to have. I only met his sister and her husband a few times. Duncan is Cooper's nephew. When he was a baby, they called him li'l man which was a joke because he was a big baby.

"For running?"

"About your family. That you had to go through that." I take the water, downing half of it. He didn't have a child with someone else. That is all too much to process. Relief fills me. It killed me to think he had a son with another woman but didn't want the one we'd made together.

"I had Dunc. He gave me something to focus on."

"I'm sorry," I repeat. I'm not sure what else I can say.

"Is that one for running off with my son?" He folds his arms over his broad chest. It reminds me of Van. It's crazy that my son has never really met his father but they have a lot of the same mannerisms.

"I didn't run." My eyes fill with tears. "That's what my mother told you, I take it?" How could I have so easily believed her?

"Pretty much. She wasn't too happy when I came knocking on your

door.”

“Yeah, she was pissed you knocked me up.”

“She fucking shipped you off.” Cooper grips the side of the counter, realizing the truth.

“Her plan was for me to have the baby and give it up for adoption. Then no one would ever know of my lustful sins.” I roll my eyes. “I told her I wasn’t going to do it. That you’d find me. You’d want us to be a family.”

“I should have tried harder to find you sooner. I would never sign away my rights to my own son. How could you believe that?” I can hear the hurt in his voice. I can’t blame him. He’s missed out on so much. Not only him but Van too.

“When you never came and my mom showed up with papers with your signature on them giving up your rights, I thought that said it all. It was notarized and everything.” I close my eyes. “She was relentless. Kept saying that you wanted nothing to do with us. It was all so overwhelming. I was days away from giving birth. My mom wouldn’t let me return home unless I agreed to the adoption.”

“Fuck.” Cooper runs his hand down his face.

“You believed I upped and left you,” I point out.

“Hell, Fischl. I never thought I was good enough for you. I had no fuckin clue how I landed you, but I knew I was coming after your ass.”

“You didn’t come.” I can’t help the disappointment in my tone.

“I came.” He shakes his head. “Saw you holding a little girl’s hand with a ring on your finger talking to some suit.”

“Sadie. She’s Sebastian’s daughter. Her mother was going to give her up for adoption, but Sebastian came and stopped it. He wanted his daughter.” That had been hard to see. I’d wanted Cooper to show up so badly.

“So you two decided you’d have your own little family with *my* kid.” His anger is back again.

“The hell did you want me to do?” I snap back at him. I did what I had to, and I don’t regret any of it. I’m only sad that the woman who was supposed to love and protect me most in the world betrayed me. It shouldn’t surprise me, though.

“Not marry someone else!” Cooper shouts back, the jealousy seeping through.

“We’re not married. Just engaged.”

“Good, less paperwork.” He suddenly grabs my hand, pulling the ring off

it.

“Hey!” He walks around the kitchen island and opens the cabinet revealing a trash can and throws it away. I jump up to go get it. “You’re nuts. That’s expensive.” Well, I’m guessing it is. Cooper stands in my way. “Let me at least give it back to Sebastian.” I try to reason with him.

“I’ll happily give it back to him for you.”

“Being a dick to Sebastian isn’t going to go over well with Van.” Cooper grits his teeth but gets the ring back out. He shoves it in his pocket. “Sadie and Sebastian are a big part of our lives. They’ve been our family.” No matter what happens, they will always be our family.

Cooper turns me so my back is against the island. His hands come down on each side of me so that I’m caged in. My breath hitches. His body is pressing against me. Cooper might be pissed with me, but there is no missing the hard-on he has against my stomach. I can feel every inch of it. Pent-up desire floods me. It’s the last thing I should be feeling, but I can’t help it. It’s always been this way between us.

“You know how hard it’s going to be for me to be around a man that’s been fucking *my* girl all these years?”

“Oh, and I bet you’ve been a saint all these years even when you thought I’d been married to someone else?” That helps calm the desire that was trying to get out of me.

“I have,” he growls right before his mouth crashes down onto mine.

I gasp, and Cooper thrusts his tongue into my mouth. His hands go to my ass to lift me. I wrap my legs around his waist when he sits me down on top of the counter.

The kiss is hard. Almost painful. Our tongues tangle together, trying to deepen the kiss. I grip his shirt, not wanting to stop. I’ve missed him so damn much. When he pulls back, our breathing is heavy. He rests his forehead against mine.

“Sebastian’s gay,” I whisper. “There has been no one else, Cooper. I hated you, but I still couldn’t bring myself to be with anyone else.”

“And you’ll never be with anyone else.”



CHAPTER 11

COOPER

I PULL HER BACK FOR ANOTHER KISS, DEEP AND THOROUGH AND A LOT LESS angry. She kisses me right back, attacking my tongue with hers. My hands roam over her body, taking in the sweet indent of her waist and the ripe curve of her ass. Her body is lusher, thicker, more womanly than when we were teens. My cock throbs with eagerness. What does her pussy taste like? What does it feel like? Is it as slick and hot and tight as it was before?

There are still things we need to talk about, but right now, the only thing I want is to make love to Fischl. My knees feel like jelly when I lift her into my arms.

As I start moving, she pulls back slightly. I tighten my grip. “No running away,” I warn. I won’t lose her again, not even for a second.

“I couldn’t if I wanted to.” She wiggles slightly. “You surprised me.” Her fingers touch my cheek. “And I needed to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

“You’re not.” I move toward the stairs. “Or if this is a dream, I’m not waking up.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” she replies.

I grin. “It is if I want it that way.”

Her eyebrow arches. “We’re doing what you want?”

Fischl has always been sassy. I missed that. Fuck, I missed everything. Her sharpness and her softness, her love and her anger. I’m going to swallow her whole. “I promise that what I want is the exact same thing that you want—me inside of you, fucking you until you can’t walk, until your pussy is full of my seed, until your head is full of me.”

“I have to make dinner for the kids later. I definitely need to have use of my legs by then.”

“We’ll see.” I’m not making promises I can’t keep.

At the top of the stairs, I veer to the right until I reach the end. I kick the door in and arrow straight for the bed. “Enough talking, time to get naked.” I place her on the mattress and kick off my boots. They thud against the hardwood floor. My jeans are next, followed by my shirt.

Her eyes widen at the sight of my body.

“I don’t remember you being so big.”

“I work construction,” I say by way of explanation. I bend down over Fischl, ready to get her clothes off, too.

“What happened to your mom’s business?”

I pause with my hand above her waist. “Insurance?” Why are we talking about jobs and shit?

“Yes, didn’t that interest you?”

I straighten up and stare at Fischl in confusion. “You know damned well I had no interest in doing office work like that. What are you talking about?”

She releases a shaky laugh. “I don’t know. All of a sudden you’re in front of me and you don’t look like young Cooper anymore. You’re so big and... hard.” I bite back a groan. Her words are sending me into orbit. “It’s like you’re a stranger.” She draws her legs up. “I don’t know you.”

“You know me better than anyone. Except for maybe Dunc, but that’s only because he’s lived with me longer. You know stuff about me even Dunc doesn’t know, though.” We shared everything with each other. She was going to be a teacher. I was going to coach football. We were going to buy a house on Cherry Street with a big porch that could hold two Adirondak chairs. We’d have four kids—or five, depending on the day we talked about it. I place a knee on the mattress and smooth a hand up her jean-clad leg. “I’m the same as always. Not super good in school but decent with my hands.”

She remains curled in her protective ball. This isn’t going how I imagined, although all the times I did fantasize about this, there were no real steps between seeing her and being in bed with her. Dreams are like that. One minute you’re standing on the street, and the next you’re under the sheets, fucking like banshees. Reality, unfortunately, has all those fucking ridiculous intermediate steps.

“You’ve changed, but so have I,” she cries. “I’m not the same either. I’ve had a child. I’m in my thirties now. I don’t have that tiny little body of a teenager.” She whips off her T-shirt. “Look at me.”

There could be an alien touching down in my backyard and I wouldn’t be interested. Her ripe tits are encased in ice blue lace looking like two scoops of

ice cream waiting to be devoured. “I’m looking,” I say, slack-jawed and hungry. “I’m looking, but I want to touch too. You’re so beautiful I could die. You were beautiful then, and you’re beautiful now. Yeah, you’re lusher and curvier, but it’s hot as hell.”

“You’re not. You’re fit. You have abs.” She makes it sound like I robbed a store.

I run a hand over my chest. “I had abs when I was a teen.” I feel slightly defensive about my younger self.

“Not like now. You belong on the cover of *Men’s Health*, and I should be on *Weight Loss Digest*, but the before issue.” She flips the comforter over her head and huddles underneath the blasted thing, taking away all her gorgeousness from my view. I drag a hand over my mouth to stifle a laugh. Even a dunce like me knows that would kill any chance I have with her. She’s sensitive about her body, which is fine. It’s my job to let her know that I don’t have issues with how she looks.

It’s my job to prove to her how sexy she really is. I start with her feet tucked under the blanket and tug her socks off.

“I’m ticklish,” comes the muffled voice.

“I know.” Her feet have always been sensitive. I run my finger down the center. Her toes curl, and she tries to draw away, but I hold her firm. “Your toenails aren’t painted.” They’re clear and cleaned, clipped short, but without any decoration. She used to paint them pink and put flower or bear or puppy stickers on them.

“Too busy.”

“Your fake boyfriend isn’t doing a good job of taking care of you.” I lift her foot and kiss the top of it.

She flips down the blanket and glares. “No bad-mouthing Sebastian. He’s the reason I’m still alive.”

I glare back. “Don’t mention him in our bedroom.” I give her leg a jerk until she’s flat on her back and the junction of her legs rests on the bottom of my knees. Her hips are tilted up, and she looks particularly edible from this angle.

She wrinkles her nose. “He’s part of my life. I can’t just erase him.”

Too bad. “He doesn’t exist in here. That’s my rule.”

“You were never this bossy when we were teens.”

“You never had another man in your life. That makes me crazy. It doesn’t matter that you never slept with him. Just him being near you for so long

when I wasn't makes me want to tear this mattress apart with my bare hands, so you're just going to have to suffer my jealousy." I place a calf over my shoulder and give it a warm kiss as an apology of sorts. The truth is I was mad jealous in the past. I hated when other guys would look at her in the hallways. I wanted to put a collar around her neck that said property of Cooper Donovan, but I don't think she would've liked it much. I hid my crazy so she wouldn't leave me. Maybe that's what I should be doing now, but I can't. I don't have the energy for that kind of game. My sole focus is making a family with Fischl, the one that we were robbed of.

I slide my hand over her calf, down to squeeze her thigh. "You look hot in these jeans, but I need to have them off."

Her sassiness immediately switches over to uneasiness, and her hands come to her waistband as if to ward me off. If I didn't know her friend was gay, I'd have to kill him for not reassuring her every day that she was the sexiest person to walk this godforsaken planet.

"If I can't take these jeans off, I'll die, and I know you don't want to be responsible for that."

A slight curve tips the corners of her mouth. "You're so dramatic."

"Truthful," I counter.

This time when I reach for her zipper, she lets her hands fall away. She watches me, though. I hope she can see my desire. How my eyes are blazing with want and the small tremor in my fingers is from need.

I draw the fastening down and then pull her jeans over her hips and down her thighs. I swing her legs over to one side and finish taking them off. They land close to my boots, making a perfect picture. I turn back to her and rub my hands over her thighs.

"Your legs are too sexy for jeans. You need to be wearing sleeping bags or you're going to cause a riot."

"You're the only one who thinks that."

"I'm not, but I'm glad you haven't noticed all the other men staring at you. I got into so many fights in high school because guys were checking out your ass way too often."

She arches her eyebrows. "Really? I never knew that."

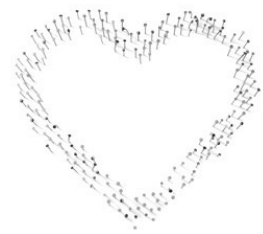
"Like I said earlier, I tried to keep my crazy hidden because I didn't want to scare you off." I arrange her legs so that one lies on either side of my knees.

"And now you're not worried about that?"

“Nope. Because I plan to keep you locked up by my side. And this time, if you run off, I’m going to follow you. There’s nowhere you can hide.” I lean forward and kiss her stomach, along the faint white lines that are proof she had my son. Her skin prickles under my touch. I smooth my hand over her stomach and then up to cup her right breast, still encased in that pale blue lace. I thumb my finger over her nipple until it stiffens into a peak. “Time to feast,” I murmur. I inhale her. That’s the only way to describe it. I suck half her boob into my mouth, tonguing that tiny little nub until her hands come up to clutch my ears. Her legs close around my waist and her hips start to move. The anxiety over being uncovered, the feelings of unsexiness are falling away under my hands and mouth. My dick throbs. Precum leaks out and wets the front of my boxers. I kiss the other breast and then move my mouth up the column of her neck across her jaw and then back to capture her mouth in mine. She receives me with open arms.

I reach between us and slide my hand into her panties. Slickness and heat greet me. I pin two fingers together and push into her cunt. It’s so tight it reminds me of our first time together. I ease in slowly, letting the walls of her pussy relax until my palm hits her sex. I pump into her, fucking her with my fingers. “Let go, baby, ride my hand,” I mutter against her mouth.

Her hips rise to meet my thrusts. I drive into her until she stiffens and gasps, her cum flooding my hand. I ease back onto my knees and bring her juice up to my mouth. I lick my fingers clean and then give her a feral smile. “Time for the main course.”



CHAPTER 12

FISCHL

“COOPER!” I CRY OUT WHEN HE BURIES HIS FACE BETWEEN MY THIGHS. HIS mouth latches on to my sensitive clit, which is still humming with pleasure from the last orgasm. He doesn’t care. Cooper is a man on a mission.

“I’ve missed your taste.” His fingers grip my thighs to keep me spread wide for him to feast on me.

I’ve missed everything about him. How did I forget how beautiful and sexy he always made me feel? The man showered me with attention. Whenever he could touch me, he would. Even if it was only to have his hand in mine or his arm brushing against mine.

I close my eyes when Cooper thrusts his tongue inside of me. He’s trying to get as deep as he can. My ass leaves the bed as he continues to thrust his tongue in and out of me. It’s not enough. I need more. A deep ache forms inside of me knowing only one thing can fill it.

“Please,” I beg. “I need you inside of me.” It’s been so long since I’ve felt this. My body is in overdrive, knowing exactly what kind of pleasure Cooper can give it. I want it all. Cooper lowers my ass to the bed, pulling his tongue out only to circle my clit. Another orgasm is so close. “No!” I cry out when he lifts his mouth from me.

“Trust me.” He climbs on top, and in only one thrust, he’s deep inside of me. “Need you with me,” he grits out, thrusting in and out of me hard. My nails dig into his back as I come again. My sex locks around his cock. God I’ve missed this connection with him.

Cooper groans my name loudly. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard. Warmth blooms inside of me. He ruts a few times, somehow getting a bit deeper before he stills, locking his body in place.

My sex flutters, pulsing from my orgasm. Cooper lets out another grunt,

and I think he might come again. I bite my lip, trying not to have a smug smile. He got me close to orgasm before he thrust inside of me because he knew he wasn't going to last. I thought maybe he was trying to draw it out to tease me but that wasn't the case at all.

We lie in silence for a few moments, our heavy breathing the only sound in the room. My body is still in a state of euphoria that I don't want to come down from.

But everything that goes up must come down. My smugness fades away as so many emotions take over. We did it again. I'm not on birth control. "What if—" My mind blanks because all I feel is panic. It grips me.

"Fischl!" My eyes fly open. Cooper has my face held in his hands. His eyes that are the same as my son's stare down at me. My throat tightens at the thought of all that he lost because of me. And of the time that we lost together.

I believed my mother when she told me Cooper wanted nothing to do with us. Why I did, I have no idea. I should've known better. That woman always did whatever she needed to get her way.

"Please." I push at his chest. "Cooper, please," I beg again. A tear slips free. He kisses it, stopping it in its tracks, but lifts his body from mine. His cock slips free.

The second it and his body are gone from mine, I miss them. But still the need to breathe overwhelms me. The mixed emotions only make me start to panic more. I haven't had a panic attack in years. I only started getting them when my mother shipped me off. Each day that ticked away and Cooper hadn't come looking for me only made them grow worse.

I bolt up from the bed.

"Baby." Cooper snags me around the waist to pull me back to him. "Breathe." He tries to calm me.

"We did it again." I don't know why that's what comes out of my mouth. There are so many other things that need to be said.

"Slow down. Breathe."

"Stop telling me to breathe!" I shout at him. It's a ridiculous thing to say. Cooper doesn't smirk at my comment. His eyes only grow wider. He doesn't know what to do with me. He's never seen me like this before.

"Fischl, I love you." He stands, trying to reassure me.

I burst into tears. I hear him let out a string of curses. "Don't come in here. She's naked," he shouts suddenly. Cooper pulls a shirt over my head. I

know it's his from the smell. I'm like a helpless doll as he pulls my jeans up my legs.

"I'm coming in!" Sebastian yells.

I jerk my head toward the door to see Sebastian and the cop from before. My mind races, trying to remember the policeman's name.

"I forgot his name." I sob. It's stupid, but I can't help it. My mind is racing about a million things.

"Look at me," Sebastian snaps. "What do you see?"

"Cooper." I might be staring at Sebastian, but Cooper is right there beside me.

"What do you smell?" Sebastian asks next.

"Sex." I throw my hand over my mouth. Did I really say that?

"You're okay. I'm with you. Are you with me?" Sebastian steps closer.

"She's with me," Cooper growls. His arms go around my waist.

"Yeah, well it looks like you gave her a panic attack, so great fucking job, asshole." Sebastian tries to keep his tone calm, but I don't miss the anger in it. He hates Cooper.

"You motherfucker." Cooper tries to lunge for him. I grab Cooper, hoping to stop him. Big Ed tries to step in. His name comes back to me. My panic attack is trying to fade away, but the fact that Cooper and Sebastian are about to come to blows doesn't help. I can't make out what anyone is saying.

"Stop!" I try to shout, but it doesn't sound as though words come out. Black spots dance in my eyes as the attack takes over again. I drop to my knees before everything goes black.



CHAPTER 13

COOPER

IT'S BECAUSE FISCHL COLLAPSES THAT THE ASSHOLE GETS A PUNCH IN. WHEN she drops to the ground, my focus zips from Big Ed and the dick to Fischl. In the process, a fist makes hard contact with my chin. Instinct makes my arm cock back. Big Ed grabs my wrist before it can find a target.

“Another time,” he suggests. “You, call 9-1-1,” he says to gutless wonder who sucker-punched me. Then, he turns to me. “You, get me a towel with cold water.”

I want to argue and send him off to get the towel, but he's the emergency personnel and I run a construction company. I do as I'm told. By the time I get back, Big Ed has her on the bed. We all ignore the disastrous state of the sheets, but pencil dick's face is red with fury.

“You call 911?” I bark.

“I wouldn't need to if you didn't cause her to have a panic attack,” he shoots back.

“You sound like she has them all the time.” I stare at him with narrowed, suspicious eyes. What the hell has her life been like that she has these episodes on the regular?

“I get that there's some conflict between you two, and it's not making a good environment for healing and recovery.” Big Ed lays the towel across Fischl's forehead. “If you can't mind your tongues, you should step out into the hall.” He mutters something under his breath about how his toddlers have better manners. Asswipe and I snap our mouths shut and glare at each other until Fischl lets out a low whimper. I drop to the side of the bed and grab her hand. “Babe, I'm here.”

“Cooper?” she asks faintly. Her eyelashes flutter as she blinks weakly. “I thought I dreamt you up.” The words catch in her throat in a half sob. My

heart clenches at the pain in her voice.

“No way. I’m real. I’d show you how real, but we’ve got an audience.”

She slowly rolls her head from side to side to take in Big Ed and the other guy. “Sebastian?” She heaves a deep, watery sigh. “I had a panic attack.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he says, coming forward to take her other hand.

I almost break my jaw clenching it tightly so that something unhinged doesn’t come out and send Fischl back into an unconscious state.

“Let me take you home,” he adds.

“Absolutely not.”

“Guys, remember what I said about healing and recovery?” Big Ed interjects.

Before we start fighting again, sirens blare outside the house.

“The EMTs are here. Go down and let them in,” I tell the other guy.

“I’ll do it.” Big Ed ambles toward the door. “Tension in here is thick enough to choke a man.”

“Fischl will do better at home where everything is familiar. Her kids will want to see her too. Won’t that be nice, sweetheart?”

I just fucking know he added that endearment on purpose to get me to act out and upset Fischl. I grind the back of my teeth together to keep from telling him what I think of his fake-ass act. Once I have myself under control, I give out the orders. “Fischl will be staying here. My kid will be moving in here as well. You and the girl are welcome to stay over if you want.”

“I don’t know,” Fischl begins.

“That’s what’s best for all of us.” I leave no room for argument. I’m not letting Fischl out of my sight, and I want my son here. “Too much time has passed, Fischl. We need to start making up for all the things we’ve lost. There’s no point in looking backward. My mom, your parents—they’re gone. We need to look forward and put our family back together. That can’t happen if you’re living in someone else’s house.”

She rubs her lips together and then nods. “I know you’re right, but it’s going to be so awkward and difficult.” Her hand comes up to rub her heart. “Van isn’t going to take this well.”

The other guy puts his hand on her forehead. I swear, I’m going to kill him once we are out of sight.

“Let’s take this slowly, and we’ll let Van choose the path he wants to take. No one is getting forced into anything.” The guy sends me a dark glare.

“I agree. We take everything slowly, but my house is the base.” An idea

forms. It's not an idea I like, but the other option is to let Fischl out of my grasp which is not happening. "You should all move in."

"Really?" Fischl says.

"No," the other guy snaps at the same time.

I ignore him. "Yeah. I've got a ton of space here. There's a mother-in-law suite on the first floor with its own kitchenette that he"—I jerk the top of my head toward the other guy—"can stay in, and there are four bedrooms up here. Your girl and Van can pick out which one they want. I can even bring in a decorator and have the kids redo everything so that they're comfortable. The garage is six bays. I've got a couple of fun vehicles in there, but those can be moved to a storage shed. The kids all go to the same school. There's a pool in the back. It makes a lot of sense."

"Oh, that does make sense." Fischl's pale skin starts to bloom with color. She's a fan of this idea. I try to keep a smug smile off my face.

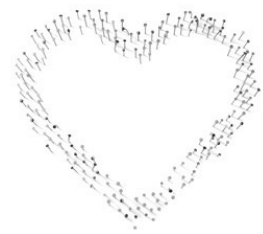
"It's done then. I'll get a mover over to your place in an hour. They'll pack everything up and bring it over here. You don't have to do a thing but rest here or out by the pool." I raise my phone to my ear. "Let me get my foreman on this, and we'll have everyone situated before nightfall."

"I never said okay to this," the other guy says.

I cast him a challenging look. "You don't have to move in if you aren't comfy with the idea. I have no problem with that. How about you Fischl?"

"Of course not. Sebastian, don't do anything you don't want to."

The man fumes, but it's checkmate. He's either moving in or being left out. Not that I care. I've got my family in my grasp. Nothing can go wrong from here.



CHAPTER 14

FISCHL

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG FOR THE EMTs TO GIVE ME THE ALL-CLEAR. THEY didn't need to call them. I hadn't hit my head, but I let them do their thing so it would give Cooper and Sebastian peace of mind. It also gives everyone a moment to try and cool their anger.

The more I calm down, the more I realize the mess I've made. Did I really agree to move in with Cooper? What is wrong with me? Do I want to live with Cooper and play house? My selfish answer is yes. That has always been my dream, but that's not reality.

I have two children to think about. We only moved here three weeks ago. Am I really going to move them again? Well, technically it wouldn't be me but Cooper who's moving us. The man is a bulldozer. I suppose some things never changed. I probably should be mad about it, but I'm not.

It was one of the many things I loved about him. I would always question things. Try to come up with different plans. Not Cooper. With him, there was only one plan. And once he decided on that course of action, it was happening no matter what it took. I shouldn't have expected anything less. He wants this badly. Not only me but our son too.

"You got a key or do I need to pop your front door lock to get my family's things?" Cooper challenges Sebastian.

"Of course, you know how to pick a lock." Sebastian throws his insult, shifting on his feet. He's barely hanging on to his control. I can tell he wants to beat the shit out of Cooper. The last thing he wants to do is live with him.

"Can you give us a moment?" I ask Cooper. The situation between them is going nowhere fast. I need to try to defuse the tension.

"We've had enough of those apart." I can't blame him for how pushy he's being. I would be the same way if I were in his shoes.

I'm trying to be understanding, realizing how much time he's lost with his son. All because of lies that ripped us apart. Ones that came from my family. After everything that went down, I decided I never wanted to see my mother again. When she died, I felt nothing. That might sound cruel, but when I got word of her death, I was years into being a mom. Which made me come to the realization that she was never a mother.

"Cooper, I don't think I can move here if Sadie and Sebastian aren't fully onboard. Sadie is my daughter." I can tell he wants to say no. "Please." I run my fingers up his arm. "It will make things better. Trust me?" I'm not sure I've earned his trust. I spent so much time hating him for something he didn't do.

"All right," he gives. I know he has to understand. Duncan might not be his son by birth, but he's still his son, nonetheless. "Give me your key and I'll head out and wait. You have ten minutes." He glances over at Sebastian.

"Deal." I hand him over my keys and hold my hand out for Sebastian's. He reaches into his pocket and yanks them out, taking the key off the ring.

"Thanks." I transfer the key over to Cooper. I'm still lying in bed. They are on opposite sides of me.

Cooper leans down and kisses me on the top of the head. That seems to pacify him, and he turns and walks toward the front door. I can't help but watch him go. I want to call him back. Wow, I'm falling fast. Right back to where we'd been.

"What the hell is going on, Fischl? Start explaining." I turn my attention back to Sebastian. I have a lot of explaining to do and a short amount of time to do it. Because I know Cooper is probably counting down the seconds until he comes back.

"He didn't sign the papers. He didn't know about Van." I can't stop the tears from flowing now. "It was all my mother's doing." Saying the words out loud to someone else makes the reality of what she'd done really hit home. Sebastian's face softens immediately at my admission. Before I know it, he has me wrapped in a hug.

"So I'm guessing this means I don't need to renew my membership in the Cooper Donovan Is the Devil Fan Club." His words bring a smile to my face.

"He lost his mom and sister." I shake my head. "He's been raising his nephew since he was a baby. Dunc isn't much older than Sadie and Van."

"Jesus." Sebastian drops down onto the bed next to me.

"At least I had you. He lost his mom and sister then had to raise a baby all

on his own.” I can’t even imagine how alone he felt.

“All right, why didn’t he try to find you after a while? You don’t have to be together because you have a kid together. That’s not a reason to be married. Fuck, you see my pain in the ass parents.”

“He was kind of kidnapping me before he found out Van was his,” I tell him. “And he said he did come looking. After he got everything settled with his family and Dunc. That when he saw me, I was holding a little girl. I think I was talking to you. He thought I moved on. Got married and had a daughter.”

“Fuck.” Sebastian runs his hand down his face.

“I don’t know how he’ll take this. It’s going to be a lot for both of them, but Van more than anything.” My eyes start to burn. “What if Van hates me for this? I messed this up. Kept him from his dad.”

“Fischl, he’ll understand. We were all young.” Sebastian swipes away the few tears that escaped. “Van or Sadie could never hate you. Every step you took you did with pure intent of what you thought was best. That’s all we can do.”

“Time’s up.” Cooper bursts back into the room. I’m actually surprised he made it as long as he did.

“That was not ten minutes.” Sebastian shakes his head but stands.

“You made her cry.” Cooper glares at Sebastian. I know he wants to try and hit him again.

“He didn’t.” I sniffle.

Sebastian holds his hands up. “We’ll all move in. Give this a test run.”

“Not a test.”

“Cooper, it is not going to be helpful if you’re an asshole to Sebastian. Sadie and Van love him. It will push them away from you.”

“I want what’s best for everyone. You might hate me, but I love Van and Fischl. I’ll do whatever needs to be done to make this as easy as possible.” Sebastian’s words temper Cooper’s anger. “Truce?” he offers.

“Truce,” Cooper agrees, taking Sebastian’s outstretched hand.

This is a start, but I’m more worried about Van than anything.



CHAPTER 15

COOPER

“AND THIS WILL BE YOUR ROOM.” I OPEN THE DOOR TO THE BLAND GUEST room. Sadie doesn’t flinch, but Fischl grimaces. “I know it’s nothing special, but we’re going to get a decorator in to spruce it up.”

When the girl’s expression doesn’t change, I add, “Or you can do it all on your own if you like. Budget is unlimited.”

I’d have added more, but the voices in the kitchen are rising. One of them belongs to Dunc, and the only other person in the house who isn’t standing outside the door to this spare room is Van. I catch Fischl’s eye. “I’ll leave you three alone while I go check on the boys.”

I hurry off before anyone says a word because I need to get downstairs before real blood is shed. I knew the transition wasn’t going to be easy, but I didn’t think my boys would try to kill each other on the first night together.

My boys. It has a nice ring to it. The smile on my face immediately drops off when I reach the kitchen. Dunc and Van are standing on either end of the island like gunfighters ready to draw their weapons. A nearly empty jug of milk sits at Dunc’s fisted hand.

“Hungry?” I ask, strolling in as if the two don’t look like they want to kill each other. I pull open the fridge door. “How about some fried chicken tonight?”

“There’s no milk,” says Dunc.

“How was I supposed to know this was your only container? What kind of family has only one gallon of milk?” retorts Van.

“Maybe ask? Or is your voice box broken because it works fine now,” Dunc tosses back.

“This is my fault. I should’ve bought more groceries today.” I pull out my credit card. “Why don’t you two go over to the gas station on the corner and

pick up a refill?”

“I’d rather jump into a lake of lava than get into a car with him,” Van sneers. He turns on his heel and stomps out, muttering something about this fuck-ass house and the fuck-ass people in it. I pretend I don’t hear, but Dunc starts after the other boy. I get in front of him and use my dad strength to push my son back.

“Enough,” I say in a low voice.

Dunc twists out of my grip. “You’re okay with being insulted?”

“This is over milk?” I lean back against the counter and try to look cool. Integrating the two families might be a task but it’s one that has to work. I won’t accept anything less.

“No, it’s not over milk.” Dunc casts me a dark look before slamming his fist onto the plastic jug. “Why didn’t you ask me if I wanted this? How come I came home to find some woman—”

“Hey now,” I caution. Dunc’s my son, but he needs to show Fischl respect.

“And her kids in my place?”

“I know it’s a surprise. Hell, I didn’t expect this to happen, obviously, but we’ve got to make the best of it, son.”

Dunc stiffens. The plastic crackles under his fist. “You’re not my dad.” It’s a cold sentence.

My breath sounds like a hiss as I inhale through clenched teeth. I pause and let the arrow scrape across my chest before I try to make a joke of it. “Wow. Direct hit. Am I bleeding?” I rub a hand over my chest. “Doesn’t feel like I am, but I should be.”

Dunc scowls and then shifts his gaze out toward the pool. I hardly know what that look of intense contemplation means these days. Is it about his future? A girl? Me?

“You know what I mean. Your real son is here now.”

“My real son has been with me for years. I’m just growing the family one teenager at a time.”

This doesn’t crack Dunc’s stone face. “You’re acting like everything is going to be cool, and it’s not. You can’t just bring a whole other family into this place and think we’re going to be the same.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be the same. I’m hoping it will be better.”

“Because my life is going to be better with a brother? I don’t think so.” He grabs the crushed plastic off the counter and stalks out. The side door

slams shut behind him.

I drag my hands over my face. Two testosterone-driven teen boys and one teen girl all in the same house? Maybe I was crazy when I said we should all live together. I stare at the milk stain on the counter and then call a local restaurant to order dinner. No one is in a condition to cook tonight. I don't even know who will be eating, but I've got to have food here. I wipe off the spilled milk and then go off to find Fischl. Outside the kitchen, though, Van is leaning against the wall with a grim expression on his face. He straightens when he sees me.

"Sadie and I don't want to be here. Tell my mom whatever story you want, but get us out of here before the weekend."

"Not happening, son."

"I'm not your fucking son," he seethes. "You abandoned me, remember? You have a son you raised, and it ain't me."

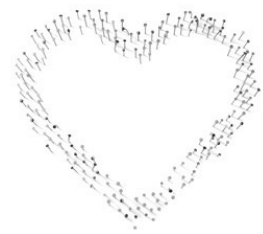
The pain he's trying to hide seeps through his words and makes my own heart, the one that Dunc slashed through, ache even more. "You're my son just as much as Dunc. I know I haven't been around before, but that's why you're here—"

"Because you fucked up," he interrupts. "Kids shouldn't have to pay for their parents' fuckup. Just FYI. I'm not interested in playing house with you so you can feel better about the way you abandoned Mom all those years ago. Your feelings don't matter. I could care less what happens to you, old man. All I know is that you're bad news and you aren't going to get a chance to hurt my sister or my mom. No second chances."

I can see why Dunc had his hands in fists. Van is very good at pushing buttons, but would I be any different in his shoes? Probably not. "I hear you, but that's not how it's going to go. We're all living here even if it means a fight every day."

"If that's how you want it, that's how it'll be," he snarls.

There's real hate in his face before he spins around and stalks up the stairs two at a time. I exhale and tell myself that nothing in life is easy, particularly the things you care about the most.



CHAPTER 16

FISCHL

VAN COMES STORMING UP THE STAIRS. HIS FACE IS FILLED WITH ANGER. GOD, he resembles Cooper so much.

“Which is mine?” he grits out. I fight the tears that want to break free. I knew this would be an adjustment, but I didn’t think Van would be this unhappy. I can’t help but second-guess if I made the right decision or not. Even though I believe it’s the best for all of us.

“Don’t be a dick to Mom.” Sadie smacks him on the chest.

“I didn’t say anything.” He didn’t have to say a word; his body language said it all.

“Your tone. Jerk.” She glares at her brother. Great, now everyone is fighting. This is definitely all my fault.

“I think it’s that one.” I point to the one across from Sadie’s room.

“Thanks,” he mutters, but it doesn’t sound like a real thank you.

“Don’t you slam it!” Sadie shouts at Van right before he is about to do just that. He takes an audible breath but closes the door gently. “It’s okay.” Sadie grabs my hand, trying to comfort me. That in itself almost makes the tears break free. I’m the one that uprooted their lives, and still she’s trying to comfort me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s fine.” Sadie elbows her dad. “Tell her that everything is going to be okay.”

“He just needs time, Fischl. It’s a big change for all of us. It’s hard to look at Cooper and not be pissed. I’m still adjusting.”

“I think Cooper means well. I feel bad for him.” Sadie has always had the sweetest heart. She tries to see the good in every situation.

We all glance down the hallway when we hear a noise. Cooper is

standing at the end of the hallway. His expression isn't much better than Van's was. I'm sure Van had a few choice words for his dad.

"I'm going to talk to him." I can't help but feel sorry for Coop. He doesn't deserve this. It wasn't his fault. In time, hopefully I can get that message across to Van.

"We'll go grab some more stuff to bring in." Sebastian wraps his arm around Sadie's shoulder.

Cooper steps aside to let them by. He comes to me, pulling me into his arms. I wrap mine around him, burying my face in his chest.

"It's going to be okay." He rubs his hand up and down my back, comforting me. I drop my head back and mouth to him that Van is right there on the other side of the door so he doesn't say something he shouldn't.

"I'm going to talk to him," I tell Cooper. I haven't gotten to give him all the details yet. I too should be on the receiving end of his anger. It was my mother's fault that all of this happened. And I should have known better than to believe her. I was young, stupid, and filled with hormones. She took advantage of that.

Cooper leans down, his mouth coming to my ear. "This isn't all your fault. Don't put it all on you." He kisses me below the ear. "I love you." I'll never get tired of hearing those words from him.

"I love you too." I drop my hands to go face-off with my son.

Van never asked anything about his father over the years. I thought he didn't care, but I'm seeing now it's because he's angry. He thinks Coop abandoned him. I need to set the record straight.

"I'll be down once I talk to him," I tell Coop before I head to Van's room.

"I'll be waiting. Everything's going to be all right," Coop says. I'm not sure if he's trying to convince me or himself.

I take a deep breath to calm my nerves before I knock on Van's door. "Honey, can I come in?" There is a long pause. He wants to say no. I close my eyes. Van has never pushed me away. I deserve it. I'm not going to force him to talk about this. Not yet, anyway. "Okay. I love you," I say, letting him know I'm not upset with him. I'll give him space if that's what he needs.

"Mom." He jerks the door open. His eyes meet mine before they dart above me, I'm sure to look at Cooper. "Not him."

"Don't make her cry."

"Fuck you, man. That's all you ever did." Shots fired.

"Hey!" I put my hands on Van's chest to push him back into the room. I

close the door as soon as I can. “Don’t do that.”

“Mom, he—”

“It was my fault too. I never told him.” When we talked about it briefly, I said there was a misunderstanding.

“I know what you’re doing.” Van walks over and drops down on the bed. “You cover for everyone. You would rather take the blame so that I don’t hate him.” I can’t disagree with him there. I would do something like that. But that’s not the case here.

“It’s true, Van. I’m not covering for anyone.”

“He hurt you. You tried to hide it, but there is a reason you don’t date. I didn’t have to ask. I knew.”

“I really didn’t tell him. I mean, I thought he knew, but my mother lied to me.” Van’s eyebrows rise. He never met my mom, but he knows a little about her. One of those things being I didn’t talk to her. I sit down on the bed next to him and tell him everything. He should get to hear it from me. “Cooper did try to find me, but he thought I was married with kids. He went through a lot too. Lost a lot of the people he loved.” I take his hand. “You think a man would raise his nephew but not his own son if he knew?”

“His nephew is a dick.” I wonder if he doesn’t care for Dunc because Cooper raised him or if there is more to it.

“You don’t know him.”

“He’s a jerk to Sadie.”

“What?”

“He thinks I don’t see him, but I do. Should keep his eyes to his fucking self.”

“Did Sadie say something?”

“No, she never does. You remember what happened at our old school.” Right, Van is touchy about how people treat her.

“Can you try to give it a chance? He is your cousin.” The room grows quiet. “Please.”

“Mom.” He mutters under his breath. “Fine.”

“It’s a lot. I hate that I did this to you and your father, but I want to fix it. Make it right. My mother took so much from me. I don’t want to do the same to you.” I can’t hold the snuffle back.

“Don’t, Mom.” He leans into me, giving my hand a squeeze. “All right, I’ll try, but they both better watch it.”

“Thank you.” I stand, giving him a kiss on the cheek. If Van can see how

Cooper is with me and even Sadie, I think it will go a long way. He stands to give me a hug.

“I’m not mad at you.” That only proves my point. Van is protective. He’s more like his father than he knows, but I’m sure he’ll soon see that.



CHAPTER 17

COOPER

NEXT TO ME, FISCHL STIRS. MY EYES POP OPEN, AND I REACH OUT TO PULL her closer to my body. “Something wrong, babe?”

“No.” She shakes her head against my chest. “Sorry I woke you up. Go back to sleep.”

“No can do. You’re up. I’m up.” I rub my hand down her bare back. “What’s got you worried?” But I already know. The days pass, but the atmosphere in the house remains cold. The women seem most affected by it. Fischl doesn’t sleep well, and Sadie’s been quiet. I do what I can for Fischl, making love to her when she wakes up and holding her tight until she falls asleep, but that doesn’t keep the worn look off her face.

“Are we making a mistake?” she says after a long silence. “Maybe we should have eased everyone into this. Had weekly sleepovers or something. If the boys were friends first, maybe they wouldn’t be so cold to each other.”

“Those two are strong-willed and set in their ways even as teens, so I think we would’ve had these conflicts with once a week or even once a month sleepovers. It’s best to throw them in the pot and let them tussle it out.”

“I don't remember you being this difficult.”

I snort. “Of course not. I was pussy-whipped. You could've told me to eat a bucket of worms and I would've gladly done it.”

“And now?”

“Still whipped.” I pull her on top of me. “Still want your pussy more than ever.” I run my tongue along my bottom lip. “Hankering for a taste right now.”

I cup the back of her head and hold her in place while I kiss her deep and long. Our tongues tangle and fight. When she’s breathless, I let her go and

slide under her warm body until my mouth is right between her legs. Her hands bat away the covers until they're down by her knees, giving me nice open access to her juicy cunt.

I lay one long lick from back to front on her. She falls forward and braces herself against the wooden headboard.

I dive in, sucking her hard clit into my mouth, tonguing that delicate bit of flesh until it's hard and quivering. I move on to her hole and arrow my tongue inside the hot wetness of her channel, sucking and fucking her until her thighs shake and cream drenches my mouth and jaw. The taste of her warm honey makes my dick hard enough to drive spikes. I tug her down until she's hovering over my cock.

"Ride me, babe," I whisper huskily.

She doesn't hesitate. Hands placed on the center of my chest, she lowers herself carefully, slowly onto the tip. I reach between us and spread her lips apart. A shaky breath escapes me as my cockhead breaches her soft sex. Even though we've made love dozens of times in this past week, sneaking in sex sessions between tasks like making bread and doing laundry as well as our nightly escapades, it's not enough. Nothing is going to make up for the years we've lost. But I'm not going to dwell on that. I'm hella grateful that she's in my arms again, and even though we've got some problems to deal with and the integration of the families hasn't been as smooth as we both liked, we're together, and that's all that matters.

Her hot cunt enveloping my shaft, her reedy breath gasping for air, her hands pressing hard against my chest, this is all I've ever wanted. To be surrounded by her, to be in her, to be with her.

I thrust up again, harder and faster, trying to imprint my body, my scent, my will into her. Sometimes I can go slowly, but this dawn, I'm feeling desperate as if all that matters in my life is about to slip away if I can't make her come this time, if I can't bring her to the edge of ecstasy once more. "You're my whole world," I growl. "If you leave me..." I can't even bring myself to finish the sentence. I surge upward and flip her over.

I pull out and slam into her with enough force that it drives her backward. Her eyes widen. "I'm never leaving you, Coop."

"Better not." I pump into her in a hard, steady rhythm and kiss her with the same force and urgency. Her eyes lock with mine, and as her body tightens under me, I stroke her deep and long until she breaks apart, crying out my name, scratching her nails across my shoulders. She throws her head

back and arches against me, trying to catch every last sensation. Spent, she collapses.

I let myself go, sending my cum inside her channel. We haven't used protection, and I hope we make another baby. One that we can raise together. I drop to her side and gather her close.

"We're going to make it. I know this is a rocky period, but we survived a separation all these years and found each other again, so I know that we'll overcome this challenge too."

She sighs and burrows her nose along my chest. "Why is everything a challenge, though? Why can't we have it easy for once?"

"We're in a bed in our house, so that's one thing that's easier. Remember having to make out in the truck? I also had to kick the door open in order to fuck you right."

She giggles at the memory. "Remember the one time we got done doing it and you looked out the window only to see that big buck staring right back at you?"

I burst out laughing. "Fuck, yes. Scared the shit out of me. I almost broke my dick scrambling away from the window."

"You yelled so loud I swear half the woods woke up."

"That old dude got an eyeful," I chuckle. "Probably the best day of his damned deer life."

Fischl smooths her hand over my pecs. "You're right. We do have it good. I won't forget that."

"And it'll get better." It's a vow I'll make come true.



CHAPTER 18

FISCHL

“HEY.” I STEP INTO SEBASTIAN’S OFFICE. I MOUTH A SORRY WHEN I SEE HIS phone pressed to his ear.

“I’m not sure, Mother.” I inwardly groan. Sebastian's mother has a way of putting us all in a shit mood. “We’ll have to talk about it later. Fischl and I are still playing catch-up with the new branch.” He pauses for a long second. “Actually, something just came up. I’ll have to call you back.” He doesn’t wait for her to respond, ending the call quickly. “She’s becoming relentless.” Sebastian tosses his phone down.

“I’m sorry.” I sit down in the chair in front of his desk. We haven't talked about this. Before Cooper came barreling back into my life, I was supposed to be considering actually marrying Sebastian. His mom had been pushing for us to do so. I’m sure he’s not looking forward to telling her we’re not really a couple. He’ll probably never hear the end of it.

“It’s fine.” Sebastian runs his hand through his hair, letting me know he’s extra frustrated. The man spends more time on his hair than I do.

“I really am. You’ve done so much for me and—”

“Don’t.” He cuts me off. “You’ve done the same for me, Fischl. The money is nothing compared to everything else you’ve done for Sadie and me.”

“I don’t think I would have ever agreed,” I admit.

“You wouldn’t have. I can see why now.” He leans back in his chair, giving me a soft smile. “You're in love. Never stopped being that way.”

“No matter how much I tried to convince myself.” I shake my head. I tried to make myself believe it was only anger I had left inside of me. But deep down, that fire burned for Cooper still.

“Because you knew, didn’t you? On some level.” He leans forward,

putting his elbows on his desk. “That you’d end up together?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It always felt wrong to agree to marry anyone.”
As though I was betraying Cooper in some way.

“You didn’t even date.” Everything felt wrong without Cooper.

“Hey, you haven’t either.”

“But I still get my needs met.” He smirks.

“What? When? You’re keeping secrets now?” Sebastian hasn’t told me about any of this.

“I guess old habits die hard.” Shit. I hate that he hides who he really is.
“Watching you with him. It has me thinking.”

“Oh?” I perk up. Both he and Sadie have been melancholy over the last few weeks. Van and Dunc keep themselves busy. They haven’t gotten into it again, but I know the two of them don’t like each other.

“I want it. What you have.” My heart breaks for him. We have had each other, but it still can get lonely.

“You deserve it.” I mean that from the depths of my heart. Sebastian deserves to find the type of love that Coop and I share.

“Thanks.” I get up to go around his desk and give him a hug. “Did you need something?” he asks.

“I was going to leave early if you don’t need me for anything else.”

“Got plans with Cooper?” He gives me a teasing smile. Sebastian has been the one to come around the quickest to all of the recent changes in our lives. But honestly, I didn’t expect anything less from him. He’s always been my biggest cheerleader and only wants me to be happy. That is what he cares about at the end of the day. He only hated Cooper because he thought he hurt me.

“No, I was actually going to see if I can lure Sadie out to talk.”

“I tried.” Sebastian shakes his head. “Out of all the kids, she’s been the one that is always saying she’s okay with everything, but she’s really not.”

“I know. I’m going to get to the bottom of it.”

“Good luck,” he says as I head out of the office.

Sadie can be the hardest to get anything out of. It took Van seeing the girls from school picking on her before we got her to talk to us about it. She never wants to make waves.

“Sadie,” I call when I enter the house. The whole place is quiet, but I know she’s home. I head upstairs to her bedroom. “Sadie.” I knock on her door.

“Come in.” She sits up on her bed.

“You haven’t done anything to your room yet?” She shrugs. “What’s going on?” I sit down on the bed next to her.

“Nothing.” Which in teenager language means *everything*. I guess she’s gonna make me pull it out of her.

“Come on. Us girls, we’re supposed to stick together.” I bump her shoulder with mine.

“Are we?” I don’t like the sad tone in her voice.

“Sadie.” I turn to face her. “What’s going on?”

“Dad and I will leave.”

“What?”

“I mean, it makes sense. We don’t fit anymore.” She drops her eyes to stare down at her fingers that she’s wringing together. Her words hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Sweetheart. You’re my daughter.” I can’t help but get choked up. I had no idea she was feeling this way.

“I was someone else’s daughter, and they left too,” she whispers, breaking my heart. “Van’s dad didn’t really leave him.”

“Your birth mom walking away gave you to me. You’re my daughter. I chose you.” I grab her hands. “That makes you extra special.”

A smile pulls at her lips. “He doesn’t want us here.”

“Cooper?”

“No, he’s actually really nice. He’s really sweet to you.” It hits me that she’s talking about Dunc. I thought it was only he and Van that were going at it. But obviously, that’s not the case.

“It’s a big change for everyone. Dunc might have the same fears as you. He lost his parents too.” I know it may sound like I’m making excuses for his behavior, but that’s not the case. I’m trying to look at things from all sides.

“Maybe.” She gives another one of her shrugs.

“It’s his loss, Sadie. Van adores you, and he never likes anyone.”

“He is kinda a grump.” She snorts a laugh.

“Maybe it’s in the Donovan blood,” I tease.

“Cooper’s sweet.”

“Unless something isn’t going his way. Trust me. He has his moments.”

“But even then, it’s still adorable.” Adorable is not in the top twenty words I would use to describe Cooper. “It’s nice seeing someone in love.”

I already know where her head is going. If Sadie isn’t studying for school,

she has her nose in her Kindle, reading.

“I’m sure you’ll have your pick of boys.”

“Whatever.” She blushes. “Do you think we can go for a drive?”

“Whoa. Really?”

“Van has to run me home after school. I should be able to get myself around.”

“You know he doesn’t care, nor do I. If you’re not ready—”

“I’m ready.” She stands up to put her sneakers on.

“All right then. We can drive to the little shopping center. I saw a taco place there.” I hand her the keys. We need some girl time. There’s a lot of testosterone flowing in this house lately. It’ll be nice for it to be just the two of us.

“Seat belt,” she says the second we get into the car.

“You got this.” I click my belt on. “See, it’s not so bad.”

“We’re only at the end of the driveway, Mom.” Sadie laughs but turns out onto the street.

“Take a left at the second stop sign,” I direct her. She pulls up to the first stop sign. The sound of a screeching vehicle pulls my attention. “Stay.” I put my hand out, seeing a white van speeding down the road.

“I don’t think they’re going to stop.” I don’t think so either. I spot a cop car behind it with its lights on, chasing it. There is a teenager behind the wheel.

“Just let it pass through,” I tell Sadie.

Except it doesn’t pass through. It takes a hard left at the last second, hitting us head-on. All I can hear is Sadie’s scream before darkness takes me.



CHAPTER 19

COOPER

I BURST THROUGH THE HOSPITAL DOORS AND RACE TO THE NURSE'S STATION. "Fischl Vanni? Where is she? What's her status?" The questions shoot out like bullets from a gun, sharp and fast. The woman in green blinks at me and then starts typing slowly. A growl builds in my throat, but before I do anything stupid, a familiar arm falls across my chest.

"Whoa, there, Coop. Don't shout at the nice nurses." Big Ed pulls me to the side and looks over my shoulder. "Where's the rest of the crew?"

"The rest of who?" My mind's on one thing right now, and that's Fischl.

"Your son. Your other son. The second dad?"

"Home. Home. Who the fuck knows? Fischl? Sadie?"

"Can't tell you about Sadie because you're not her guardian, but Fischl..." He trails off, rubbing a finger across his lower lip. "Car got hit head on landing more on the driver's side, Coop. She's in the OR because her lung collapsed."

It's a good thing Big Ed is next to me because my legs almost give out. My vision blurs and then goes black. I hear the screaming of tires, the sickening crunch of metal against metal, my sister's blue eyes flashing and then going dull. No. This is not happening. I'm not losing Fischl. I grip Ed's collar and drag myself upright. "Prognosis?"

"I'm no doc."

"What'd they tell you, Ed?" I snarl, tightening my grip on the fabric.

"They told me—"

"You! Where's Sadie?" a sharp voice interrupts. We spin toward the newcomer to see Sadie's dad storming at us, red faced, suit coat half on, shoes untied.

I find myself holding up a hand. "Seb, the car hit the driver's side."

“God! Was Fischl hurt?” He grabs the other side of Ed’s collar and gets up in the officer’s face. “Tell me!”

He gives us both a shove backward. “Look here. I’m not the doc, okay? Sadie’s got an arm injury, but it’s not so bad that they think they’ll have to do surgery. She’s in a recovery room. Fischl, like I said, she’s in the OR, and I don’t know a damned more thing than that.”

Both of us take a step forward. Ed shakes his head. “One more shirt grab out of either one of you and I’ll be hauling you down to lockup, and instead of getting hospital updates on your girls, you’ll be listening to Marty, the town drunk, tell you how he thinks his toe jamb is delicious.”

Seb gags, and I let out a stream of frustrated air. “Fine, Ed. Come on, Seb. The recovery rooms are on the second floor. I’ll wait down here in OR and text you when the results for Fischl come out.”

“What about the boys? I don’t think either of them should drive over here.”

“I’ll get my foreman to pick them up.”

Seb agrees to this and quickly heads off to find his daughter. I key in some text messages to my foreman and then son, telling him to call me now.

Above me on the wall, I see Vanni, F listed in OR 5. It’s only been a half hour. Since I’ve never had surgery and only watched a few medical shows on TV, I don’t really know if that’s a good sign or a bad one. Like is thirty minutes a lot or is it nothing?

The last time I was in the hospital like this, I was a teenager, and the person in the OR wasn’t Fischl, it was my sister. She died on the table. Doc said that the chance of her surviving was less than low. My mom begged for a chance, but it was no good. To be honest, I think the grief killed my mom as much as the sickness, and I understand it more today than I did back then. If Fischl goes, well, it’s going to be hard to fight to stay here on Earth. Van’s at an age that maybe he doesn’t need a broken man like I would be.

Dunc’s voice comes over the line. “Dad?”

He sounds young and afraid. I stiffen my spine and slap myself across the face. I’ve got two boys now. I can’t be selfish and abandon them. Someone’s got to be strong. “Dunc, I’m sending Alec to pick you up. Fischl and Sadie were in a car accident and—”

I hear a clatter and then shouting. “Fuck,” I curse. Hurriedly I call his cell phone, but he doesn’t pick up. Fortunately, I have Van’s phone number. I call him, and he picks up on the first ring.

“How are they?” are his first words.

“Sadie’s got an arm injury and she’s in recovery. Your—” I almost said dad, but I’m his dad. “Sebastian’s with her.”

“And Mom?” There’s fear in his voice too.

“She’s in the operating room. Got her rib cage banged up a bit, but she’s going to be okay.” I figure that’s not much of a lie. I’m not letting Fischl go, and if I have to bring every doctor in the world here to save her, that’s what’s going to happen. “I’m sending you two a car. I don’t think either of you should be driving, and definitely not Dunc.” That boy already lost his parents in a car wreck. He’s in no shape to get behind a wheel.

“I hear you.”

“I’m trusting you, son, to take care of your brother. You both get here safe, you hear? Your mom will be spitting fire when she wakes up and hears you were all irresponsible.”

There’s a choked laugh. “Yeah, you’re right. She would be mad.”

“What’s he saying?” I hear Dunc ask.

“You’d know if you stayed on the phone,” shoots back Van.

“Fuck you. I’m trying to get to the hospital.”

“Not in that state, you’re not. Look, here’s our ride.” To me, he says, “Bye.”

And those are the last words I hear until the thud of boots on the hallway fifteen minutes later. I look up to see only Dunc.

He clears his throat. “Van went upstairs to see Sadie. I need to know—is she—” He can’t finish.

I throw an arm around his shoulder and draw his body next to mine. “There’s no update yet, but she’s going to be fine. You and I will make it so. Together.”

He sags into me, and then a sob catches in his throat. He turns and buries his head in my neck and weeps silently. Tears prick my eyes as well. *Oh, Fischl, honey, come back to us. We’re two broken shells without you.*



CHAPTER 20

FISCHL

I TRY TO OPEN MY EYES WHEN I HEAR MY NAME BEING CALLED, BUT THEY feel as though they have weights on them. The voices are familiar, but I can't really piece together what else they're saying. Only a word here and there. Something about an accident and surgery.

Every fiber of my being hurts. Panic begins to rise in me as I try to get my bearings. I take a deep breath, trying to calm down. But even doing that seems to be a chore.

"Sadie!" My eyes spring open when the memories of what happened flood my mind.

"I'm okay," I hear her say softly. I try to sit up, wanting to see her, but get nowhere. Two arms are pushing me back down.

"Baby, it's all right."

"Cooper," I whisper, my voice cracking. Relief fills me knowing that he's here.

"You're fine and so is Sadie, but I need you to stay in bed. No quick movements." My eyes start to clear more. "Flip off some of those lights," Cooper orders, making everything come into view now. Well, at least Cooper comes more in focus because he's leaning over me with his hands on my shoulders keeping me in place.

"What happened?" Cooper presses his mouth against mine in a soft kiss before he finally answers me.

"There was a police chase, and the guy they were after crashed head-on into you and Sadie."

"I remember Sadie screaming and the sound of the impact, but everything after is blank." That's not a sound any parent ever wants to hear. I don't think I'll ever forget it.

“You were pretty banged up when the ambulance brought you in. Docs had to do surgery because your lung collapsed,” Cooper continues. Holy crap. No wonder it feels as if I was hit by a bus.

I glance over to my right, now that my eyesight has cleared to see Sadie, Van, Dunc, and Sebastian all sitting there. It’s the first time since we merged families that I’ve seen them all sit close together. They look tired and have worry etched on their faces.

“Well, this is a welcome sight. I mean you guys should have told me that all I needed to do was almost die in order for all of you to get along.” I try to lighten the mood in the room, but no one laughs. “Too soon?”

“Fuck, Mom.” Cooper steps aside to make room for Van. He places his hand on Van’s shoulder, and to my surprise he doesn’t try to push it off. “You scared the hell out of me.” I reach my hand up to cup his face.

“I’ll be okay.” Van takes my hand into his. I can’t help but smile seeing Cooper and Van standing side by side. “Sadie, sweetheart.”

“Told you guys I shouldn’t drive.” Sadie comes to stand on the other side of the bed. She has a bright pink sling on her arm. Her eyes are red. Dunc stands right behind her.

“I’ll drive you.” Dunc says it like an order.

“I can drive my own sister.”

“You have early football practice.” Van starts to respond, but Cooper cuts in.

“Dunc can take Sadie to school.” Sadie glances over her shoulder at Dunc. I don’t think she’s too excited about it.

“I’m sure I could just, ah—” Sadie tries to think of some excuse.

“I’ll take you.” Dunc takes a step closer to her, crowding her in.

Sebastian stands at the end of the bed. Our eyes lock, and I know what he’s thinking, and it’s not that he can’t take his own daughter to school because he could. It’s that things are starting to settle. He gives me a half-smile. I’m sure it’s all he can muster with what he’s been through today.

Sebastian has always wanted a family. One that was nothing like his own. This one’s dynamic might be different, but with time, I think Van and Dunc might start to like each other. I still don’t understand why they can’t stand each other. But boys will be boys, and you have to let them work it out on their own. The more you try to force it, the more they’ll fight against it.

“Why don’t all of you get out of here and get some rest. You guys look like crap.” I try to laugh but stop abruptly when a sharp pain shoots through

me.

“You need to take it easy. And I’m not going anywhere,” Cooper growls out. I can tell the others don’t want to leave either.

“I won’t be able to get any rest knowing all of you are sitting here staring at me.”

“And Sadie needs rest. You’re supposed to take more pain meds in ten minutes, and we haven’t been to the pharmacy yet,” Dunc adds.

“I’ll grab her medications on the way home. You three can head home together,” Sebastian tells them.

“Take my car. I’m not leaving tonight. I’ll have my foreman drop me one off later.” Cooper pulls his keys out of his pocket, holding them out. Both Van and Dunc stare at them.

“You drive. I’ll tend to Sadie.” Dunc is still standing close to her. Van’s eyes bounce between the two of them, but he takes the keys from his dad’s hand, not starting a fight. That’s more progress, if you ask me. Usually, they would have fought over one just suggesting the other do something.

Each one gives me a kiss. Cooper doesn’t growl when Sebastian leans down and kisses my cheek. Once again, progress.

“I know you’ll take care of her, but don’t worry about the kids. I’ve got them.”

“Thank you,” Cooper tells him before Sebastian heads out last.

“Look at you two getting along.”

“He was really good with the kids.” Cooper runs his hand through his short hair. “Kept it together better than I did.” The anguish shows on his face now that all the kids are gone.

“I’m okay.” He had to be scared out of his mind. Cooper has lost so many people in his life. “We’re not losing anyone else, Coop. If anything, I’m sure this family is only going to grow.” He gives me a half-hearted smile, grabbing the chair and pulling it right up next to the bed, and takes hold of my hand.

I’m not going to fight him on going home. It would be pointless, and I don’t want him to go anywhere. I’ll never ask Cooper Donovan not to be by my side. Nor would I ever let someone take him from me again.

WHAT'S THIS? No epilogue???? Not to worry, my loves, Sadie's book is next and there is more Cooper and Fischl in that story. Please stay tuned. It's already written and the finishing touches are being applied. Stay safe and sane this holiday season. Many kisses.

Ella

ALSO BY
Ella Goode

Kissing the Hitman
The Good Bad Man

Pick Love
Taste of Love

Rocked by Love
Marked with Love

Chasing Series
Chasing You
Chasing Us

Swiped for His Taking
Claiming His Bride
Heiress
Knocked Up by Love

Justice Series
Socialite and the Cowboy
Heiress and the Cowboy
Princess and the Cowboy
Billionaire and the Cowgirl
Secretary and the Cowboy
Insta Holiday

Connected to Forever Mine
Making Her Mine

Protecting What's Mine

Friends to Lovers

Forever Mine

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(loosely based fairy tales)

Claiming His Queen, Stealing His Princess

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Secret Baby / Love's Secret Baby / Rock 'n Roll Baby

Spark

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Finding Home & Bring Him Home

Captured, Kept, Stolen

Make Me Yours

She's All Mine

Pretty Prize

The Wolf's Mail Order Bride

Beauty in Summer

My Secret Valentine Baby

Wrap With Love

(a collection of past holiday stories)

Christmas Stalking

Three of Us (Twins #1) and Belong Together (Twins #2)

I wrote a few motorcycle romances when I first started out.

Their Private Need (Michigan, Easy and Annie)

His Bold Heart (Chelsea & Wrecker)

Her Secret Pleasure

Captive Ride

My one and only LGBTQ romance.

She's the One & My Only One

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