

SECRET LOVE



USA Today Bestselling Author
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I'll admit I'm not the friendliest guy around. I'm not on the football field throwing touchdowns or in the classroom racking up perfect grades. I am mostly getting by but that's because I've always known what I want. I'm going to take over nearly billion dollar construction company my dad built... or so I thought.

My plans fall apart when Sadie and her brother appear in my life. Her brother is actually my dad's real son. That makes Sadie my—no, it can't be because one look at Sadie and the only thought in my head is how to possess her.

New plan to execute. Figure out the complicated family ties. Try not to kill my new brother. Convince Sadie I'm the man for her. Easy, right? Well, maybe not but anything worth having is worth fighting for and Sadie's worth everything.



CHAPTER 1

DUNCAN

“DUNCAN, PLEASE STAY FOR A MOMENT AFTER CLASS,” Ms. COTTON, MY homeroom teacher, asks.

A bunch of oohhs rise around me. I tilt my head to the side and survey the room. Everyone shuts up. I already know what this is going to be about. Horny teach wants in my dad’s drawers so she makes up some story about my behavior, my grades, my studying—or lack of it—to bring him in for a conference. Hardly a new story. I’ve dealt with her kind since I was in elementary school. If I had a quarter for every time a teacher wanted a few extra minutes after class, I’d have at least enough to buy myself a twenty-piece chicken bucket at Kane’s.

After the bell signals class is over, everyone is out the door except for Rose Benton. She slides her Mary Janes across the tile until she’s a whisper away from my desk.

“I’m having a party this weekend. My parents are going to Jackson Hole for a little romantic retreat. Dad’s thinking of buying a cabin up there.”

Since Benton’s dad owns all the car dealerships around here, a cabin likely means some mini mansion made out of logs and stocked with caviar. “He want my dad’s opinion on whether it’s built okay? Have him take some video and send it over.” Dad’s a big believer in doing small favors for others. Sort of a reap what you sow philosophy. I don’t really ascribe to that. All I’ve ever reaped is shit, and I haven’t done anything to anyone. I mean, okay, I might be kind of a dick, but it’s not like I actively shit on people. I just don’t want to allow anyone too close. It’s not personal.

“Okay but —”

“You have my email, right?”

“If you gave me your phone number —”

“Email’s good.” I get to my feet and sling my backpack over one shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Rose’s face crumples, but I don’t spend any time comforting her. She’s been trying to get me to come to a party since we were freshmen. She should know better by now. I brush past her and head for Ms. Cotton’s desk. She watches me with a frown but doesn’t say anything until Rose leaves.

“That wasn’t very nice.”

“How so?” I glance at the clock. It’s only three, so Dad’s probably still at a worksite. If I hurry and change, I could join him before he sends the crew home at five.

“Rose is a nice girl, and she was —”

“Rose only likes me because she thinks my bank account matches hers. You don’t see her inviting Dickinson to any of her weekend smashes because he lives on the east side where the only grass that grows is between cracks on the sidewalk.”

Ms. Cotton frowns. “You don’t know that’s true if you’ve never gone to a party.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t need to go to know what the guest list is. Anyway, if that’s all you wanted to see me about, I’ll be going. How many parties I’m not attending isn’t really something you teachers can be interested in.”

She coughs. “Of course, I asked you to stay longer because I wanted to discuss your academics. I was a little sidetracked by the...drama.”

I arch an eyebrow because that’s not what it was. Ms. Cotton flushes slightly and drops her gaze to the paper in front of her which is labeled *AP Calculus*. I sigh and rock back on my heels. She picks up the packet and holds it out to me.

“I think you should consider moving to this class.”

“No.”

“The course materials in this one are too easy for you. Plus, it will give you an advantage when you go to college next year.”

I bite my tongue to keep from saying I’m not going to college because I know what kind of discussion that will get me. “I’m not interested.”

Frustrated, she taps the papers against her desk and says, “Would you tell your father I’d like to see him? Tomorrow? After class.”

“Sure.” I’m actually all for Dad getting some. He’s practically a monk, and I think it’s unhealthy for him. But Ms. Cotton won’t get anywhere with him. Dad says that there is only one woman for him and that he’s not

interested in anyone else. That's a nice concept, but the one woman he fell for disappeared on him. She probably wouldn't have wanted to be a teen mom anyway, especially to a kid she didn't give birth to. I don't resent her. It's reasonable. Like, I'm about the same age as Dad and his girl were when my parents died in a car crash, and I can barely keep a goldfish alive. I had one when I was like ten and it died. Dad and I flushed it down the toilet. To be honest, I wasn't real attached to it. I never get attached to anything.

I love my dad, but I'm not going to turn out like him, thirty-five and still pining over the one that got away. Besides, I don't believe in the love at first sight shit. That stuff is for people who need some kind of emotional crutch. I'm not built like that. I don't need those kinds of attachments.

"That all you need, Ms. Cotton?"

She lets out a sigh and waves me off. "Yes, Duncan. Thank you. I'll look forward to seeing your dad tomorrow."

I dip my head and move toward the door. Before I'm halfway across, it swings open with a clatter, and two people tumble in—a girl and—well, I don't see anyone past the girl. My eyes lock on hers, and it's like a bolt of lightning piercing my skull and traveling through the core of my being. Bells ring. People start shoving past me. I don't move. I can't.



CHAPTER 2

SADIE

“FUCK, YOU’RE GORGEOUS.” WARMTH SPREADS INTO MY CHEEKS AT THE sound of his deep voice.

My mom might have been right. This new school is going to be a fresh new start for me. Especially when the hottest boy or maybe man I’ve ever seen compliments me. This move is already better. I was dreading it, but nothing could be worse than my last school. I was happy to be closing that chapter in my life.

“Thanks,” I manage to get out.

“What’s your name?” His voice is gruff. The question almost sounds like a demand rather than a request.

“Sadie.” I hold my hand out to him.

“Dunc.” He responds by taking it. I swear I feel a spark when we make contact, but I’m probably imagining it. Surprisingly, his hold on me is gentle, but his hand is rough. The texture makes my skin break out in goosebumps. My breath hitches. What is happening to me?

An arm drops down around my shoulder before I can process the reaction I’m having. I don’t have to look to know who it is.

“We got a problem?” Van, my brother, asks.

“Why would there be a problem?” I chirp, wanting to be chipper so Van knows not to scare Dunc away. But when I glance over at him, I can see that’s his mission.

My brother has always been protective of me. But once I started getting bullied in my old high school, it really went full throttle. I don’t think my brother knows that some of that bullying was because of him. And I would never speak those words out loud because it wasn’t his fault.

Van was always popular but not by choice. Some of my friends were

never even *my* friends. They only came over to try and get his attention. He never gave it to them. Which would bother the crap out of them. That was the beginning of the bullying—they taking out his rejection of them on me.

Then people found out we weren't truly brother and sister in the DNA way, and that Van's mother and my father were really just best friends. Our parents actually met when my dad came to find me after finding out my mother had given birth to me. His daughter. She wanted him to sign away his rights, but my dad wouldn't. Van's mom, Fischl, had been in the same predicament. Only she wouldn't sign hers over.

They never told us all of the story, but the two of them formed a bond. One my dad used to make my grandparents chill out about him getting married because we all know he's gay. Now Van's mom and my dad pretend to be a thing to the rest of the world. My dad comes from a very wealthy background. Our last name is known to most of the world.

But Fischl isn't just Van's mom. I don't care what anyone says. Fischl has been my mom my whole life. And Van is my brother. Nothing more. The girls at my old school couldn't get past Van shutting them down, so they started to spread gossip that Van and I were secretly a thing.

Vomit.

I mean, Van is handsome, but so is my dad. The only love I have for my brother is a family one. He feels the same. Van is just super protective. It's almost a chip I think he carries on his shoulder because his biological dad dropped off the planet. I think. Mom doesn't talk about it.

"You sure about that?" Van asks. Both he and Dunc glare at each other.

"Get to your next classes," the teacher calls out.

"This is our class." Van responds. "She must be talking to you, pretty boy. Move along."

"Van!" I hiss, hitting him in the chest. I swear I want a hole to open up in the floor and swallow me. I can't believe my brother just embarrassed me in front of the hottest guy on the planet. Scratch that. I can totally believe it.

"Fuck off." Dunc walks past him but not before shoulder-checking him, making Van's arm fall off my shoulder. I grab a hold of my brother's shirt before he can try to go after him.

"New school," I remind him. "Be nice." That's the excuse I use, but that's not the true reason I want Van to back off.

"He was eye-fucking you," Van says bluntly. If any of my blush had started to fade, it is surely back now.

“And what’s wrong with that?” I put my hands on my hips. My frustration with what just happened is evident.

“Fucking Christ.” Van runs his hand down his face.

“What?” One of these days Van is going to realize that I’m not a little girl anymore. That I don’t always need protecting.

“I know a dick when I see one.”

“What?!” How the hell could he have come to that conclusion when they barely said two words to each other? Actually, I don’t think Dunc said any.

“Takes one to know one?”

“Yep.” Van doesn’t try to deny it.

“He said I was gorgeous.”

“And? The sky is fucking blue too.”

“Language,” the teacher snips. I think back to my schedule to try to remember what her name is. Ms. Cotton, I believe.

“Sorry, Ms. Cotton,” I say for both of us.

She gives me a soft smile. “You’re new.”

“Yes,” I tell her. Van drops down into a seat. “I’m Sadie, and this is my brother Van.”

“Welcome.” She hands us both a piece of paper with her class syllabus.

“Thanks.” I take the seat next to Van.

“Sadie.” Ms. Cotton taps my desk. “Dunc can be a bit of a…” She trails off, trying to find a word.

“Dick?” Van supplies.

“Language,” Ms. Cotton tells him again but doesn’t deny what my brother said. He seemed nice to me. Maybe I’m silly, but it wasn’t only that he called me gorgeous. I swear he looked at me like I was too.

“See?” Van mutters under his breath to me as more students start to flood into the classroom.

I watch as girls fill up all the available seats around my brother. I shake my head because he doesn’t notice. He’s pulled out his notebook and is drawing. Some things never change.

I sink farther into my seat, hating math. Okay, I don’t hate it. It’s just easy, which makes it boring at times. My mind drifts to Dunc. I’m not sure what it is about him but he had my attention in a way no other ever has.



CHAPTER 3

DUNCAN

I CHECK MY WATCH. DAD SHOULD BE DONE WITH MS. COTTON BY NOW unless she, by some miracle, convinced him that his era of celibacy should come to an end. Maybe he's so hard up they started screwing each other on the desk, which is as good a reason as any to be late for dinner. My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't eaten since lunch four hours ago.

I pace in front of the pickup and then force my feet to still. I'm usually not this...agitated. I blame it on the girl and her boyfriend. Dad has had this thing for one woman all his life, and I never understood it. The one true love theory just never made sense to me, but now... Fuck me. It can't be true because she's got a man. I'm not the type of guy to poach on someone else's property. Not that she's anyone's property, but the same sentiment applies.

I saw her, and I wanted her. Like something visceral grabbed me by the throat, and if it weren't for the guy behind her, I would've thrown Sadie over my shoulder and taken her to the nearest closet and screwed her blind.

I need to see her again. Maybe what I felt was due to lack of food or having to listen to Ms. Cotton drone about numbers. Maybe it was lightheadedness from Rose Benton's perfume. I just need to see Sadie again and without the guy. The guy...I feel like I know him from somewhere. Like we've met before, which is fucking odd because I've lived in this town my whole life and all my friends are guys I've known since elementary school.

A piercing whistle jostles my thoughts free. The football team is practicing across the field. I was never into the game. Dad and I spent time at the baseball fields in the summer, but being an athlete never interested me. It took time away from my dad, who had built his construction company from nothing into a mini empire. Largest construction company in a three-state area. Revenues of over a billion last year. My body is just as stacked as any

football player, but I didn't build it in the gym but by helping carry steel beams, sheetrock, and hundred-pound bags of concrete mix. I don't need college, and I hope that Ms. Cotton doesn't convince Dad otherwise.

I owe it to him to take over the business. He was barely a kid himself when my parents died in that wreck. I remember people telling him that he should give me up for adoption. That he wasn't equipped to raise a kid, but he refused. I'm not paying him back by running away from everything he built to protect me.

I should go and rescue him.

I reach Ms. Cotton's room, but the doorway is already full. The hair on the back of my neck rises as the guy in front of me shifts, and I see Sadie's small form right behind him. I hear her gasp and him curse and then the two run away. Sadie's words run through my mind. "He looks like you." She wasn't talking about me. She didn't even see me. She was talking about her boyfriend. Or the dude.

Dad walks out looking sheet white.

"You look like you saw a ghost," I say, wanting to know what he knows.

He merely dips his head toward the exit. "Hungry?"

Not really. My appetite has suddenly disappeared, but I know if I say no, it will give rise to way too many questions.

"Yeah."

We make a short detour to pick up some burgers and fries. While we wait, I get on social media and start scrolling through the school hashtag looking for pictures of Sadie and that boy. Dad drones on in the background about college and shit. Since I've heard this discussion before, I can give the appropriate response without paying attention. No, I'm not going to college. No, being an architect sounds boring as hell. My internet search comes up blank. I sigh and drag my hands through my hair.

I want to ask him if that kid is related to me. I can tell something is going on. He never gave any hint that he had another kid. Did he not know? But once Sadie said the two of them looked alike, I can't get it out of my head.

That has to be it because there's no way he wouldn't have raised his own son. God, his own son. Those words sit like a rock in my stomach. Does that make Sadie my sister if they're related and not dating? I wait for bile to climb up my throat in response to my thirsting over my own sister or wait, my cousin, and yet the only thing I feel moving is my dick in my pants. I'm discovering all sorts of terrible things about myself today.

I should've taken Rose up on her offers—whatever they were. Maybe if I'd slept with someone before meeting Sadie, I wouldn't have these sick thoughts. Ironically, the thought of bedding Rose makes all my desire wane. Instant boner loss.

At home, I shove the food in my mouth, thinking more about Sadie. The bells I heard, the rush of blood in my dick, all of that is normal guy stuff. Okay, maybe not the bells, but having a woody? I wake up every morning hard. That's normal. The bells, well, easy explanation is that I'm at a school. I hear bells all fucking day long. I was probably having residual hearing memory function, if that's a thing. Besides, love at first sight is not a thing. Maybe lust at first sight I could buy but not love.

I cave and ask Dad one question I know he'd be able to answer. "The girl you left to take care of me, how long had you known her?"

"One look. It was like a bell went off in my head."

I stare at him, angry all of a sudden. Why'd he have to say that? Why does she have to be the one?



CHAPTER 4

SADIE

I SMILE WHEN I SEE DUNC EXITING THE SCHOOL AS I HEAD INSIDE. MAYBE HE forgot something in his car. My mom dropped me off today because Van went in early and I'm lame and still won't drive. I've had my permit so long I had to renew it.

Dunc is staring down at his phone as he passes me.

"Hey, Dunc."

"What part of I'm not interested are you not fucking getting." His words stun me so hard I stop walking. What the heck?

"I'm ah," I stumble over my words. "I'm sorry." I clearly am terrible at reading people. Van is always right. I should have listened when he told me Dunc was a dick. Even the teacher tried to warn me, and I didn't want to hear it.

I should know better. At my last school, I got myself shitty friends that used me because I took what people gave me at face value. Van says I give everyone the benefit of the doubt and can never see them for what they truly are: assholes. Sorry, it's not like I was born with a built-in asshole detector. The two men in my life I love treated me like gold.

"Shit, Sadie, I—" A scream has me pulling my attention away from Dunc to see my mom being kidnapped by some man. Dunc runs toward them. I pull out my phone and call my brother.

He answers on the second ring.

"What's up?"

"I think Mom is being kidnapped."

"What?!"

"I'm in front of the school. Your doppelgänger from yesterday is stealing her!" I start moving toward them, not sure what to do.

The man shoves a backpack at Dunc. I hear him say, “If I’m not home tonight, don’t worry. I’m taking care of something.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Dunc shouts back at him, looking just as confused as I am about what’s going on.

“Stop. This is kidnapping!” my mom yells, beating her hands into the man's back. “Someone call the police.”

“Don’t you dare,” the man shouts, already heading toward his truck to toss my mom into the back seat. I try to run after them, but a hand loops around my waist, stopping me.

“What the hell?” I try to wiggle free.

“It’s fine. My dad isn’t going to hurt her.”

“Let me go.” I stomp down on his foot, but that doesn’t work. He didn’t even flinch.

“Calm down,” Dunc tells me. The truck takes off before he releases his hold on me. I step away from him to call 911, but he snatches my phone.

“Give it back.” I lunge for it, but he holds it way over his head, making my body rub against his as I try to jump to get it. I know it’s pointless because I’ll never reach it. I am barely a few inches over five feet.

“Van was right about you.”

“Van can fuck off.”

Every emotion I felt toward my old school bubbles to the surface. The memories of the girls there picking on me, and then sometimes their boyfriends coming to their aid course through me. Add in my mom being kidnapped and Dunc’s cruel words when I tried to say hello, and I do the unthinkable. For me at least. I smack him.

Dunc’s eyes widen in surprise. His hand drops. I manage to grab my phone.

“You stay away from me,” I hiss at him.

“Sadie—” I cut him off, holding my hand out.

“Don’t.”

“Yo,” Van calls out, running toward me. I rush over to him.

“Should we call the police?”

“I already called Dad. He’s on it. I’m going to see if I can catch them.”

“How?” I shout at him, but he’s now sprinting into the parking lot. There are a million ways they could have gone. We haven’t lived here long. He can’t possibly know his way around.

“The app,” he reminds me before he’s gone. Right, I forgot about that.

We can all track each other.

“It’s his dad.” Dunc is still standing there with his backpack in his hand.

“What?” I thought he was Dunc’s dad. I suppose he could be both.

“The man Van is chasing with your mom is his father.” I shake my head.
“You and Van are close in age. He can’t be your brother.”

“He is my brother,” I defend.

“Not sure he sees it that way. He’s real protective.”

“I really want to smack you again.”

“Smack me again then.”

I swallow, already having guilt over the first time I did it. “You’re not worth it. I’m sorry I hit you. I’ve dealt with my share of bullies and never hit anyone. Guess that makes you an extra special jerk.” I turn to head into school. He calls after me.

“Sadie.”

I stop to glance back at him. “Please leave me alone.” I hate that his words cut me so deep and that my eyes are watering. I play it off that it’s not only him being a jerk but everything else that’s happening.

“Fuck,” he shouts before muttering something about not knowing it was me.

I head into the bathroom, finding an empty stall to call my dad. He reassures me that everything is fine. I also learned Dunc wasn’t lying about the man, Cooper, who I now know is indeed Van’s father.

Does that make Dunc his brother? The more I piece it together, I can see it. My brother and this Cooper were super similar in appearance. I’d said as much yesterday. Now I can see how Dunc too has similarities as well. Not as strong but the build of his body and the hard jawline.

Just great. Now I’m going to be stuck with Dunc regardless. A tear slips free. My life is about to change. What if Van and Mom leave Dad and me? Cooper was hell-bent on taking my mom.

I swipe away the tears, forcing a smile onto my face. I’ll do what I have to do to make sure that my family stays together.

Fake it until you make it. I did it before; surely, I can do it again.



CHAPTER 5

DUNCAN

MY LIFE IS AN EPISODE OF *PRETTY LITTLE LIARS* OR *RIVERDALE* BUT WITHOUT the supernatural aspects. I think because I honestly have never seen an episode of either, but from what I've picked up from school conversations, there's a lot of backstabbing and morally gray relationships. Right now, I feel like there's a knife between my shoulder blades shoved there by my da—my uncle Cooper—that not even my backpack full of books could stop. It doesn't feel right to call him Dad anymore, not when he has a real son out there.

I knock my head against the brick wall of the school a few times until my forehead starts hurting. Cousin? I can't even believe it. I don't want to believe it. Why does destiny hate me so much? Like what did I ever do to her? A new cousin who hates my guts and a another new cousin who I want to fuck into oblivion.

I bang on the bathroom door. Sadie's been in there long enough. It's time for us to talk. The door falls open on my fifth or tenth knock. I wasn't keeping track. A girl I barely know scowls at me.

"Duncan? What are you doing here?"

"My—" I can't bring myself to say it. "I'm waiting for Sadie."

"Who's that?"

"Is anyone else inside?" I don't want to have a conversation with this girl. I want to see Sadie.

The girl scowls. "You're a real dick, Duncan. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Everyone?"

She rolls her eyes and stomps past me. I catch the door and walk in. Sadie is leaning against the sink, staring at herself in the mirror. Her mouth moves, but I can't hear what she says. Hell, she's so pretty in her mini skirt with the folds—pleats or whatever they're called. Her long legs end in a pair of white

socks bunched around her ankles. On her feet are thick-soled black loafers. While her legs are on display, her arms are covered by a long-sleeved sweater also in black. A bit of white peeks out of the top of the sweater. She's very put together, like she could be on the cover of a teen magazine. Prettier than anyone on television. The back of my teeth ache with want. I swallow a groan. "Sadie?" I say gruffly.

She spins around, her mouth opening in surprise. "Dunc? This is the girl's bathroom!"

"I know. Let's get out of here before someone comes in and reports us."

"Us?" She points at her chest. "I'm a girl. I have every right to be in here, unlike you."

"Maybe so, but when I tell them that you asked me to meet you here to make out, then it'll be both our problems."

Her eyes narrow. "You wouldn't."

"I would."

"Has anyone told you —"

"That I'm an asshole?" I cut in. "Yes, many people. Let's go." I jerk my head toward the door.

She doesn't budge.

I take a step toward her and stop when she raises her hands. "It's a violation of the student honor code to touch someone without their consent."

The bell rings, and I wait for it to stop before replying. "I'm a guy in the girls' bathroom. I'm sure I'm violating about five honor code sections without laying a finger on you. We can either go quietly or you can go kicking and screaming over my shoulder. Either way, we're leaving."

"You take after your dad."

I pause for a half a minute and remember that my da—I mean Cooper—carried Sadie's mom off. I guess I do take after him. I was raised by him, so it makes sense.

"Then you know what the end result is going to be."

She makes a face but pushes away from the wall. "I'm only walking out because I have to go to class. Don't touch me," she says as she passes by.

I follow docilely behind her, hands in my pockets because that's the only way I can keep myself from reaching for her.

Once we're out in the hall, I silently herd her toward the exit. At the heavy glassed-in entry, she pauses and tilts her head. "This is not my class."

"We're not going to class. Neither of us are in the right mind to listen to a

lecture.”

Sadie’s small white teeth capture a corner of her lower lip. I switch my gaze to the ceiling so I don’t fall on her like a ravening wolf.

“Van really your brother?”

“Yes, God, I’ve already said that.”

“And Fischl is your mom?”

“How do you know her name?”

I don’t even have to look at Sadie to know she’s got an angry expression on her face. I can hear the suspicion in her voice.

“My da—Uncle Coop has talked about her before.”

“In what way?”

I drop my eyes to her face that’s now showing curiosity instead of animosity. “I’ll tell you in the truck.”

Taking a risk, I push open the glass door and start for my truck. She’s either going to follow me or I’m going to be shit out of luck because school doors only open from the inside out during the day.

I feel her at my back, and a grin breaks across my face. I gambled and things are going right for me for once. I slide my backpack off and fling it into the back seat. “In you go, Sadie,” I hold the door open for her.

She hesitates but climbs in. I pretend not to notice a flash of extra skin as the skirt rides up her thighs. In the future, she’s going to have to wear pants to school or I’m going to have to wear five pairs of compression shorts to hide a constant woody. Lusting after my cousin is sick and wrong. I know this, but my body has a mind of its own. I keep telling myself there has to be an explanation. Maybe Fischl used a surrogate. Although surrogates carry the eggs of the bio mom. Maybe Sadie is adopted. She and Van look nothing alike.

“You adopted?”

“No.” She sounds offended.

I slam the door shut. “Fuck.”



CHAPTER 6

SADIE

WHEN DUNC GETS INTO THE TRUCK, HIS MOOD HAS ONCE AGAIN SHIFTED. They say girls are hormonal, but he would give us a run for our money. He takes off out of the school parking lot. A few students lingering around openly stare at us.

“So?” I ask when he doesn’t say a word. He said if I got in the truck with him that he would spill the beans on whatever info he has. And I expect him to live up to it. It’s why I got in his truck to begin with. Maybe. I mean, that was a big part of it but not the entire reason. “If you’re not gonna talk then pull over 'cause I’m getting out.”

“Give me a sec. Trying to work all this out in my own damn head.” I glance over toward him again. I can’t read the expression on his face.

Crap. This is probably a lot for him. There is a reason he lives with Cooper. He slipped up a few times when referring to him. Calling him Dad most of the time but also uncle here and there. We might have more in common than either of us know.

“Cooper is your uncle?” I try to give him a little nudge to get the conversation going.

“Yeah,” he responds. His brow furrows together.

I’m glad he’s driving because he has to keep his eyes on the road. This allows me to watch his face without him doing the same to me. I tend to lose my train of thought when his attention is focused directly on me.

“But you call him Dad?” He only nods a response this time. “Can I, ah —” I lick my lips, knowing from personal experience how uncomfortable this conversation can be. “Where are your parents?”

“Dead.” He says it without a speck of emotion.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I don’t remember them, so—” He shrugs it off easily. I don’t know if I should buy it. If anyone knows how to play along and pretend everything is okay when it’s not, it’s me. I’m finding that Dunc and I really are a lot alike.

“My mother left me,” I tell him. The words were out of my mouth before I could really think about them. It’s not information that I usually share so freely. But I’m finding that Dunc makes me do and feel a lot of things I don’t normally do.

His admission caused this overwhelming need in me to comfort him. Van says it’s one of my best and worst qualities. That I give it to people that don’t deserve it.

“What?” He whips his head around to give me a long stare before he has to go back to watching the road. “I thought that Fischl was your mom.”

“She’ll always be my mom. I mean, you said it yourself. Van and I aren’t twins, and we’re only days apart. He came first and never lets me live it down.” I’m trying to explain this, but I don’t think I’m doing a good job of it.

“You’re not related?”

“We are,” I say defensively. Fischl and Van are the only family besides my dad that I know. The fear of losing this all scares the crap out of me. If your own mother can walk away from you, I think anyone can. “You and Van are cousins.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Your egg donor, that’s your mom?” Ouch. That stings. I don’t think he’s trying to be mean, but with him I’m not sure. He’s so blunt. Still, it doesn’t give him the right to be a jerk.

“No, Fischl is my mom.” I stare out the window. I’m not going to give him more if he can’t do the same. Van can be a hardhead. They have that in common, but with me, Van isn’t that way.

Dunc makes a few turns leading us down a heavily wooded street. I want to ask where we are, but I keep my lips sealed shut. It’s not long before my question is answered when he pulls into the gravel parking lot of a beautiful lake nestled back in the woods. If this were a date, this place would be perfect to make out. I bite the inside of my cheek. This is not the time to be having those kinds of ideas.

“My ah, Cooper. He’s held a torch for Fischl forever.” He shakes his head, clearly annoyed about this.

“Then why aren’t they together?”

“Not a fuckin’ clue. I guessed she ran off on him.”

“She would never!” I turn to face him. He does the same.

“My uncle raised me. Why wouldn’t he want to raise his own kid?”

“I don’t know, but my mom would never keep Van from this Cooper if he wanted to be a part of his life.”

“Your cheeks turn a creamy pink when you get worked up.”

“What?” His eyes drop to my mouth. My heart starts to pound. Dunc leans toward me. Without a second thought, my eyes fall closed. His warm breath tickles my lips as he brushes his against mine.

A loud noise chimes through the cab of the truck. I jerk back away from Dunc to find my phone. Van’s name lights up my screen.

“Hey,” I say, answering it.

“Where are you? You need to get home. Shit’s happening.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you there.” I end the call before he can ask me where I am again or how I’m getting home. “Can you take me home?”

“You always jump when he calls?”

“Are you always a jerk?”

“Typically, they call me an asshole.” Right. I need to remember that. Not only because he is one. Trust when people show you who they are.

Hell, this morning when I said hi, he almost bit my head off. Even if I could get past some of his remarks, we could never be anything more than friends.

Things are about to get messy already. I won’t add to that. Not when I could so easily drift away from a family that might not be mine anymore.



CHAPTER 7

DUNCAN

SHE'S NOT RELATED TO ME, SINGS THE ANGEL ON MY RIGHT SHOULDER. *SHIT, that means Van's not either so they could still be hooking up.*" I'd punch the demon on my left, but Sadie already thinks—I don't really know what she thinks, but it's not what I want her to think. I want her to want me, to desire me so much that she tastes it in her mouth. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like it's working out that way for me. Instead of spending some quality time at the lake in the back of my property, I'm driving her to the dickhead, her so-called brother.

If I was raised with Sadie, I would—I cut off that line of thinking. No good will come of me traveling down that path. I pull into the driveway of a large contemporary home. It's glass and concrete and steel. I glance at Sadie. She doesn't seem to be a hard-edges, steel beam kind of girl. I think she's like her mom and likes flowers and pretty colors and molding. That's how my dad built our house despite the only people living there being him and me.

"Nice place," I say because people love their homes and don't want to hear weird opinions about them.

"Is it, though?" She wrinkles her nose. "It's kind of stark."

"Your dad's pick?"

"It was the only one around here that has a pool, so it's really a default pick. I like more country homes. Big porches and rocking chairs." She shrugs. "I guess I'm old fashioned."

"You'd love my place."

"Really?" Her eyes light up.

"We can go there right now," I suggest, coming to a halt on the sidewalk.

"Maybe later. I want to hear what Van has to say." She skips up the steps,

and I follow.

I barely clear the door before there are two hands on my shoulders pushing me back against the wall. Instinctively I raise a fist, but a cry stops me. Looking to my right, I see Sadie clawing at Van's shoulders. "Stop it, Van! Stop it right now."

"His dad has our mom," the guy shouts. "The police wouldn't even help me. The dumb ass stood there and just let that old fart drive away."

"Uncle Coop isn't that old," I interject partly because I know this will enrage Van.

"Fuck you," he snarls on cue.

I cough to cover a laugh. Predictable. The pressure of Van's hands increases, digging into my upper pecs. I could push him off, but the best card for me to play here is a passive one. Sadie wants us to stop fighting, and if I get bruises on my shoulders maybe I can convince her to play nurse—with her mouth.

Van's eyes narrow at my lack of response. He senses something is up, but he's not sure what. Quickly I don a pissed expression. Van squints at me once more before turning back to Sadie. "Doesn't Dad know the mayor?"

"My dad knows the mayor, too," I chirp.

"Did I ask?" Van snaps.

"Look, let's go—" *my house*, I start to suggest and then I realize my dad needs some time alone with Fischl. He raised me. He sacrificed his life and his love to give me a solid home. The least I owe him is to keep these two out of his hair for a few hours. I capture Sadie's eyes because my appeal is only going to work with her.

"My dad has never had another woman in his life as long as I've known him. He's never dated, never had a woman over. He's only loved one woman his entire life, but he lost her. Or he thought he lost her."

Sadie's eyes widen. Van scoffs. "Please tell me you're not buying this bullshit."

Sadie gnaws on her lower lip. "What does it hurt if we let him have a little time?"

"Are you crazy?" Van throws up his hands. "He kidnapped her!"

I slide away to stand next to Sadie. Her gaze is pinned on me. She wants to believe me. "Because he loves her," I say.

"That's the language of abusers," Van says.

I whip around to the dickhead with my fist up. "What did you call my

dad?"

"If the shoe fits." Van steps forward until his chest is close to mine.

Sadie wedges herself between us. "Stop it, you guys. Let's just call Dad and he can decide what to do. Those three need to work it out."

"So we just sit here?"

"Yes," Sadie and I both say at once.

Van's face hardens. "Traitor," he mutters and then stalks off, disappearing up the stairs.

Sadie apologizes. "He's usually not this way at all. He's nice and fun."

"Unlike me?" I joke.

"Well, you did say everyone calls you an asshole."

"Fair enough. I can be nice, though."

"Why aren't you?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I guess because it was easier." I stop before I say anything more. Not having connections means no losses. I liked life that way, or I thought I did, but as I stand here, inches away from Sadie, I realize that way was dumb as hell. Be alone all my life when I could have her? When I could cradle her in my arms, mold her sweet frame to mine, kiss her until she's breathless and then kiss her more, giving her my own oxygen until everything inside of her is a blend of her and me.

"Wh-hat are you thinking?" she stutters. She raises her hands between us, but I keep advancing until the back of her knees hit the sofa in the living room. I lean forward, and she loses her balance, falling backward. I catch her waist with one arm and draw her tightly against me.

"Saving you, saving me," I mutter and then capture her mouth with mine. She tastes like honey and sunshine, and I know from the first touch of her lips on mine that I'm just like my old man because there will never be another for me but Sadie.



CHAPTER 8

SADIE

HOLY CRAP. HE'S KISSING ME. I PRESS MY HANDS TO HIS CHEST TO PUSH HIM away, but my brain doesn't listen. Instead, my fingers grip his shirt in a tight hold as his mouth works over mine. My lips part for him as Dunc's tongue slides across the seam of my mouth.

That's all the opening Dunc needs. He thrusts his tongue into my mouth. To my surprise, he tastes sweet like sugar. It's the last thing I was expecting when it came to him. I start to kiss him back, needing more of him.

When I do, a deep, sexy rumble comes from inside of him. I swear I can even feel it against my hands on his chest. My whole body wakes up in a way I've never felt before. I kiss him harder, pushing my body into his. Another groan leaves Dunc.

"The fuck!" Van's shout brings me back to reality. It also has Dunc releasing his hold on me. I fall onto the soft sofa. Dunc spins around, giving me his back. I shake myself out of the trance his kiss put me under, realizing that once again, he and Van are in another standoff. Only this time, I'm not fast enough to get between them.

Van barrels right into Dunc. Dunc grabs ahold of him, bringing him down to the ground. The house freaking shakes when they land. Not that it stops them. This is going nowhere good fast, and I'm unsure how the heck I'm going to stop it at this point.

"Calm the fuck down," Dunc orders.

"Two seconds I was gone and—" I can hear the anger in Van's tone.

"Got her first kiss?" Dunc sounds cocky about it. My heart sinks at his words.

"Motherfucker." Van hits him in the side. He kinda deserved that one, but I know I need to somehow stop this madness before one of them really gets

hurt.

“Stop!” I scream as loud as I can. “Please.” Van is the more aggressive one, so I go after him, knowing I need to get between them. It’s the only thing that will get Van to stop throwing punches. They both release their hold on each other.

I ignore Dunc and grab Van’s arm. Not that he needs my help to get up. My lips still tingle from Dunc’s kiss, but whatever lust-filled dream I let myself fall into with him evaporates away.

“He’s an asshole,” Van grumbles.

“I’ve heard.” I sneak a glance over to Dunc, who is glaring at my hand on Van’s bicep.

“Who said you were my first?” I snip, wanting to get that little dig in there. I try to be cocky, but I’m sure my pink cheeks are giving it away. Van barks a laugh. Now who’s the traitor?

“Wait, who?” Now he’s glaring down at me. I swear he’s always ready to fill the shoes of his big brother role. Not that I can blame him after what happened in our last school.

“It’s none of either one of your business.” I fold my arms over my chest. I’m so not letting Dunc know I just lied through my teeth. “You should be worrying about how both of you are acting, never mind my personal life. You two need to grow up. I could’ve been hurt getting in between you guys.” I throw that out there, knowing at least it will work on Van.

I go back over toward the sofa and sit down. It’s not long before Van comes to sit next to me on my right. He bumps my shoulder. His manly way of apologizing to me. Before I know it, I feel Dunc sit on the other side of me.

“You two are related,” I try to remind them.

“Blood doesn’t mean shit to us, Sadie. You know that.” I should, but everything is so uncertain to me now. I want to yell at both of them for being so stupid. I’m trying to hold on to my family, and these two have found each other and are so easily willing to throw it away. But I know now is not the time. Their emotions are too fresh. And to be honest, I’m holding on by a thin thread as well.

My phone starts to ring. I jump up from the sofa. Dunc does too, following me over to my bag I dropped when I stepped inside.

“Jesus. You a fuckin’ puppy?” Van grumbles. I put my finger to my lips, telling them both to zip it when I see my dad’s name. I don’t miss Dunc

eyeing whose name is on my phone.

“Hey,” I say when I answer.

“Both you and Van at home?” He cuts straight to the point.

“Yeah. Is everything okay?” Dad lets out a long breath. “Dad?”

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Mom found her baby daddy and long-lost love.” I fill in for him.

“Something like that.” He lets out a small chuckle that relaxes me. Until he speaks again. “Then she had one of her panic attacks.”

“Oh God. Is she okay?” It’s been a long time since I can recall her having one.

“She wants to move in with Cooper.” All the air leaves my lungs. She’s leaving. “Says she owes it to Cooper for keeping Van away from him.” Mom is taking Van with her. I fight back tears.

“What?” Van jumps up, seeing my expression.

“I know we barely got settled into our place, but I think she might be right.”

“Okay” is all I can get out. Dunc suddenly plucks the phone out of my hand.

“What’s going on? Lil bit over here is about to cry,” Dunc says into the phone. What did he call me? “All right. When will they be here? Got it.” Dunc ends the call, handing me my phone back. “Movers are coming.”

“Movers?”

“I guess you and your mom are moving in with Cooper.” He looks over at Van. Van’s eyes widen. If my heart wasn’t breaking I’d laugh because I’ve never seen him make that face before.

“You too, lil bit. We’re all shacking up.” Dunc throws his arm over my shoulder. I knock it off. “Show me to your room. I’ll help you pack.”

This day keeps getting crazier by the second.



CHAPTER 9

DUNCAN

“VAN HATES MY DAD. I MEAN, MY UNCLE.” I TIP THE MILK JUG UP AND LET the liquid glide down my throat until my gut tells me that another drop is going to make me puke. I let the jug fall between my legs and swipe my arm across my mouth. Sadie’s eyes follow my actions intently like she can’t keep her eyes off my lips. It makes me want to lay her on the grass and do crazy things to her, but we’re sitting in my backyard, and the adults are probably staring at us from inside, not to mention her brother—or my cousin, I guess—is lurking around here.

Thankfully, she doesn’t hate me too much despite me fighting with Van over a friggin’ jug of milk. It seems dumb in retrospect, which is why when she asked me what happened between me and her brother, I said we fought about Cooper.

“How long have you been with him?”

“Since I was a baby. Mom and Dad died in a car wreck. Cooper was seventeen. He and his mom took me in, and then when his mom died, Coop kept me.”

“He’s your dad then.” Sadie says this so matter-of-factly as if there can be no argument.

“I’ve called Coop Dad since I was nine,” I find myself telling her. “I’d been thinking about it for a while but didn’t know how to say it. One day, he was driving to a build site and cursing because the aux cord between his phone and the truck was frayed. We didn’t have a lot of money back then because Coop was just starting out, so every penny counted. Anyway, he was getting frustrated, and I hated that because it didn’t matter to me if we had music in the truck. I was just happy to be with him, and so I told him, ‘Dad, I hate your music.’”

Sadie bursts out laughing. “Seriously? And what did Cooper say?”

“He laughed too and said he always played the top hits because he thought that’s what kids liked.”

“Did he say anything about you calling him Dad?”

“Nope, but he reached over and patted my head for like five minutes until I told him to knock it off because he was going to make me bald.”

“Cooper seems like a nice guy.”

“He is.”

She butts her shoulder against mine. “Van will come around.”

Her smile fades a bit. “But if you and Van are family, then that makes me and Dad...” She trails off.

“Not family,” I agree vehemently. Thank fuck for that. “You are definitely not part of the family.”

Some expression I can’t read flashes across her face, and all the warmth between us dissipates like water on a hot sidewalk.

“I think I’ll go inside now.” She jumps to her feet.

“Wait, I thought—” I grab her wrist.

“Take your fucking hands off her,” an angry voice bellows from the back deck.

We both turn toward the voice and see Van standing on the pavers with his hands jammed at his waist, looking like he’s Moses ready to throw the stone tablets at my head.

I tighten my grip, but Sadie twists her wrist and I let her go before I hurt her. “What’s the matter?” I ask, the words coming out more like a demand than a question.

“None of your business,” she retorts with none of the sweetness that colored her words before. She’s no longer staring at my mouth with interest. Nah, now she looks like she wants to slap me across the face. I don’t even know what I said wrong.

“You might run from me now, Sadie, but you live here. You can’t escape me,” I growl. She’s mine now. I’m not telling her that because I don’t want to scare her off, but I know how it works. Fischl was the only one for Cooper, and that was the way it was for seventeen years. No matter how long Sadie tries to deny me, the end result will be the same. She’s mine.

“It’s the twenty-first century, Dunc. Women don’t belong to anyone, especially men.” She darts off, heading straight for the house.

“Wait!” I chase after her, brushing by Van, who tries to stop me. “Fuck

off,” I snarl and give him a shove.

He shoves me back, and we’re two seconds from brawling when Dad clears his throat.

“I think you’ve done enough damage to each other for one day. Why not save some fight for tomorrow?”

Over his shoulder stands a worried Fischl and behind her, Sadie’s dad. I let my hand drop from Van’s shoulder. Fighting Van in front of Sadie’s Dad doesn’t seem like the best idea. I need to impress him or, at the very least, not make him think I’m a worthless shithead who shouldn’t be standing within five feet of his princess, let alone taking her to bed with me.

“We were just horsing around,” I declare. “All good fun, right, Van?”

I smile thinly in his direction to get him to play along, but because he’s a fucking asshole, he replies, “The only good fun would be you on the ground after you ate my fist.”

“Van,” Fischl cries.

“Van nothing. I didn’t want to move here, and I know damn well that Sadie didn’t either. Forcing us to be a family makes no damned sense. Nothing good is going to come of this, and you all know it.” He stalks into the house after Sadie. I want to go too, but over Fischl’s head, Dad shoots me a disappointed look and silently tells me to stay. I rub my lips together. I need to fix this, but I’m not sure how.

THE NEXT DAY, Sadie and Van avoid me altogether. Dad and Fischl look pretty lovey-dovey, but Sebastian stands to the side all awkward as if he is aware he’s a fifth wheel. The atmosphere in the house is tense, and I’m treading lightly because I don’t want to cause problems.

I stopped outside of Sadie’s door last night, but Van stood in the hall like some rabid guard dog, and I knew that if I laid a finger on the handle, he’d be at my throat. I could take him, but it would make everything in this house worse. Sadie hates it when we fight, probably because it seems like she has to pick sides. I need to make it so she sees she can be with me with no drama. I figured I’d catch her at school, but Van has been glued to her side like a parasite.

After two weeks, I’m losing my patience, not that I’ve ever had a lot of it

in the first place. I'm starting to go out of my mind.

I need to get Sadie away from this house, away from all the parents and Van. We need to be alone. It's probably all happening too fast for her, and she's getting confused about alliances and shit.

"You okay, Dunc?"

I whirl around from the side door where I've been waiting for Sadie to come home and see Dad—Uncle Coop—hovering three feet behind me. I scowl. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You've been staring a hole through the side of the door for a good five minutes, so that's why I was asking."

I can't tell my dad what's going on between me and Sadie. I know what he'll say. That it's not the time nor place for something like her and me with Fischl coming to live with us, and Uncle Coop trying to be all fatherly to Van and shit.

"I was thinking about Ms. Cotton." College talk will distract him.

Uncle Coop's eyebrows shoot up. "What about her? Did you say something to Fischl?"

I rear back. What did he take me for? "Fuck no. Why would I say anything to Fischl about my math teacher? Do you really think I'd try to mess your reunion up with the one that got away?" I fume.

Uncle Coop grimaces. "God, no. Stupid shit just came out of my mouth. It's a stressful time for all of us."

His hand lands heavy on my shoulder. I shrug it off. Wounded from his accusation, I'm in no mood to hear his excuses. I'm holding off fighting Van all the time to make sure that there's peace in this household so Coop can fix things with Fischl.

"Let's just agree not to talk to each other for a while. It'll be better for all of us," I snap. I stomp off to my room to wait for Sadie's appearance. Van can't be with her the whole time. I'll catch her alone at some point and convince her to take off with me. We'll go to the back of the property down by the river, and I'll talk it out with her. Get her to tell me what's on her mind and reassure her that I'm not going to clip her wings. Just because me and Uncle Coop are built a certain way, loving just one woman, doesn't mean she's of the same mind. I'll ease her into it, make sure she's comfortable. I won't fumble this like Uncle Coop did.

I take a shower, and while I'm drying off, I check the security cam feeds on my phone to see if Sadie is back. A frown creases my brow. Not only did

she come home, but she left again and this time with Fischl. Where would they go together? Shopping? Actually, this is perfect. I'll run into them at the mall, charm Fischl, and then buy Sadie something nice and expensive. We can have dinner somewhere.

I throw on some clothes and hurry downstairs where I find Van, drinking out of the fucking milk carton. He smirks at me and then downs the rest of it. Like I fucking care. Uncle Coop bought four gallons and stashed extras in the fridge in the basement. Van can choke on the milk.

I grab my keys and am about to leave when Van says, "Where is everyone?"

"Don't know." It's not really a lie. I'm guessing on the mall thing.

"What's for dinner?"

"Do I look like your personal chef?"

"Your house." He shrugs. "You and your dad never cook?"

"Uncle Coop?" I almost say he's not my dad, but why should I give that gift to Van?

"You call him Uncle Coop now?" There's a slightly mocking tone that makes me fist my hands at my side.

"It's none of your fucking business what I call him, is it?"

"Kinda is since he's my *dad* now."

I swear this guy is looking for a beat down. He's testing every single ounce of my patience. I'm about to respond when my phone starts vibrating, Uncle Coop's name lighting up the screen.

"Dunc," he says without preamble, "I'm sending Alec to pick you up. Fischl and Sadie were in a car accident and —"

The phone drops out of my hand. Van meets my eyes and I know he sees fear in them. "What?" he says.

"Fischl and Sadie...car accident." I can hardly get the words out. I was a baby when my parents died, but I still have nightmares where all I see are headlights and my head is full of crushed metal. I stumble and grab for the counter.

"Shit. Yeah, I hear you." Van's voice sounds like it's far away, down a long tunnel. "And Mom?"

I don't remember much more. Van shoves me out the door. I head for my truck, but Van pushes me toward a different vehicle that says Donovan Construction on the side. The driver is Alex, one of my dad's foremen. "It's all good, kid," he reassures me.

“Did they tell you anything?”

“Sadie’s messed up her arm and Fischl’s going to be fine, too.”

Next to me, Van takes in a shaky breath. I don’t give him any reassuring words because I have none. I lost my family in a car accident. There’s nothing worse in the world.



CHAPTER 10

SADIE

“YOU GOT LUCKY. IT’S ONLY A SUBLUXATION OF YOUR SHOULDER. I THOUGHT it was fully popped out of place,” the doctor tells me as he glances over my X-ray. “I’m going to put a sling —”

“My mom?” I ask again not caring about my own injuries. That pain med they shot me with is helping that. I know they’re sick of the question. It’s one I ask every other minute. I blame that on the meds too.

If they gave me more information, I might settle down. But everyone is being so tight-lipped about what's going on with her. When the initial shock of the accident wore off and I looked over at my mom inside the car, she’d been dazed. I could see she was having trouble breathing.

Cooper popped in for half a second, but I told him to get back to Mom and find out what was going on. She has to be in worse shape than me or he would have come back by now to tell me what he could. He’s not leaving her side. That’s telling in itself.

“They are looking her over.” The doctor tries to reassure me. His expression doesn’t give anything away. Do they teach that in medical school? If so, then maybe I should go to learn that skill. Every emotion I have plays across my face.

“Lean back, honey.” The nurse gently puts her hand on my good shoulder to get me to lie back slowly not to move my other one. Then she picks up a syringe to put into my IV.

“What’s that? I thought you gave me pain medication already.”

“It will help you relax.” She gives me a warm smile.

“I don’t want to relax.” The words no sooner leave my lips and I’m melting into the hospital bed. My eyes grow heavy, but I fight the pull of sleep. Dunc flutters through my mind. He always does. No matter where I go

or what I do, he's always near but never close.

"Where the hell is she?" My eyes spring open at that very familiar voice. One I've missed over the past few weeks. Not that I would ever admit that to him. The doctor turns towards the door as the loud steps grow closer.

I spot Dunc first. His mouth is in a straight line. He appears to be pissed. Our eyes lock. "Move." Van tries to shove Dunc out of the doorway where he'd come to a full stop. He moves but not to get out of the way. Within three strides, he's next to my bed.

"You okay?" His words are gruff. He's paler than normal. Worry is etched in his face. It's then I suddenly remember how he lost his parents. As irritated as I've been with Dunc, I reach out to take his hand, needing to comfort him at this moment. I wanted him to stay away before we did something we couldn't take back. Then I got what I asked for, and I was miserable.

"I'm good. Actually, I kinda feel great." I try to sit up.

"That's the meds." The nurse stops me from moving. "Be still."

"You scared the fuck out of me." Van drops a kiss on the top of my head.

"Don't crowd her," Dunc snaps. I peek up at Van, expecting him to snap back at Dunc, but he doesn't.

"You two getting along now?" I turn my head back and forth to glance between them. "Whoa. That makes me dizzy."

"We're cool," Van finally answers.

"Ah, are you being nice 'cause your cousin is freaking out?"

"He's not my cousin," Van grumbles.

Dunc keeps a hold of my hand. His thumb brushes back and forth against my skin. His touch is gentle, but his fingers are rough.

"I like how your thumb feels on me," I tell him. The nurse lets out a laugh.

"The hell, Sadie." Van runs a hand down his face.

"What?"

"She has some good meds going," the doctor informs them. "Nicky is going to get what I need. I'll be back in a few."

"My mom?" I call after the doctors.

"She's in surgery," Van tells me before they can try and brush it off.

"What?" I try to get up, but both Van and Dunc stop me from going anywhere.

"They said she's going to be fine. Her lung collapsed." I let out a gasp. I

knew those doctors were keeping something from me. A collapsed lung doesn't sound fine at all. "It's an easy fix. I promise."

"Go be with her and send us updates," I tell Van. "I'm fine."

"I got her. I'll bring her down when she's done," Dunc reassures him.

"You sure you're good?" Van tosses back at him. They lock eyes for a long moment before Van nods. "All right. Give me your number so I can text or call you." Van pulls out his phone for Dunc to put his number in. Van gives me another kiss on the top of the head before leaving.

"You came," I say when Dunc and I are alone in the room.

"The first chance I've been able to get you alone."

"You've been trying to get me alone?"

"Stay down." Dunc puts his hand on my chest. I hadn't realized I was trying to sit up again. Slowly, I scoot over to make room for him.

"Get in."

"I'm not getting in the bed with you."

"Why not?"

"You're hurt, and the doctor will be back in a second," he answers as though my request is completely ridiculous.

"Please," I beg. A smirk pulls at his lips. He's so dang handsome. Why's he gotta be an asshole?

"A handsome asshole?"

"Did I say that out loud?"

"I think I like you on pain meds. It's the most you've talked to me in weeks." I roll my eyes at him.

"Whatever. You've been avoiding me!" I hiss. "Not that I care. I also don't care about how I have to listen to Rose talk about you nonstop when I'm in Creative Writing." Dunc's smirk turns to a full-on smile. I want to smack myself in my own mouth to stop myself from talking, but he has one of my hands, and the other is out of commission at the moment.

"Jealous?"

"No." I slowly scoot back over. "Never mind about sharing my bed." I ignore him.

"I'd like it if you were." I peek over at him. "Not that you need to be, but you'd get a taste of my fuckin' life."

"What does that mean?"

"Seriously?"

"What?"

“Van.”

“What about him? He's texting you?” I look for Dunc's phone.

“Never mind.”

I don't get a chance to push. The doctor comes. Dunc holds my hand while he examines my shoulder again. I only feel a small tug. The meds are doing their thing. He places my arm in a sling to keep me from moving it too much. By the time he's done, my dad has shown up, giving us an update that Mom is out of surgery but they are keeping her for a few days.

The parents sent us home. Cooper is staying with Mom while Dad goes to get my medication. The car ride home is quiet. Dunc sits in the back with me while Van drives.

For once, we're all working as a family. That's what I wanted. For everyone to get along. That only makes Dunc and me impossible.



CHAPTER 11

DUNCAN

“YOU’RE WITH ME TODAY.” I FLING SADIE’S BACKPACK OVER MY SHOULDER and gently nudge her toward the door. I’m careful with her not just because her arm’s in a sling but because Fischl’s and Uncle Coop’s eyes are on us. I’m not sure what they think I’m going to do with her, but they don’t trust me. Probably for good reason. If I had my way, Sadie would be naked and in my bed every night.

“What about Van?” She twists to peer over her shoulder as if her brother will jump out at any moment.

“Didn’t you hear?” I respond with real cheerfulness. “The star wide receiver’s dad got a job transfer to Dubai for mega bucks and is moving the entire family there, so the team needs a new wide receiver. Coach heard Van played at your old high school and recruited him.” Which means he’ll be gone in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings. I almost rub my hands together like a cartoon villain. It worked out so perfectly for me.

“Oh no.” Sadie’s mouth turns down at the corners. She puts the brakes on and ducks out from under my arm. “Did you know about this?” She confronts Fischl.

Her mom nods slowly, curling her hands around the mug of coffee on the table like it will ward off Sadie’s frown. “Yes, he asked me the other day.”

“The other day? You guys have been keeping this from me for days?”

“He knew you’d be upset.”

“That coward! Of course, I’m upset. Why aren’t you upset, too? I can’t believe you agreed to this.” Sadie’s small hands are fisted at her side, and her face is turning red.

“I know, but Van really wanted this. I couldn’t say no.” Fischl gives her daughter a sad smile.

“What about you?” Sadie swings toward Uncle Coop.

He raises his hands. “It was Van’s decision.”

“You’re his dad, aren’t you?”

“Sadie, that’s enough.” Fischl rises to her feet. “There are a lot of changes happening in our family, and we need to be gentle with each other.”

Sadie clamps her lips together as if trying to keep herself from saying something she’ll regret. I step forward and angle my big body between her and her mom. Gazing down at Sadie’s frustrated face, I give her a small chin nod toward the door. “Let’s go. You can vent in the truck,” I say quietly.

Outside, she releases a small shout of irritation before climbing into the passenger seat. Silently she fumes next to me. When I’m mad, I don’t want anyone talking to me, so I don’t bother her with a bunch of questions. We’re almost to school before she starts talking.

“He had a concussion last year. It was bad. One minute he was running down the field and the next he didn’t move for what seemed like hours. When they lifted him onto the stretcher, his arm flopped down by his side like he was...dead.” She stops to collect herself. “After he woke up, he started vomiting, and his head hurt so much he couldn’t talk. We took him home, and it seemed like he didn’t even know who we were. He was mean and snapped at us all the time. The doctor said it was a common side effect of a brain injury. A brain injury, Dunc! From football!”

I nod because what else can I say?

Sadie continues, “Mom cried almost every day. He was a junior, so he didn’t play much after that, and at the end of the season, Mom begged him not to play again. When we moved here and he didn’t try out, we thought... he was done with it.”

“Guess it’s hard when you love something to give it up like that.”

“Maybe.” She doesn’t want to hear it so I shut up because it’s none of my business. I park and help her down out of the truck. A few of our classmates stare at us with questions in their eyes as I keep my arm draped around Sadie’s back. She doesn’t notice—either my arm or their attention—as she scans the now empty practice field for Van.

“He’s probably inside showering right now.”

She lets out a huff. “Why can’t he love chess?”

“Probably not enough violence.”

“He can throw pieces at his opponent. Also, I watched *The Queen’s Gambit*, and there’s a lot of stress in that game.”

Her exasperation is adorable.

“Why are you grinning at me?” she asks with narrowed eyes.

“Nervous reaction.”

“Right.” She rolls her eyes. “Where would Van be now?”

The grin on my face slides right off. Why’s she so obsessed with him? I’m right here. “No idea. Class is about to start.”

This perks her up. “Oh good. I’ll see him there.”

“How many classes do you have with him?”

“Almost all of them. We planned it that way so I wouldn’t—I mean, we wouldn’t be alone.”

I notice her slip and wonder what that means. Why would she be afraid of being alone? I don’t know enough about Sadie’s life before she moved here. Van would know, but I don’t want to go to him. The perfect person to talk about Sadie is right at home. Fischl. I bet she’d be thrilled to talk about her kids. That’s how parents are wired.

“I’ll see you at lunch then. Save me a seat in Algebra.” At least I end the day with Sadie. Maybe I should change my schedule so that it’s me in all her classes, not Van.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” Sadie touches my arm. She looks up at me with a sweet, pleading expression, and if she asked me to fly to the moon, I would have jetted off right there powered by her sweetness.

“Yeah?” I manage to respond, my voice hoarse, my jeans tight.

“Why didn’t you play football?”

The side of my mouth tilts up. “Do I look like I’m a team player? I’m selfish, Sadie. I don’t play well with others. What I want, I take, and I keep it. I don’t ever share.”



CHAPTER 12

SADIE

DUNC'S COMMENT PLAYS ON A LOOP IN MY MIND. I'M NOT SURE WHAT TO make of him for the past week that I'd been stuck at home. He'd been at my beck and call, showing me another side of him that I wasn't expecting. It was different from how he'd been before the accident. His mixed signals are driving me crazy even though they shouldn't. I have to make a conscious effort to remind myself that we are never going to be a thing. That it's impossible. That it would never work. No matter how much I wish it could.

When I enter class, I don't see Van anywhere. I drop down in my seat and pull my phone out to text him. A second before the bell sounds, he's sitting down in the seat next to mine.

The hell? I mouth to him. He only shrugs. I hate having to wait till the end of the class to finally talk to him. Plus, I've become accustomed to him being around in most of my classes. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a bit uneasy that he won't be around as much. I know it's selfish of me.

"I'll be fine," he says before I can get a word out. "I want to do this." His words don't put me at ease at all. I gather up my things before heading out of class.

"Van." I sigh. Why can't I boss him around like he does me? We walk to our next class together. I notice a few people glance our way.

"How's your shoulder?"

"It's fine. How's your head?"

"My head is fine. I'm fine. Let's drop it. I don't want to argue about this with you." I don't really have much of a choice because our next class is starting. "I'm having lunch with the coach so we can go over some stuff," Van tells me when our next class ends.

"Okay."

“Hey, don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“All sad. I need this right now.”

“All right.” I let out a long breath. He’s been so angry since everything went down with Mom. Van shoots me a big smile. The first I’ve seen in a long time. He gives me a side hug to not hit my sling before he takes off in a jog down the hallway, leaving me by myself.

I make my way to the lunch room wondering where Dunc is. He said he was going to meet me. I look around but don’t see him anywhere. Great, I’m going to be the weird girl sitting by herself in the cafeteria. I take a calming breath, the memories of all the mean girl things that happened at my old school trying to creep in. I push them back. I can do this.

I walk in, grabbing a tray and getting in line. Once I pick out a few things that I want, I scan the room, looking for a place to sit. The tray wobbles in my one hand since my other arm is in the sling. When I turn, someone collides into me.

The tray smashes against my chest before dropping to the floor. A sharp pain shoots through my shoulder, taking my breath away.

“Watch where you are going,” Rose hisses at me, but a smirk plays at her lips. Everyone around us is laughing. Heat rushes to my cheeks.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see you.” I’m pretty sure she ran into me. I hadn’t moved, only turned around to see if there was somewhere on the other side of the cafeteria to sit.

“You should be sorry.” She drops her voice. “You should really watch what you’re doing more carefully. Wouldn’t want more accidents to happen because you’re somewhere you shouldn’t be.” It’s not hard to read between the lines. She’d shot me a glare when I got out of Dunc’s truck this morning. “You understand?”

“I think I do,” I manage to get out. How is this happening all over again to me?

“Good. Dunc has been mine since middle school. A chubby nobody isn’t going to take him from me.” A few more laughs sound around me. I don’t wait to hear more. I make my way out of the lunchroom, using the side door that goes outside.

A few tears slip free. I tell myself they’re because my shoulder is now throbbing. I fumble through my backpack to call my dad but remember he has a big meeting tonight about some project. He’s been working on it for a

while. I call Mom instead.

“Hey.” Cooper answers the call. “Sadie? You there?” I don’t respond at first because I’m trying to get my emotions in check.

“Yeah, I was looking for Mom,” I finally manage to get out.

“She’s sleeping. The meds knock her out.”

“I’m not feeling so great either. My shoulder is killing me.” I just want to go home. I already missed a bunch of school. What’s another day going to hurt at this point?

“All right.” I can hear him shuffle around. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“You’re coming to get me?” I don’t think I’ve ever been alone with Cooper before.

“Yeah, your mom will be out for a few hours. It won’t take me long to pick you up. Hold tight,” he says before ending the call. Relief fills me, knowing that I don’t have to go back inside.

I make my way toward the front of the building. My phone goes off in my hand. Dunc’s name comes up. I don’t answer. Instead, I turn my phone off before shoving it down into my bag. Thankfully, Cooper gets here quickly. He leans over, opening the door for me.

“Thanks.”

“I brought you your medication if you need it and some juice.”

“Thank you,” I say again. I can definitely see why Mom is so head over heels for this man.

“You don’t have to thank me, Sadie. I know I’m not your dad, but maybe I could be like an uncle to you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Did you think something else would happen?” I chew on my bottom lip, not sure if I should say anything. I take my medication and swallow it down with half the juice. I tried not to take them because they make me loopy, but my arm is still throbbing. “Sadie?” Cooper pushes for an answer.

“I thought maybe you wanted my dad and me gone.” I tell him the honest truth.

“Shit,” he mutters, sounding like Dunc. “Not gonna lie. I was damn jealous of your dad. He’s had her all these years.”

“You’re more his type.”

“I know. I know.” He shakes his head. “But I don’t feel that way

anymore. You both are a part of the Donovans. We're all a family now."

I give him a smile, wanting to believe that. It's sweet.

Too bad the last thing I want to be with Dunc is family. But I'll fake it until I can make it. That's the way it has to be.



CHAPTER 13

DUNCAN

“HELP YOU DO WHAT?” I STARE AT SCULLY, A SENIOR WHO IS BEST KNOWN for his kill book, which is an actual notebook where he documents all the virgins he’s had sex with. He rates them on a scale of one to ten. I know this only because he sits next to me in Ancient Civilizations. I don’t engage with him, but my lack of response doesn’t deter him any. He just blabbers on and on. I took—I mean, we all take—Ancient Civ because the teacher just shows movies and YouTube videos during class. Our tests consist of watching these same videos and then writing down key points from them.

It’s a no-brainer class that has occasional interesting moments. The stuff about Herculaneum in Italy was cool as fuck. It was covered in ash from the Vesuvius eruption, and the ash protected it from looting and weather. When it was discovered, whole wood beds and even paper scrolls were intact. So not everything in this class is a waste, but that made Scully even more annoying because he’d keep talking even during stuff that was cool like the videos on Herculaneum.

Now he’s saying he needs me to help him fix some prop for the theater because the lead is a sophomore that he’s been trying to bed for three weeks, and she keeps telling him no.

“You build shit, right? With your dad?”

I don’t tell him that it’s Uncle Coop now because that’s just too much of a hassle. “I’ve never built a stage prop, and I need to meet S—someone for lunch.” No need to put Sadie on this asshole’s radar.

“But you have Home Ec next period with Mrs. Mannon. She won’t care if you skip out to do some work on the play.”

I don’t like Scully much. I have no intention of helping him get in some girl’s pants. I also don’t care about the play, but building something is a lot

more interesting to me than baking cookies. “Fine.”

“Great.” Scully slaps me on the back. “It’ll be fun.”

The props look like they were made by preschoolers. Screws aren’t countersunk into the wood, which means people could trip or tear their clothes or, worse, their skin on a protruding fastener. No one seemed to use a level when building a riser as it’s visibly listing to the left. Some of the ropes used to raise and lower different items onto the stage look frayed and old.

“This place is a hazard.” I make a mental note never to allow Sadie in here. “Who’s in charge?”

“Coach Ingle,” says the girl under Scully’s arm. “But he’s never here because it’s football season, so we have to make do on our own.”

I shake my head. “Where are the tools?”

The girl directs me to a storage room. I hook a tool belt around my waist and get to work. The girl and Scully sit in the second row of the theater seats making eyes at each other. It doesn’t look like Scully needed my help in getting the girl interested; he just needed someone to do the work for him. I flip the hammer in my hand a couple of times and decide that I’ll just fix a few things before I go see Sadie.

“Tell me when it’s ten to the hour,” I instruct Scully. He salutes me, and I get to work. The time goes by pretty fast, and before I know it, Scully is telling me that it’s time.

“Just put the tool belt back in the storeroom,” the girl says to me.

“Oh shit, my phone is dead,” Scully says. “Bro, let me use your phone to text my dad. He’s supposed to pick up flowers for Mom today because it’s her birthday. I was supposed to remind him.”

I glance toward the girl. *Use her phone*, I telegraph.

“It’s just for a minute,” he whines.

Fuck me. I need to put these tools away and then haul ass to meet Sadie for lunch. “Fine.” I toss him the phone and then walk to the storage room. The door shuts behind me as I hang the belt up on the back wall and place the hammer, measuring tape, and screwdrivers on the shelf. My task completed, I turn to leave, but the door doesn’t budge. I jiggle the doorknob, but it only turns about halfway. “What the hell?” I pound on the door. “Scully, something’s blocking the door.”

Silence greets me. I pound harder and yell louder, but still nothing. That prick. When I get out of here, I’m going to take his kill book and shove it down his throat. I turn back and grab the hammer. The hinges are on the

inside so it's easy enough to remove the door, but it takes time, and when I finally heave the heavy wooden thing to the side, it's nearly quarter after. My phone is lying on the edge of the stage. I pick it up and shoot a message to Sadie.

Me: I got stuck in the storage room in the theater department. Long story will tell you when I meet you. Sorry for being late.

I tuck my phone into my pocket and haul ass to the lunchroom. It's emptying out when I arrive, and Sadie is nowhere to be found.

I call her, but I'm sent directly to voicemail. Great. She probably thinks I stood her up. I check her schedule and see that she's supposed to be in an AP class in ten minutes. Smart girl. Probably too smart for me. I burst into the classroom, but hardly anyone is there. The teacher looks up and frowns. She doesn't recognize me. "I'm here to see Sadie xxx."

"Sadie? Oh, the new girl. She's absent today."

"What do you mean? She was here this morning."

The teacher shrugs. "Things change."

"Where is she?"

"I can't say. It'd be a privacy violation."

"I live with her. How can it be a privacy thing?"

The teacher raises an eyebrow. "If you live with her, you can ask her yourself."

I growl in frustration. Who would be at the house at this time? Fischl? I give her a call, but that goes straight to voicemail too. What the hell?

A cold chill seizes me. Is she at the hospital? Are they both there? Frantically, I call my dad. He answers on the second ring. "You need something, son?"

"Yes, is something wrong with Fischl?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because she's not answering her phone."

"She took some paid meds, and it knocked her out. I turned off her phone so she wouldn't be disturbed. What made you call?"

I thrust a frustrated hand through my hair. "Sadie's not at school, and she's not answering her phone."

"Ahh, she's in her room resting. She called and said her shoulder was hurting."

"Why didn't she tell me? I would have driven her home."

There's a long pause before Uncle Coop says, "I don't know why she

didn't come to you, Dunc. I hope you two aren't having any problems."

There's a warning note in his voice, something that tells me I better pick my next words carefully. I grind the back of my teeth before replying, "No problems, sir."

"Okay, well, I'll see you home at dinnertime." *And not before* are the unsaid words.



CHAPTER 14

SADIE

WHEN MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN, I SEE DUNC STANDING OVER ME. I CAN TELL he's pissed.

"Are you watching me sleep?" I yawn while sitting up.

When I got home, Cooper got me into bed, and I passed out. I woke up for a little while to take another round of meds an hour ago and must have nodded off again. The painkillers take the throbbing ache away, but they also knock me on my ass.

"When I'm not watching, you tend to always up and disappear." Well, it looks like the old Dunc is rearing his head today. What crawled up his butt? I'm the one that should be upset that he stood me up for lunch. Not that we're a thing or anything. Because we're not.

"I don't disappear." Why is he so concerned with where I am all the time? "That would be pretty cool though if I could." I could go to school and not be bothered. I try to joke to lighten up the serious atmosphere in the room.

"It's not fucking cool." He sits down on the bed next to me.

"Why are you all pissy?" I've learned not to beat around the bush with Dunc. Confronting him is the best way to get to the bottom of things.

"We were supposed to have lunch together." What the heck?

"I didn't see you." I'd wanted to. I tell myself to stay away from Dunc, but I don't want to. I know he has heartache written all over him, but I'm drawn to him. But I know that the fallout from having a relationship with him that didn't work out would be too much. That after we went up in flames—because at some point we would—there would be no recovery for our little family. I mean, Dunc himself admits he's an asshole.

"I texted and called you. I got locked in the supply closet."

"Seriously?" I laugh. He doesn't. "Like really?" I giggle again, thinking

about how mad he must have been in that closet.

“I had to take the door off the hinges.”

“How does one get locked in a supply closet?” I ask, curious as hell to find out what happened. I can’t help but smile again.

“It’s not funny,” Dunc says in his serious tone, which only makes my smile broaden. “I couldn’t find you.”

I try to keep a straight face but fail. “Oh, come on. Even you have to admit that it’s kinda funny.” He tries to quickly hide his smirk, but it’s too late.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with Scully tomorrow.” His hand comes to my chin. “How’s your arm?” I ignore his question 'cause now I’m really curious.

“Wait. Someone locked you in? I thought it closed behind you and you got stuck or something.” Dunc’s thumb strokes my cheek gently.

“Scully was being a dick for some reason.” The dark expression he had on earlier comes back again. He drops his hand.

“He a bully?” I can’t see anyone picking on Dunc.

“A bully?” Dunc laughs. “He’s a dumbass with a death wish.”

“Guess you never have a problem with those,” I mutter under my breath.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say too quickly.

“Did your arm just start hurting or did something happen?”

“I accidentally hit it when I was at lunch.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. Tomorrow I’ll be there.”

“I’ll pack a lunch. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll be there,” he pushes.

“It would probably be better if you’re not.”

“Too bad.”

“Hey, I don’t have to eat lunch with you.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Why are you always an asshole?”

“Did you just growl?” His smirk returns.

“I didn’t growl.”

“Think you did. Your nose even squished up.” I wiggle my nose. “It’s cute.”

“Cute?” I roll my eyes.

“Your pain meds making you a grump now?”

“No, I just don’t want to have lunch with you.”

“Like I said. Too bad. I’m over this cat and mouse game.” He runs his hand down his face, letting out a frustrated sound.

“What game?” I didn’t know we were playing one.

“Me giving you space and then finding out you’re pissed I gave it to you.”

“I wasn’t pissed.” Stupid hospital drugs. I had admitted that.

“Hurt?” I glance away from him. “Hey.” He grips my chin to pull my face back toward him. “Talk to me. You’re killing me here.”

“I’m not really sure how I feel. Everything is all mixed up.”

“You enjoyed it when I kissed you?” He leans forward. Without thinking, I do the same, closing my eyes. His lips brush against mine. “I’m not mixed up at all. I know what I want.” Dunc’s lips lock with mine.

His hand slides into my hair as he deepens the kiss. His tongue slips into my mouth. The kiss is soft and sweet. It’s different from our first that was filled with a wild need. I like this one just as much as I did the other.

When he pulls back, he rests his forehead against mine.

“How can you be sweet sometimes and an asshole at others?”

“I’m not an asshole to you.”

“Really?” I let out a laugh.

“Pushy maybe, but not an asshole.” He kisses the tip of my nose. Sweet again. “I’m not backing down, and I don’t think you want me to.”

“I don’t,” I admit. “But I’m scared.”

“I swear I’ll never be an asshole to you.” I can’t stop the smile that takes over.

“It’s not that, it’s—” A knock sounds at the door.

“Dinner,” Cooper says but doesn’t try to open my door. Dunc gets up. I grab his hand to stop him from opening the door.

“Okay. I’ll be down in a second,” I call back to Cooper. “Can we keep this between us for now?”

“Not happening.”

“Please,” I beg, sliding my fingers between his. I don’t want him to find out about the crap at school. It’s embarrassing.

“Fine,” he reluctantly agrees, giving me a sliver of hope.



CHAPTER 15

DUNCAN

“WHAT WERE YOU DOING IN SADIE’S ROOM?” UNCLE COOP ASKS ME AS WE clean up the kitchen. Sadie was nearly falling asleep over the pork chops, so Fischl took her upstairs to bed. I wanted to be the one to tuck her in, but since I’m supposed to be keeping our thing between us, I helped clear the table. Van took off immediately, and Uncle Coop shooed Sebastian away, saying it was quality time for Coop and me. Obviously, quality time means interrogation time.

“What do you mean?” I play dumb.

“You were in her room before dinner. I saw you coming out of it.”

“Creeping about, old man?”

“Gotta stay up on what’s happening with you guys,” he says with an unrepentant shrug.

“We were supposed to meet for lunch, but I couldn’t make it, so I was apologizing.”

That explanation seems to satisfy him. He whistles tunelessly for a couple measures and hangs up the dish towel. “I don’t want to be the bad guy, but —”

“Then don’t,” I say tersely. I don’t want a lecture.

“Look, son —”

“I’m not your son.” I slap down the washrag.

“Thought we were over that,” Coop says. His own tone is short.

Anger bubbles inside me. Anger at my parents for dying when I was a baby. Anger at Van being Coop’s real son. Anger that Sadie is viewed as my cousin when I didn’t even know her two months ago. Anger that she was in a car accident, my biggest nightmare. Anger at myself for being afraid. Anger at this idea that my feelings for Sadie are something that need to be hidden,

kept in the dark. My hands fist, and my throat closes. Just when I'm about to explode, Coop grabs the back of his neck and sighs.

"Dunc, this situation is so wild. I don't blame you for having all sorts of negative feelings, but let's not fight. It's been you and me against the world since you were a baby, and I know I haven't been the best parent to you. What do I know about being a dad, right? But I wouldn't give up a day with you for anyone. For anyone, do you hear me?"

I hear what he's saying. What he can't put into words. I don't want him to say it out loud either because I understand what Van's going through. He's displaced just like me. I ease back and nod. "Fine but just know this. Sadie's not related to me."

Coop makes a face. "I don't know why you keep saying that, and I don't want to know, but I will say this one thing. Don't make Fischl unhappy. I can't bear that."

If he had said it would have pissed him off or he'd be after my ass, I might have gotten mad again, but when he sighed like he was half broken-hearted, I let the last of my anger go. "I don't plan on making anyone unhappy."

"Great. We're on the same page." Under his breath, I hear him mutter something about Van. That's a situation he's going to have to work out. Van and I are like oil and water, and I know that when he finds out about me and Sadie, there's going to be fireworks. And probably a little blood.

"Going to my room now."

He waves me off. One kid down, one kid to go, he's thinking.

I hoof it up the stairs and do a pre-bed routine, but this time I shave the stubble that's pebbling my chin. Sadie's a soft girl with soft skin. I need to watch out for her. I grab some sweats and a hoodie and make my way to her room. She's a motionless lump under the covers. I toss my clothes to the side, plug my phone in, and climb into bed. She makes a soft sound and rolls toward me. Gently, I push her until she's lying on her back again, her slinged arm lying across her chest. I slide my arm under her head and draw her close until her side is flush with my front. One soft leg slips between mine, and she turns to rub her cold nose against my biceps.

"Dunc?" she murmurs.

"The one and only." I stroke a hand down her T-shirt-covered side, careful to avoid touching her arm.

"What time is it?" She tries to turn over, but I keep her still.

“Time to keep sleeping.”

“Why are you here?”

“Where else would I be?”

That silences her, and soon enough, her even breathing signals she’s fallen asleep again.

At first, it’s nice and warm. Her sweet body is barely big enough to make contact with mine. I watch her as she sleeps. Her chest rises and falls in slow motion. Her eyelashes lie like tiny veils against her cheek. I want to lap her up, drink her in from her toes to her forehead. I try not to stare at her lush tits pushing against the thin fabric of her T-shirt, but it’s damned hard. Blood pools in my groin, and the erection I’ve been fighting since dinner hardens into steel. My cock pulses against her side with enough force I ease away so that I don’t wake her.

I’ve never been so hard or in so much pain in my life. The urge to put my hand between us is killing me. I close my eyes and count to ten and then twenty and then one hundred. My body starts to burn. I breathe through my nose and remind myself that she’s injured. Her arm is in a sling. We’re supposed to ease into this. I’ve barely kissed her. She’s not even eighteen yet.

I bite down on my lip until I taste blood. How many days until her birthday? I will spend that time planning out the best damned party she’s ever had. It’ll be the best one I’ve ever had too.



CHAPTER 16

SADIE

I SLOWLY WAKE TO THE FEELING OF WARMTH ALL AROUND ME. WHEN I TRY TO move, an arm around me tightens. I open my eyes to see Dunc lying cuddled up next to me. The morning sun is peeking in through the bottom of my curtains. I wish I could stay in this moment forever.

I was sure I'd dreamed of him crawling into bed with me. Which isn't crazy because I've dreamt about him many times. A lot more than I'm even willing to admit. He often takes up way too many of my thoughts. He's a temptation that I want badly to give in to fully, but it scares the hell out of me. But watching Cooper and my mom together makes me want that same kind of love.

Is Dunc capable of that? He can tend to be on the bossy side. He's also pointed out multiple times that he can be an asshole. The funny thing is for as much as he proclaims he is one, I can only recall being on the end of his assholiness once. He doesn't look the part as he's lying next to me.

I watch him for a minute, taking all of his features in. It's something that I don't often get to do because his eyes are constantly on me. I run my fingers through his short hair. His eyes fly open. When they lock on mine, a smile tugs at his lips. It's not something he does often. It makes my heart flutter.

"Morning," I whisper, suddenly feeling shy.

"Morning, beautiful." He snuggles into me.

"I like when you're sweet."

"I like when you touch me." I go back to running my fingers through his hair. "When was I not sweet to you?"

"That day at school."

He lifts his head. "When?"

"When you were coming out of the school and I was going in."

“I have no clue what you’re talking about.” He really does seem confused.

“It was the day your dad kidnapped my mom.” His brows pull together.

“You said something like you’re not interested in me and then dropped the f bomb.” It still stings even now, remembering his words.

“I have no clue what you’re talking about, but if I did say that I wasn’t talking to you because I’ve always been interested.” I can’t help but smile at that. “Shit. I remember. I thought it was Rose that said hi to me.” I drop my hand at the name. “What?” He grabs my hand.

“Sadie.” A knock sounds at my door before it pushes open. “How are you feeling?” Mom asks, flipping my light on. Her eyes widen. I want to pull the blanket over my head.

“Morning,” Dunc says, not the least bit embarrassed. He sits up.

“Morning,” my mom mutters back, obviously at a loss for words because she’s still in shock.

“How’s your arm, babe?” Dunc re-asks my mom’s question.

“Better.” I manage to get one word out.

“Are you up for school?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. I’ll see you downstairs.” She turns, closing the door behind her.

“Oh my God,” I groan.

“So I guess we don’t need to hide anymore.”

I let out a huff. “Mom won’t say anything.” I try to sit up. Dunc helps me. “But it’s more about school.” I hate to burst his bubble, but it’s the truth. School is my main concern. I don’t want the negative attention a relationship with Dunc will bring. I hate that I even have to worry about it.

“School? Why school?”

“Just cause.” I turn to sit on the side of the bed, giving him my back. It’s embarrassing to admit to the bullying I experience. I feel silly that I can’t stand up for myself. Even though I want to. My words always get stuck in my throat. Van says I just don’t have it in me to be cruel. I bet Dunc has never been bullied a day in his life. He’d never understand.

Dunc mutters a few curses before getting up from the bed.

“You agreed,” I remind him.

“Right,” he mutters, sounding pissed. Guilt weighs on me. I don’t want to upset anyone. I spend most of my life trying to make sure that I never do. It’s

because I have a stupid fear that I know comes from my egg donor that I'm easy to discard if I cause too much trouble.

"I'm going to get ready." I get up from the bed.

"You need help?" Dunc offers, coming over to me.

"I think I got it."

"All right." Dunc surprises me by dropping a kiss on my lips. "I'll see you downstairs." I nod, watching him go. I start to get ready. It takes me longer with my arm not being fully functioning in its sling.

"Hey." My mom knocks on my door again.

"Yeah," I call back. She opens the door, slipping into my room.

"So." She leans up against the door.

"Nothing happened."

"Yet. Nothing happened yet."

"Mom." I know my face is getting redder by the second.

"Hey, I think you forgot I got myself knocked up by Cooper. I was your age once."

"Well, you put me on birth control a year ago, so I don't foresee that happening," I remind her.

"I know. I'm just checking in." She walks over, taking my brush from me. "Let me get it."

"Like I said. Nothing has happened. It's new."

"New as in it just happened?"

"New as in I agreed that maybe we could be something, but I don't want to tell anyone yet." Mom snorts a laugh. "What?"

"I bet he's taking that real well." She puts the brush down to braid my hair.

"It's fine."

"You keep telling yourself that."

"He's intense," I admit.

"You like that?" I nod. Yeah, I kind of do. It gives me reassurance that he's really into me.

"Cooper ever say anything about him dating?"

"No, but I can poke around if you want."

"No, it's fine." I don't think I want to know anyway. I already feel a certain type of way about how some of the girls at school are oddly possessive of Dunc.

"If you want to talk, you know I'm here, right?"

“I know.”

“I was wondering when you were going to start dating.”

“I’m not even eighteen yet.” I roll my eyes at her.

“A few days.” She smirks.

“No surprises.” I narrow my eyes on her. “In fact, if you could keep it to yourself?” I’m always awkward when I’m the center of attention.

“I have to do something.” I can tell how much she wants to. “I’m your mom.”

“Fine.” I give, making her face light up.

I finish getting ready for school. When I make it downstairs, Dunc is waiting for me with a breakfast sandwich in his hand and a strawberry milk. My favorite. Without thinking, I press my mouth to his.

It’s going to be harder than I thought to keep us hidden.



CHAPTER 17

DUNCAN

“I’LL PICK YOU UP FOR LUNCH AT YOUR CLASSROOM,” I TELL SADIE. I DON’T want a rerun of what happened yesterday where she thinks I abandoned her. “Don’t leave until I get there.”

“Are you planning to do something that will make you late?”

“No.”

“But you are planning something.”

I swing into the school lot and park. “I’m not saying I am, but if I was, what would make you think that?”

“Because you might be late and you don’t want me leaving until you arrive. I might not have graduated, but I can still put two and two together.” She stares out the window at the practice field. “Do you think Van’s okay?”

“Yes.” I grab our backpacks and head over to her side of the truck.

“You don’t really know, though,” she says when I open her door.

“And I don’t care,” I say before pressing her lips to mine for a quick kiss.

“You should. He’s your cousin,” she says when I pull back.

“If he’s my cousin, you’re my cousin.”

She makes a face. “It’s not the same, and you know it. Besides, you would care. You just like to hide it.” She thumps my chest. “I know it’s not all concrete in there despite what you like to show to the rest of the world.”

I rub my hand over the spot she touched. “Don’t tell all my secrets.”

“Or what?” She lifts her nose slightly in the air as if she’s too cool for my rules.

“Or I’ll have to take you into the back seat of my truck and teach you a little lesson.”

“Gasp, in the school parking lot?” Her eyes are sparkling, and it fills me with some unexplained happy emotion that I don’t know I’ve ever felt before.

Is this what it's like to be high? This mix of free joy and lightness?

"Yeah, right here." I slide my fingers up the side of her jean clad leg wishing she wore a skirt so my hand could be under it, stroking her soft, bare skin.

"Not that I don't want that, but we're keeping this on the downlow at school, remember?" Her tone is slightly chastising, but she doesn't push away my hand.

I harness my inner demons and straighten. "All right but only at school. I'll talk to your dad later."

"My dad?" She squeaks as she hops down. "What does he have to do with it?"

"Parents always want to know shit. Better that you let them in on a few things or they're always up in your business. What's going on at school? How are classes going? Have you thought about college?"

She makes a small noise of understanding. "Mom will talk to him about it anyway, but I guess it can't hurt. What will you say to him?"

"That you and I are together."

"He's going to want more than that."

"Like what? A resume? A financial statement? Donovan Construction is my co—" I shut up because is it? Now that Van's in the picture, is Donovan Construction all mine? It's not anymore. I have to share it. Hell, I might even get pushed to the side because Van's the true son. Donovan Donovan. What a fucking dumbass name.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure it will be fine." Sadie rubs my arm, mistaking my sudden anger over fear of her father.

I shoot her a tight smile because I don't want to tell her what kind of shit is going on in my head. She doesn't need that. I try to redirect the conversation. "How's the arm?"

"It's fine. Actually, I don't have much pain. I can't wait until I don't have to wear this sling anymore. But enough about me and Dad and Van. What are you planning?"

Her sudden change of topic catches me off guard. "Wh-what?"

"Ha!" She points a finger at me with her healthy hand. "I knew you were up to no good. Spill."

Flushing like some kid caught with his fingers in the cookie jar, I come clean. Sort of. "Just checking out the situation in the theater department. There's no way I got stuck in that storage room by accident."

“But why would anyone lock you in on purpose?”

“That’s what I’m off to find out.” That and to beat a little lesson into Scully. I don’t know why he did it, but even if it was a harmless prank, it ended up hurting Sadie’s feelings, and I’m not going to stand for that. Plus, Scully is just a general dickhead, and people like him need to be knocked around once a semester for his own good.

“It was probably Rose.”

“Who?”

“That girl who was talking to you when we first ran into each other. She likes you and wanted to get you into a closed-in space where you would suddenly see her for who she is and fall madly in love.”

“I was in there alone. Rose is not in theater. I’m sure it’s too dorky for her, and even if we were stuck in a room together, I already know who she is and I would not fall in love with that.” Rose is self-absorbed and just wants to dangle me from her Dior purse like an expensive charm that proclaims her better than everyone else.

“What would you fall in love with?”

I peer into her eyes and pinch her chin lightly. “It’s not a question I can answer at school, babe.”

A furrow digs into her forehead. “Why not?”

“Because you imposed a no sexy-time rule here on school grounds, and I’m bound by my word not to violate that. If you want to lift it, let me know, and I can take you to a practice room and give you a hands-on description of what I love.” I waggle my eyebrows.

Sadie blushes but rolls her eyes. “I don’t need a demonstration. I can guess from your expression.” She punches my biceps and then releases a little cry. “Ouch! Are you made of steel?”

“Again, the answer would require a lifting of the sexy times ban.”

“Oh Lord. Why do I feel like this is the only response I’m going to get for anything?” She gives me a push. “Go to class, you horny fool.”



CHAPTER 18

SADIE

“HEY.” VAN DROPS DOWN IN THE SEAT NEXT TO ME. I SWEAR HE’S BIGGER. He must really be putting in time at the gym and on the field. It makes sense because he’s never around. If it weren’t for Dunc filling a lot of my time at home, I would probably feel Van’s absence a lot more. It’s still strange—us not being as close as we used to be.

“Hello, stranger.” I give Van a little jab.

“What?” He looks confused by my comment.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “We haven’t really hung out or talked much.”

“Sorry. I got a lot going on.” He pulls out his Chromebook. “I’ll be at the party.”

“Party?” How does he know something I don’t? He’s been a ghost lately. Even before he said he was joining the football team. Van isn’t even a party kind of guy, or maybe that was because I wasn’t in the *IT* crowd so he hung back with me. Had I held him back?

“After the game on Friday.”

“No one told me.” Maybe that’s what Mom was going to talk to me about this morning before she saw Dunc was in my bed.

“It’s our birthday, and you know Mom.”

“Right.” How the heck did I forget that? I guess between the accident, moving, Van joining the football team, falling for Dunc, and the jerks at school, my mind has been in other places.

“Check your email. She sent a long-ass message.”

“Why are we having a party? We don’t know anyone here.” Van’s brows lift. “What?” I pull out my phone. “Tell me.” I know he’s got some other information I don’t.

“There is some online board for school people to post on for the football

team. She posted about it there.”

I sink down into my chair, dread immediately filling me, having a good idea who would attend the party. There is a typical crowd that surrounds the football team in my experience. Not to mention if people put together that it’s at Dunc’s house, they will be lining up to attend. And when I say people, I mean the girls at school. Ones that made it clear Dunc was off-limits or they would make my life harder.

This couldn’t get any worse. Those are the last people I want to be around or have in my personal space. A small amount of panic begins to set in at that thought.

“Let Mom have it. She still pouts that she didn’t get to do a sweet sixteen.” I take a deep breath, trying to get myself together so that Van doesn’t start asking questions that I don’t want to answer. Knowing he’ll go into overprotective brother mode.

There was a reason I hadn’t wanted to have a party then. Sad to say that my new school is turning out to have the same problem.

“When did Mom send the email?” I scroll through my emails on my phone, trying to find the one from our mom. “I don’t see anything from her.”

“Hold up. I’m looking through my stuff.” While Van is busy looking through his phone, I continue to search mine but come up empty-handed.

“Did you find it? Maybe I accidentally deleted it somehow.” Van doesn’t answer, the room going eerily quiet all of a sudden, causing me to look up. I can’t decipher the look on his face. “Is something wrong, Van?” More worry begins to fill me.

“I just realized what a dumbass I am. It was supposed to be a surprise for you. Mom is going to murder me for letting the cat out of the bag.” If I weren’t so stressed, I would burst out laughing at how scared Van looks right now.

“I won’t tell.” I guess trying to talk my mom into having this only be a party for Van is out of the question now. I don’t want to ruin it for her after she put in all this effort to try to do something nice for me. I’m sure she thought it would cheer me up.

“It might not be half bad. You could make a few friends,” he suggests.

“Trying to get rid of me?” I half-heartedly tease.

“No, I just remember middle school. You had a few girlfriends you hung out with.”

“It’s our last year of high school. I don’t need friends here. Unless you

got a girlfriend.” Van stiffens at my remark. I know why he wasn’t interested in girls from our old school but why not here? “Just not Rose.”

“Rose?”

“The blonde. Super tall.” He shakes his head. “I saw her talking to you once.” I’m sure she was trying to get her hooks into him.

“Doesn’t ring any bells.”

“Well, Dunc doesn’t speak too kindly of her.”

“That doesn’t mean shit. Dunc is known for being an asshole.”

“It takes one to know one,” I mutter.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I decide to keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to get into it with Van today.

“I’d take whatever Dunc said with a grain of salt. He seems the type to sleep with a girl and then be a dick.”

He slept with me but was still sweet this morning. Not that I’m telling Van that. I don’t need to add to their drama. Plus, I know that isn’t the kind of sleeping Van meant. I want to ask more, but class starts. I pull out my Chromebook.

I can’t pay much attention to what the teacher is saying. All I can think about is Dunc and Rose sleeping together. He’d called her *that*. It could be because of a bad breakup. She was rather possessive of him. Even told me I wasn’t his type.

Van and I part ways when class is over. I head to my next. I don’t know if I’m self-conscious now, but I swear I notice a few girls glancing my way before leaning in to talk to each other. Dunc hadn’t been great at hiding us this morning, but I’d forgotten too for a moment. It had been nice when it was only the two of us and I didn’t have to worry about anything else.



CHAPTER 19

DUNCAN

“YOU’RE SWEATING.” SADIE REACHES UP AND WIPES HER FINGER ACROSS MY forehead. I quiver like we’re naked and she just palmed my crotch. I’m down so bad.

“Ran here so I wouldn’t be late.” I take her backpack and sling it over my shoulder, curling the fingers of my right hand around the strap.

Her gaze falls to my knuckles. Belatedly, I remember that this is the hand I used to punch Scully’s jaw. It’s too late to hide the red marks and, unfortunately, I think she knows what they’re from. She does have a brother, after all.

“You were fighting,” she says flatly.

“Having a conversation with my hands,” I correct.

“What were you fighting about?”

“He locked me in the storage room and caused me to be late. I hurt your feelings. All of those things are worth fighting about.”

“If you say so, but I think the fact you talk with your hands a lot is what gives you a bad reputation.”

“Probably.”

“Don’t you care?”

“No, not really.” Maybe I should put out some effort. Uncle Coop texted me to let me know we’re holding a surprise party for Sadie’s birthday and that I should invite as many kids as possible.

She puts the brakes on and turns to me. “You’re not a bully, are you?”

“What? Of course not.” Where did that come from? “I’m just... disengaged. I wanted to be with my da—Uncle Coop and help him with the business because he—” Guilt creeps in. Coop has taken care of me all my life even when he was a teen himself. I’ve treated him kind of shittily these past

few weeks.

“He’s still your dad.” Sadie rubs her hand up my arm. “Like Fischl is my mom and always will be and she never carried me like she did Van, but I know she doesn’t love me an ounce less. It’s the same with Uncle Coop.”

I inhale. She’s right, but I’m not there yet. “I just got to work it out in my head.”

“And it’s not Van’s fault he’s the bio kid. He’s got to work it out in his head too. Don’t talk with your hands with him, okay?” She gives me a pleading look, and it’s one that I know I’m going to be giving in to a lot in the future.

“Yeah, okay.”

Her smile turns brilliant, and my heart flips. “Good thing we’re at school,” I growl in a low tone. “Or you’d be on your back with my face between —”

“Dunc? I have something to tell you.” Rose appears at my side, her hand coming up to touch my arm.

“No touching the merchandise.” I stare at her fingers until she drops them with a nervous laugh.

“I’m sorry. I just needed to get your attention.”

I start to say something cutting and then remember that we’re throwing Sadie a birthday party. “Sure.”

Sadie makes an odd noise at the back of her throat, but a quick glance in her direction doesn’t give me any hints about what that means.

“Maybe you could come with me.” Rose tries to tug me away from Sadie. I don’t move. “You can say what you have to say here.”

Rose flattens her lips. “Fine. I tried to be nice about it, but since you want to stand out here in the middle of the hall instead of going somewhere private, I’m just going to say it. She’s a bully.” Rose points her finger across my chest.

I follow the line of sight past Sadie and spot Fleur Benson, a tall redhead with a sharp tongue. “Fleur? Who you bothering these days?”

Fleur points at herself. “It’s easier if I list the people I’m not bothering, but this morning I made Van curse at me. Am I in trouble?” She flutters her eyelashes.

I burst out laughing. “Nah, you’re obviously doing the Lord’s work. Keep it up.” I give her the thumbs up.

“Not Fleur,” interjects Rose. “Her!” This time it appears that Rose is

pointing at Sadie.

Fleur saunters forward and slings an arm around Sadie's shoulder. "This little thing? She couldn't bully a hive of bees, let alone other kids."

"That's not what her old school says." Rose shoves her phone in our faces. "I got the whole story last night. She was awful to other girls. Constantly engaged in slut-shaming them. Would call the girls who didn't have money DRGs for Dirty Rag Girls."

I cough to cover a laugh because that sounds frigging dumb as hell. I glance down at Sadie so she can join in the hilarity, but she's ghost white.

Rose isn't done. "She had an initiation ceremony every year and would pick one or two girls to be her school servant. That person would have to get her lunch every day, do her homework, sometimes even rub her feet, and if they didn't do it, she'd beat them."

"Rose, you should stop right here before you embarrass yourself any further. No one believes you," I say quietly. I draw Sadie away from Fleur and tuck her close to my side. Her body is trembling like a leaf.

"You should. I have evidence." Rose flicks something on her screen, and a video begins to play. I pluck the phone out of Rose's hand and hurl it down the hall. It clatters about the same time Rose screams. "What the fuck, you asshole!" Rose yells, running after the phone.

"Come on, let's go eat lunch. And don't tell me you're not hungry because that's not what we're going to lunch for." I jerk my head at Fleur. "You're coming too."

"Yessir." She salutes me but not with a lot of sass.

Sadie stumbles, and I haul her upright. "Stiff upper lip, babe. The wolves can scent blood."

"Isn't it sharks who scent blood?" Fleur says.

"Are you saying wolves can't smell blood?"

"No, but the saying is sharks smell blood in the water."

"I can make up my own saying."

Sadie releases a soft laugh. "I can see why you and Van were fighting, Fleur. He's wrong like this, too."

"Oh, girl, I can see we're going to be best friends."

Between Fleur and me, we get Sadie through the lunch line and find a table in the corner. As soon as we sit, I say, "Spill."



CHAPTER 20

SADIE

“THERE ISN’T ANYTHING TO SPILL. I DIDN’T DO THOSE THINGS.” I TAKE A BITE of the pizza Dunc put on my tray. “Do you really think I can eat this much?” I try to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“I can.” Fleur takes a giant bite of her cheeseburger.

Ketchup drips out, but she doesn’t seem to care. I’m finding I like her more and more. I get the vibe she doesn’t necessarily fit in with any crowd fully but that she also isn’t trying to or cares that she doesn’t. That was easy to see with how she responded to Rose. She wasn’t the least bit worried about the wrath Rose could bring down on her. I wish I could be more like that.

“There was something,” Dunc pushes. I know he’s not going to let this go. He never lets anything go. He’s like a dog with a bone. It’s endearing to a degree but not so much at the moment. Especially not when it’s a subject you don’t really care to revisit. I know what happened at my old school wasn’t my fault, but I still feel shame about the whole thing. Even though I was the victim.

“It’s rich that Rose is calling you a bully after the stunt she pulled in the cafeteria yesterday.” Fleur shoves fries into her mouth next.

“What?” Dunc sits up straighter, his body tensing.

“Oh, is that a secret?” Fleur gives me an apologetic expression.

“Like you can keep those.”

“I’m the president of the school paper.”

“There are still papers?”

“Not really, but it’s still called that. We email it out, and it’s online.”

“Sadie.” Dunc grabs my hand.

“It’s nothing really. She ran into me. I dropped my tray.” Dunc closes his eyes. He’s fighting anger. That asshole side of him is begging to rear its

ugly head, and he's trying to keep it under control.

"What did she say, though? I couldn't hear." Fleur asks, unintentionally fueling the fire.

"Oh my God, you really can't keep a secret."

"Sorry?" She shrugs. "I mean, if you tell me to keep it, I will."

"What did she say?" Dunc asks. His hold on my fingers tightens. Fleur leans toward me, not going to miss it this time.

"Have you two slept together?" I blurt out to Duncan. It's not what Rose said, but there is some weirdness there. He doesn't care for her, but she wants him.

"No." Both Dunc and Fleur speak at the same time. I flick a glance to Fleur, wondering how she would know.

"I know things." She smirks. "Why I'm the president of the newspaper."

"Did she say that shit?" Dunc's face is one of disgust.

"No, you just seem annoyed with her, and she has a giant thing for you."

"Ahh," Fleur says. "She told you to stay away from him or else."

"I think it's clear Rose is fuckin' annoying. I've known her since grade school."

"Dunc hasn't slept with anyone. Not from our school anyways." Fleur bumps my shoulder with hers. "But suddenly the new girl has all of his attention, and that's newsworthy."

"Keep that to yourself."

"Really?" she huffs. "It's not like it's a secret. Rose knows. Hell, everyone does. Dunc chatting some girl up is big news around here." Her eyes bounce between Dunc and me. "Inviting me to sit with you guys. I think he wants us to be friends." She wiggles her eyebrows.

"I'll deal with Rose. Now about your old school."

"I don't know what Rose was talking about. I mean, I wouldn't be shocked if the girls from there said the worst things they could about me. I wasn't liked."

"Why didn't Van handle that shit?"

I roll my eyes. "Van was part of the problem."

"The fuck." Dunc releases my hand to get up.

"Stop! You wanted to hear this so don't go running off before I can give you the rest." He sits back down. "It hadn't always been that way. I knew a lot of the girls would want to stay the night at my house in junior high because they wanted to be around Van. He ignored them. It pissed them off."

Some couldn't understand why he wouldn't give them the time of day, but back then, football was Van's focus."

"He seems super focused. Kind of a dick. Must run in the family," Fleur teases.

"It got out that Van and I weren't blood related."

"They turned on you," Fleur says, already knowing where this story is going.

"They started to make up stories. Spread gossip. Then Van got involved. It was all just a mess." That's putting it mildly. It was pure torture for me from the moment I stepped into that building every day.

"And I bet Van never got shit, did he?" Fleur shakes her head. No, the boys never have to deal with that drama.

"Not that I noticed, but Van wouldn't give a crap what was said about him. It all rolled off him. Except when it hit me. Then he hit others."

"As he should," Dunc says. He may have things to work out with Van, but I can tell he respects him for sticking up for me. Maybe some good will come out of this situation with Rose. "Eat." He nods toward my food that I haven't really touched beyond one bite. Fleur, however, has managed to clear half her tray.

"Is he always this bossy?" Fleur asks.

"It can be kinda sweet," I admit. Dunc smirks. "Don't let that go to your head." Fleur laughs.

"You haven't signed up for any activities," Fleur says, stealing a grape from my bowl.

"How do you—" I stop mid-sentence. "You know everything."

"You could too."

"All right," I agree.

"And no, you can't join," Fleur tells Dunc without him even asking.

"Why not?"

"You wanted us to be friends. Deal with it." She pops another grape into her mouth. Dunc grabs my bowl and moves it to the other side of my tray away from her, making us both laugh.

It feels good to laugh in this space and gives me hope that everything will be okay.



CHAPTER 21

DUNCAN

I MAKE A PROMISE TO SADIE THAT I WON'T TALK TO VAN ABOUT WHAT happened with Rose.

"He'll go ballistic and then get kicked off the football team," she explains on our way to Calc.

"Is that a bad thing? I thought you hated that he played football."

"I do, but I don't want him to get kicked off. I want him to quit because he knows it's harmful."

"I'm sure he knows it's harmful." I hold open the classroom door and nudge her under my arm before following her into the room. "He just doesn't believe the harm will happen to him, so he won't quit."

"Thanks for your words of encouragement." She flounces to her seat.

Rose is sitting two rows over. I catch her attention. "You find your phone, Rose?"

"Yes. It's broken, thanks to you. I'll be sending you a bill for the new one." She gives me a saccharine smile.

"Good luck getting it paid."

"I can't believe I ever thought you were hot. I hope your dick melts off."

I start to reply, but Sadie lays a hand on my arm. "She's not worth it."

"I was going to be funny."

"You save that for me. Don't be giving your jokes around like freebies to people who aren't worthy."

"All right." I like that. That she wants to keep me for herself. I wink at her, which causes her face to turn a pretty pink.

"I wouldn't go to her party if you paid me. I'm sure it's going to be a drag. No booze. No weed. They'll probably have a piñata and dress her up with a sash and a little crown like it's a five-year-old's Disney princess

festival,” Rose sneers.

The pretty pink turns red and this time not from shyness but embarrassment. I straighten immediately, and I’m about to lay into Rose when a girl from behind her says, “Shut up, Rose. No one is buying what you’re selling. You’ve been dying to get into Duncan’s pants since we were freshmen, and even though you’ve done everything but practically strip in front of him —”

“No, she did that sophomore year during PE when she fake-tripped during floor hockey and her shirt somehow flew up and exposed her red lace bra,” adds in someone else. “Not that you noticed,” they direct to me. I have no recollection of this.

“Okay, so you’ve done everything to get his attention, and it didn’t work, but this girl —”

“Sadie,” I offer.

“—Sadie shows up and bam, Duncan is in her pocket. You can’t live with that, so you’re making up stories —”

“It’s not a story!” Rose insists.

“—that no one believes so give it up. Anyway, thanks for the invite, Duncan, we’re all going to be there, so it better not be a drag,” warns the girl. Madison, I think her name is.

I salute her. “Every drink will be spiked with tequila, and we’ll have weed baked into everything including the tortilla chips.”

The class is still laughing and cheering when Van walks in. He looks at us all suspiciously but agreeably gives high-fives as he makes his way to Sadie’s side.

“What’s this all about?” he asks.

“I told them you were going to sing at the party this Friday, and they’re all excited,” I say.

Sadie giggles. I’m guessing from her reaction she knew about the surprise party.

Van sits down with a thud. “The hell I am.”

“Your last school said you had the pipes of an angel. Looking forward to it, man.”

He stiffens. “You been checking out our old school?”

Belatedly, I realize my mistake. “Nah, it was just a joke.”

“Don’t stick your nose where it’s not wanted, asshole.”

I keep my tongue locked behind my teeth because I absolutely shouldn’t

have gone there just for laughs when we were just beating down Rose for trying to scrape up old rumors about Sadie.

“He didn’t mean anything,” Sadie says quietly.

“Are you defending him?” Van is incredulous.

“Let’s talk about this at home,” I suggest. Around us, the classroom has fallen silent and more than a few are coming to the realization that something happened to Van and Sadie at their old school. Rose tips her chin up as if to say, *See, I told you so.*

“Okay, no karaoke,” I say. “And crowns for only the guys because otherwise the party favors are predictable.”

“I like karaoke, though,” chirps Madison.

“Because you’re the lead soprano in the choir,” a guy says. “Not all of us have pipes like that.”

“Karaoke is about confidence, not talent,” Madison says.

“It’s better if you aren’t good,” says someone else.

The class starts debating this topic until Ms. Cotton walks in. “I’ve got a feeling this discussion isn’t about differential equations.”

A unanimous groan erupts. No one likes that topic. Actually, I don’t mind it, but I would never admit to this. I sneak a look at Sadie, whose tight expression has faded. On the other side of her, though, Van is glaring daggers at me. I wink back to be obnoxious.

“Damn, we’ll get a karaoke machine then.”

Ms. Cotton tells us all to shut up, nicely, and then starts her lecture. I reach over and squeeze Sadie’s hand. “You okay?” I say quietly.

She nods. I lift her hand to my lips and then remember we are in the middle of Calc and her brother is sitting right next to her. Over the top of our joined hands, I meet Van’s eyes. He is lit up with anger.

Take your fucking hand off her, he mouths.

Sadie jerks her fingers from mine and shoves her hand under her desk. My own hands curl into fists. Van doesn’t get to dictate to me or Sadie what we can and cannot do. I understand she loves him like a brother, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to beat the crap out of him, and I telegraph that very message silently to him.

He sends back a *bring it on.*

This Friday party may never happen.



CHAPTER 22

SADIE

“DID ROSE RUIN THE BIRTHDAY SURPRISE OR DID YOU ALREADY KNOW?” Dunc asks when class lets out.

Rose practically stomps past my desk. I fight a smile. I never want to be cruel to anyone. Even though she deserves it for how she treats people. But I know what it’s like to be on the other side, and it sucks.

Plus, I think a lot of people who lash out have their own demons they have to face. But hearing Dunc has never given her the time of day and somehow, I have caught all of his attention makes me giddy. There’s nothing she could do to bring me down right now.

“Van let it slip.”

Dunc glares over at Van.

“It was an accident.” Van packs up his stuff. Dunc grabs mine before I can.

“Maybe it’s from being hit on the head too many times.” I take another jab at this football crap.

“My head is fine.” He stands. “Besides. Sadie doesn’t like surprises.”

“Enjoyed the surprise of waking up with me this morning.” Dunc winks at me. I brace myself for a fight, but I can tell Van doesn’t believe him.

“Not playing your stupid game, Dunc. I’ve got to get to practice.” He focuses his attention back to me. “You good?”

“I’m great.” I’m not sure if it’s a lie or not. Things are changing. Van isn’t wrong. I’m not a fan of surprises or changes.

“I got her,” Dunc challenges. I’ve noticed that Dunc has been trying to hold some of his jabs with Van, but still some slip through.

“Wasn’t talking to you.”

“I said I’m great. You got football.”

“We’re talking tonight,” Van mutters before he starts to walk off.

“If it’s about Dunc, I don’t want to talk.” Van freezes for a half second but shakes his head and leaves the classroom. When I glance over at Dunc, he has a smug smile on his face. I roll my eyes. “Don’t get a big head.”

“You’d really pick me over Van?” Dunc follows me out of class. His hand grabs my hips, shifting me to walk on the inside of him so no one can bump into me unless they hit him first, which won’t happen.

“I don’t want to pick anyone, but I, ah—” I lick my lips, unsure if I should continue with my sentence.

“But—” Dunc pushes, wanting me to finish. And the look he’s giving me tells me he needs me to give him the words.

“I really like you.” My cheeks burn. Pretty sure he knows this already, but saying it out loud makes me feel vulnerable. “Even if you’re an asshole.”

“Not an asshole to you,” he reminds me.

“Right.” I laugh. “I want to see where this goes. I see what happened to your dad and my mom when people got in their way.” Everything might be great now between them, but they suffered for years because of other people. It makes me hesitant.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I won’t let anyone come between us. Van hasn’t stopped me. Maybe slowed me but never fucking stopped.” I have to admit that I love this side of Dunc. The one that gets all possessive and will fight for me.

“It would be nice if you two could get along.” It may be wishful thinking, but I truly believe that the two of them will eventually come to their senses.

“It’s not easy with how he is with you.” Dunc opens the car door for me.

“What do you mean?”

“In you go. You got a doctor’s appointment. See if you can get rid of that sling today.”

“I do?” I slide into the passenger seat. Dunc leans in and pulls my seatbelt over me. “I can buckle myself in.” His only response is to press a kiss to my lips before shutting the door and going around to the other side to hop in.

“So? How is Van with me?”

“I’m jealous. All right?” I stare at him. That wasn’t what I thought he was going to say. But I can tell from how his jaw is clenching that he’s not joking.

“He’s my brother. I really hope you don’t want to be my brother.”

“He acts like you belong to him. You don’t. You’re mine.” I snort a laugh.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.” I apologize remembering how I felt with Rose. I place my hand on his thigh. “I promise I do not see Van as anything other than my brother. He’s protective because of the crap I dealt with in our last school. The bullying started because of petty girls wanting Van, and I think he took that on as it being his fault.”

“Shit.” Dunc lets out a breath. He pulls the car over to the side of the road. “I know I got my own shit too. It doesn’t help that Van is Cooper’s real son.” It’s the first time he’s really admitted that out loud to me.

“Dunc.” I reach up to stroke his face. He leans into my touch. “Cooper is still your dad. Don’t take that from him. He was there for you back then and he’s here for you now.” Dunc grabs my hand, kissing my palm. Our fingers slide together to lock in place.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” I glance away.

“Back here, gorgeous.” He puts his finger on my chin to make me meet his eyes.

“I get scared,” I admit. “You all are really connected. I know it’s irrational, but my egg donor easily walked away from me.” I can’t stop the hitch in my voice. “It wasn’t because she didn’t have the means. She just didn’t want me. Hasn’t ever tried to find me. Not that I want her to, but it scares me that others could do the same.” I peel back some of my layers to reveal myself to him. I know it makes me vulnerable, but I don’t care.

“No one is going to walk away from you, Sadie. Soon enough, you’ll be tied to this family in more than one way.”

“What does that mean?”

“That you’re always going to be mine.” He leans in, his mouth taking mine in a slow, sweet kiss. I want to be his, but is it really that easy?



CHAPTER 23

DUNCAN

THE PARTY IS GOING WELL. THERE'S NO WEED OR BOOZE BECAUSE THE parental units would not allow it, but everyone appears to be having fun. Clothes are off and swimsuits are on. About a dozen classmates are in the heated pool playing water polo. Another group is on the lawn playing a game of croquet that I swore no one would be interested in but anyone who loses has to collapse on the grass like they're dead and you have to play around the bodies.

Next to me, Sadie shifts from one foot to the other, still nervous. A plastic cup is gripped between both hands.

"Ease up, babe," I say quietly. "It's all going well."

"It is. It is," she says, but she doesn't sound fully convinced.

I shove my hands deep into my pockets so I don't put my arm around her. It sucks having to keep myself in check, but I know that's what she wants, especially with Van standing near the punch fountain glaring at anyone that comes near, and the parental units standing in the sunroom overlooking the patio.

"Why's your brother looking like he has a rod up his ass?"

"He's your family, too, and he's afraid someone is going to spike the drink. I guess he heard something earlier."

"Probably the football players."

We both turn toward the grassy area just beyond the pool deck where the quarterback and the running back are engaged in a mock bull fight wearing blow-up horns. Sadie giggles a little. "At least they're harmless."

"True." I do another scan and frown when my eyes fall on Rose. "What's she doing here?" You'd think after the week we had where I broke her phone and then we all ignored her, she would have had the good sense to stay away.

I decide to go tell her that when Sadie stops me.

“Let her stay. It’ll be ten times worse if you drive her away. She’ll be like the thirteenth fairy godmother that didn’t get invited and then curses me to sleep forever.”

I grimace. “I don’t want to, but I will because I don’t know how to ride a horse, and Prince Charmings all ride horses.”

“I’m sure you’d learn,” Sadie reassures me.

I flash her a big grin. “I sure as hell would.” For a moment, I forget where we are and bend down to kiss her. At the last minute, we both remember where we are. She ducks out from under me, and I bring my fist to my mouth and pretend to cough.

When I gather myself, I see Van watching us with narrowed eyes. I flip him off.

Sadie sighs. “Why can’t you two get along? You’re more alike than you know. You could be friends.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Friends have mutual interests. Van likes books and sports. I like working with my hands without someone blowing a whistle in my ear.”

“I bet you have more in common than you think. You should spend some time together.” Her face wears that sweet, pleading look that makes my knees—and resolve—watery.

“Fine,” I mutter.

She smiles brilliantly. “Thank you.”

“I know Van doesn’t fall for that look.”

“Because he’s my brother,” she replies drolly. “Or did you want me to treat you the same?”

“No, no.” I wave my hands. “I’m good.”

She snickers and then swishes her near empty glass. I pluck it from her hand. “Anything else you want from the grub table?”

“Maybe a mini cupcake or two?”

“On it.” As I approach the food table, I spy Rose near the punch fountain. Her hand dips inside her bag, but I don’t see what she pulls out because her body blocks me. A high-pitched yelp fills the air.

“Take your hands off me, asshole,” she screeches at Van, who has her wrist in a death grip. A large number of heads swivel in their direction. Great, just what Sadie does not want. I hurry over and get in between the two of

them.

“Let go, Van.”

“She’s trying to spike the punch bowl,” he growls.

“This party is lame as hell. I was trying to give it some sparkle,” Rose says, trying to tug away.

“Let her go, Van. It’s no big deal. Sadie doesn’t want us making a scene.”

“Did Sadie say that or are you assuming?”

I hesitate because she didn’t exactly tell me to stop Rose from spiking the punch bowl, but I know that’s what she would’ve wanted.

“Exactly. Come on,” he starts to drag Rose toward the house. More people are looking at us. I cross the distance in three short strides and pull Rose from Van’s grasp.

“Enough.”

Rose stumbles and somehow pulls Van toward her. We all careen backwards. I feel my head hitting the table. First there’s a trickle followed by a flood as the punch fountain crashes onto my face. Van pushes Rose out of the way and lands on my gut with a hard thud. The breath whooshes out of me, and my vision blurs. Instinctively, my fist comes up. I make contact with something—his chin, the table, the metal of the fountain? I don’t know. Something strikes me in the chest. I respond with another punch and another. Distantly I hear screams. Someone might be crying. The weight is suddenly lifted off of me and then I’m hauled to my unsteady feet. I sway, gasping for air, blinking pink juice away. Beside me, Van is in the same state, drenched with liquid and some weird white stuff that I vaguely register as frosting.

In front of both of us, Sadie is full of tears. Behind her are the parental units and beyond them are fifty of our classmates, all staring big-eyed.

“I think we fucked up,” I say.

“You think?” Van replies.

I rub my aching chest. “Did you have to do a solar plexus move on me? I think my ribs are broken.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t pulled me on top of you, it wouldn’t have happened. That was an accident, unlike your two fists to my nose. I think you broke it.”

“I wish he’d broken your jaw,” Sadie spits out. “And you.” She points an angry finger at my face. Maybe it’s two fingers. I can’t really tell. “You broke your promise.”

And that punch is the one that hurts the most.



CHAPTER 24

SADIE

I DON'T MISS THE SHOCKED EXPRESSION ON MY MOM'S FACE AS I RUSH BY HER muttering an apology knowing this is partially my fault. Nothing can go right anymore. Maybe I should take that as a sign from the universe.

"Sadie." My mom calls after me, but I keep going, heading into the house, the need to get away from everyone overwhelming me. I don't want everyone to witness me ugly cry. "Sadie!" she shouts again. I pause on the stairs, knowing she will only follow me up if I don't answer her. I turn around to face her. "Honey, that was not your fault."

"It kinda was. I'm not helping with getting the two of them to like each other. If anything, I'm making it worse." I sniffle.

Van has been quiet since I told him not to talk to me about Dunc. To keep me out of whatever their beef is with one another. Maybe he's pissed I'm not on his side. I don't know. He probably sees it as some sort of betrayal. We've always stuck together.

"They're stupid boys. If it wasn't you, they would find something else to fight about. It will work itself out in time." I'm not so sure I believe her.

"Sadie! Babe!" Dunc shouts through the house. He sounds as though he's in a panic.

"It's not your fault, and I'm not mad. Okay?" Mom says. I nod as she takes a step back. Dunc almost runs right into her, but I think my mom knew she needed to get out of the way. She did say Dunc reminds her a lot of Cooper. She probably understands him more than most. I'm not sure what to do with him.

"Sorry," Dunc mutters to Mom as he shifts past. He's a hot mess. If I wasn't so upset, I'd laugh. Dunc freezes when he realizes I'm on the stairs. "Babe." His expression turns to pleading. It's not one I'm used to seeing on

him. My anger falters. He has this secret power over me I don't understand.

"I'll leave you two to it," Mom says before heading back downstairs.

"You look ridiculous." I stomp up the stairs. Fleur slips out of my brother's bedroom. I didn't even know she was here. I'd texted her but hadn't heard back.

"The hell happened to you two?" she asks like I didn't just bust her coming out of Van's bedroom. I'm the one that should be asking the questions here.

"Why were you in my brother's room?"

"I thought it was the bathroom."

"Friends don't lie to each other."

"Fine, I'm nosy. I can't help myself." She throws her hands up. "What happened to him?" She nods toward Dunc.

"I fucked up," Dunc sighs.

"That's a good start." Fleur smacks him on the shoulder as she passes him going downstairs.

"Why are you following me?"

"I'll always follow you, Sadie." He proves his point by slipping in behind me as I enter my bedroom, not giving me the chance to close and lock the door. I'm sure that wouldn't stop him either way.

"This isn't working," I tell him.

Dunc pulls his shirt off, wiping his face with it. My eyes drop to his bare chest. Holy crap. My mouth suddenly goes dry. He doesn't even work out. How does he look like that!

"You're right." He tosses the shirt into my laundry basket. My heart sinks at his response, which is stupid. "I can't hide us. It's driving me insane." He closes the space between us. "I know I keep fucking shit up, babe, but I promise you, everything I do, you're always my first thought." He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. "I don't hate Van. Sure, he pisses me off, but I know he's only looking out for you. I'll try harder." I can see the sincerity in his eyes.

"Really?" I'm not sure they will ever get along.

"Try. He is a dick." I smack his chest but can't help but smile. "Why do you want to hide us?"

"Can you sit over there?" I run my fingers across his bare chest. "It's hard to think when you're this close." *And this undressed.*

The second he took his shirt off, my body had a reaction. It's the same

one I've been fighting every night when he slips into bed with me. He never tries anything. Only pulls me close, burying his face in my neck.

"That is not going to get me to move away from you, babe."

"Sorry." I drop my hand.

"Don't apologize for touching. It is all yours." He smirks. I roll my eyes at him.

"Go sit." I point to the chair next to my desk. He actually does what I say, dropping down into it, knocking off a folder in the process. I rush over to grab it and the papers that spilled out, but he beats me to it.

"Sadie." He holds one of the papers up. "This is a college application."

"I know."

"It's on the other side of the country."

"It's nothing." I grab it from his hand. He starts to flip through the other papers.

"They're all far away." He looks up at me. "You're trying to leave me." Gone is any smirk or pleading. I can't really decipher the look he's currently wearing. It's a mix of anxiety and betrayal.

"Don't look at me like that!" My eyes fill with tears again. He snags me around the waist, pulling me into his lap. I end up straddling him. I rest my head on his shoulder.

"Don't leave, or at least tell me where you're applying so I can too."

"You don't want to go to college."

His hold on me tightens. "I can't lose you."

"I printed those out weeks ago," I admit. "I wasn't sure how things were going to work out here with everyone. Sometimes I felt like I didn't belong." I lift my head. "You felt that way too, didn't you? It's why you keep calling Cooper 'Uncle'."

I don't know why this only dawns on me now. Sure, I thought he was annoyed with the turn of events, but I never thought that he could be feeling the same way as I did. He only has a different way of showing it. Where I try to be still and not make waves, Dunc and Van are like hurricanes. Category five ones.

"I don't know. My head was all messed up between thinking I was losing my dad and then you. But it doesn't matter. I don't care because all that shit brought you here. Nothing else matters if I get you out of this. We fit. I'm that family you told me about when we were lying in bed. You said more than anything you want your own family. A couple of kids and a husband. I

want to give you that. Let me be that for you.”

“But do *you* want it?” I do want all those things in the future.

“Before you? No fucking way. That shit scared me. I lost my parents. I watched Uncle Coop torn up for years over a girl. I wanted to work and nothing more. Or I’d thought that.”

“And now?”

“Now I know losing you would hurt more than anything. In a crazy way that I’m still trying to understand, because of you, I can let myself see all those possibilities.”

“Dunc.” I drop my forehead to his. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want to hide us, but I thought it would cause less problems for everyone. At home and school. I thought it would protect everyone.”

“I disagree and not because I’m a jealous asshole. People will have to deal and move on. It was only a matter of time before it would come out.” I know he’s right. There is no way that we can continue to hide how we feel for one another. It’s not fair to either one of us.

“Okay.”

“Okay as in you agree with me?” I don’t think he was expecting me to give in so easily. But I’m tired of all of this. Of allowing all of my fears to impact the narrative of my life.

“Yeah, I agree with you. We both have felt a little lost in this family, but when I’m with you, it doesn’t feel that way.”

“Because you’re mine and I’m yours.”

“Dunc.” I sniffle.

“I promise I’ll spend my life loving you, and that is a promise I will never break.”

“I promise to love you too.”

Dunc claims my mouth in a kiss. I allow myself to get lost in him, knowing today is a new beginning for both of us. I’m not hiding us. Dunc and I will have the life we always dreamed of. *Together*.



EPILOGUE

DUNCAN

A few years later

“YOU ANXIOUS TO LEAVE, BOSS?” MY FOREMAN ASKS.

“Got plans,” I admit. I try to keep the grin off my face, but it’s not possible. I’m half hard thinking about Sadie waiting for me at home. Good thing I have my tool belt.

The guys hoot and holler but keep their dirty thoughts to themselves. They know better. Had to set a few straight after Sadie visited me on site a few years ago, but since then, everyone treats her with a healthy amount of respect.

Blake hands me a rundown of the shit we accomplished today. I review it and sign off. “Don’t look for me in the morning,” I tell him.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” he calls after me.

“Sounds more like a challenge than a warning.” I give him a chin nod and take off.

On the way home, I pick up the flowers, cake, and a little bling-bling I think will look pretty around her neck.

When I arrive home, our dog tries to jump into my arms and eat the cake—or the flowers. One of the two.

“No, Panda!” yells Elsa. My three-year-old grabs the collar of our black and white shaggy-haired mix who weighs at least twice as much as she does. Fischl appears and picks up Elsa before the little one is crushed by her doggo.

“Sadie’s putting away our shopping,” Fischl informs me. The two are stocking the new nursery. Sadie’s twenty-four weeks along with our second kid. Everything Sadie and I had dreamed about is coming true.

I drop my packages on the counter and lift my girl out of her grandma’s arms. “How was your day, baby girl?”

“Good.” She holds my face between her tiny hands and gives me a wet smack. “How wath your day?”

I chuckle. “Good but better now.”

“Time for us to go, Chickadee.” Fischl takes Elsa back.

“Where we going, gamma?” Elsa is happy to be back with her grandmother. The two of them are thicker than thieves. Always up to no good.

“To grandpa’s house with the big pool and the ice cream freezer.”

Elsa screams with glee and allows herself to be carried away.

I unwrap the cellophane from the flowers and tuck the jewelry box in my back pocket. Panda is at my heels when Sadie meets me on the stairs. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Your mom already kidnapped Elsa.” I pick Sadie up and continue up the stairs and down the hall to our bedroom. She’s wearing her usual attire of loose-fitting knit pants and a matching knit top. She’s never looked sexier. My cock throbs with need.

“I guess we’re all alone then?” She twines her arms around my neck and tugs me close. “Did you have a good day?”

“No. I was absolutely miserable. The sun was hot, two sawblades broke, and a new hire almost fell through the roof. But that didn’t bother me. What bothered me was that it was keeping me from you.” I stop in front of our bed and jiggle her lightly. “What are you gonna do to make it up to me?”

“I could make you dinner.”

“Not hungry.” Or at least not for food.

“I could put the game on.”

“It’s the summer. And I’m not interested in baseball.”

“I bought a new book the other day. It’s got blue aliens in it.”

I scowl. “If you’re lusting after blue aliens, we’re gonna have to have a talk.”

She grins. “You’re sexier than all those blue guys put together.”

“Better be.”

“Would you fight them for me?”

“Yes.”

“No hesitation,” she murmurs, running her fingers across the back of my neck. I shiver in excitement. Even though it’s been five years since we married, every day is new with Sadie. When she touches me, it’s like the first time we made love on the night of her eighteenth birthday in the back of my truck on the edge of the lake in the back of my dad’s property. Her body is curvier now, her thighs thicker, her lips poutier, but I love it the same. No, I love it more. I love her more.

I lay her down on the mattress and dip my head to kiss her collarbone. “You’re so beautiful today.”

“More so than yesterday?” she teases, scratching her nails through my scalp. I want to purr like a big cat.

“Every day more beautiful than the last.” I push her shirt up and off. Her bra is next. Ripe, extra juicy tits bounce happily in front of my face. I cup one

in each hand and push them together. “Hotter today too.” I dive forward, sucking on one nipple and then the other, going back and forth until both are hard, pointy tips.

She moans and shifts on the bed. I kiss my way up her neck, still holding her boobs in my hands, squeezing and molding them, rubbing her stiff peaks with my thumbs. I trace her jawline with my lips, capture her mouth, and kiss her deep and long until we’re both breathless. I draw back and admire my handiwork. Her lips are cherry red, and her cheeks are flushed. Her eyelids have fallen half-closed, and she watches me out of a curtain of lashes as I reach into my back pocket to pull out the necklace of pearls.

She gasps when I open the box. “Happy birthday, darling.” I lean down and hook the three strands around her gorgeous neck.

“There. The jewelry looks better on you than in the store.”

“This is too much,” she says, her hand at her throat.

“Not really.”

“I saw how expensive these were!”

“And I saw how much you liked them. Besides, if I can’t spend our money on you, what’s the point of me working every day? Isn’t it for us?”

“How is this present for you?” she asks.

“Because you’re happy and that’s what I want. No, I need that. I need you to be happy, to feel treasured, to feel loved.” I rub my hand across her slightly rounded belly. She’s starting to show more every day.

“I do. I feel all of those things.” Her eyes are big and beautiful. I hold her gaze as I take her mouth again, kissing her until we’re both breathless. I move down her body.

I devour her creamy tits until she’s a squirming, writhing mess. Lust pounds through my blood. Every day I wake up with need to possess her, and every night when I take her, I always seem to want more.

“I can’t get enough of you. Every moment of every day, all I want is to be inside this wet cunt of yours.”

I take my hand between us and slide my fingers into her juicy core. Her moisture drenches my hand and drips onto her thighs. The sounds that fill the room as I slowly fuck her with my hand makes me dizzy. My cock is steel hard. I move lower and replace my fingers with my tongue. Her taste coats my lips, slides down my throat, and ratchets up the flame of desire. I tongue her in long, even strokes until she’s quivering and coming against my mouth. My balls tighten, and I beat back the urge to come. I need to be inside her. I

have to have her.

I lean back on my haunches and take myself in hand. She stares at my cock with hungry eyes. “Keep looking at me like that and I’m going to come all over your pretty stomach.”

“Do it,” she breathes out.

“No. I want to fuck you. I want to fill you up with my cum until it spills out.” I position myself at the entry of her hot hole and wet my dick in her honey. We both hiss at the first contact. She sucks her breath in harder as I ease myself inside of her. One kid, but she’s still tighter than a new nun.

I take it slow, savoring the heat, the wetness, the suction. Her eyes flutter shut. As I lean forward to capture a bobbing tit in my mouth, her fingers wind through my hair. Palms on either side of her head, I move my big frame over her smaller one. I dig my knee into the mattress and begin to work her. Our gazes cling to each other. Her gaze is wanton and glazed. I know mine is feral.

I’m possessive when we’re out of the bedroom, but inside of it, I cut off the constraints of the world and let my territorial nature take over. “Randy was looking at you today.”

“No, he wasn’t.” She shakes her head.

“I’m going to take my nail gun and punch his eyes through his skull the next time he breathes in your direction.”

She tugs me down until our lips meet. “I don’t want anyone but you.”

“Better not.” Sweat rolls down the sides of my face. “I don’t like when Van talks to you. Might take his tongue out of his mouth.”

One hand leaves my hair to cup my cheek. “I can’t even remember a word he said.”

The beast inside of me purrs. “That’s how it should be.”

“I know.” She holds me in her small palm while I thrust inside of her again and again until her hand falls away to grip the sheets. Her back arches. Her head goes back. A high, keening wail escapes her lips. I bend forward and kiss and bite the long, elegant column. I run my tongue along the bumpy edges of the pearls and continue to drive forward, waiting until the very last of her flutters grips me, and then I let go.

“Come with me again, baby,” I urge, one hand on her hip, pulling her body up to meet my pumps. “One more time.”

She explodes, and her screams trigger my own loss of control. I spend inside of her, filling her until she’s overflowing and a combined mixture of

her juice and my cum spill out between us.

I drop beside her and gather her close, kissing her softly until her breath evens out and her shuddering calms.

“I love you, Sadie, darling. More today than yesterday and it’ll be more tomorrow than today.”

“I love you too, Duncan. You wild, possessive thing.”

I chuckle against her cheek. “I can’t control myself around you.”

“I love it. Don’t change.”

“You either. Let’s be this way forever.”

She hugs me close, our two hearts thudding in sync until it’s one heartbeat, one body, one mind. This is how we were meant to be, no matter how odd our origin story. Her family, my family, our family. It’s destiny.

MY LOVES, gather around because I have a secret. Shhhhhhh! No one’s listening, right? Okay. I’m writing Van and Fleur’s story. You like that? Me, too! Stay tuned. It’ll be the perfect story to start the new year and then after that, I have a fun, new romance I haven’t written before that I think you’re going to love. My heart is aching writing it.

If you’re new here, read about Coop and Fischl in [No More Secrets](#). It’s out right now.

Stay warm, my beloveds!

xoxo Ella

ALSO BY
Ella Goode

No More Secrets

Kissing the Hitman
The Good Bad Man

Pick Love
Taste of Love

Rocked by Love
Marked with Love

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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](#)

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Friends to Lovers

[Forever Mine](#)

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Smooth Kisses, Sweet Kisses, Saved Kisses

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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