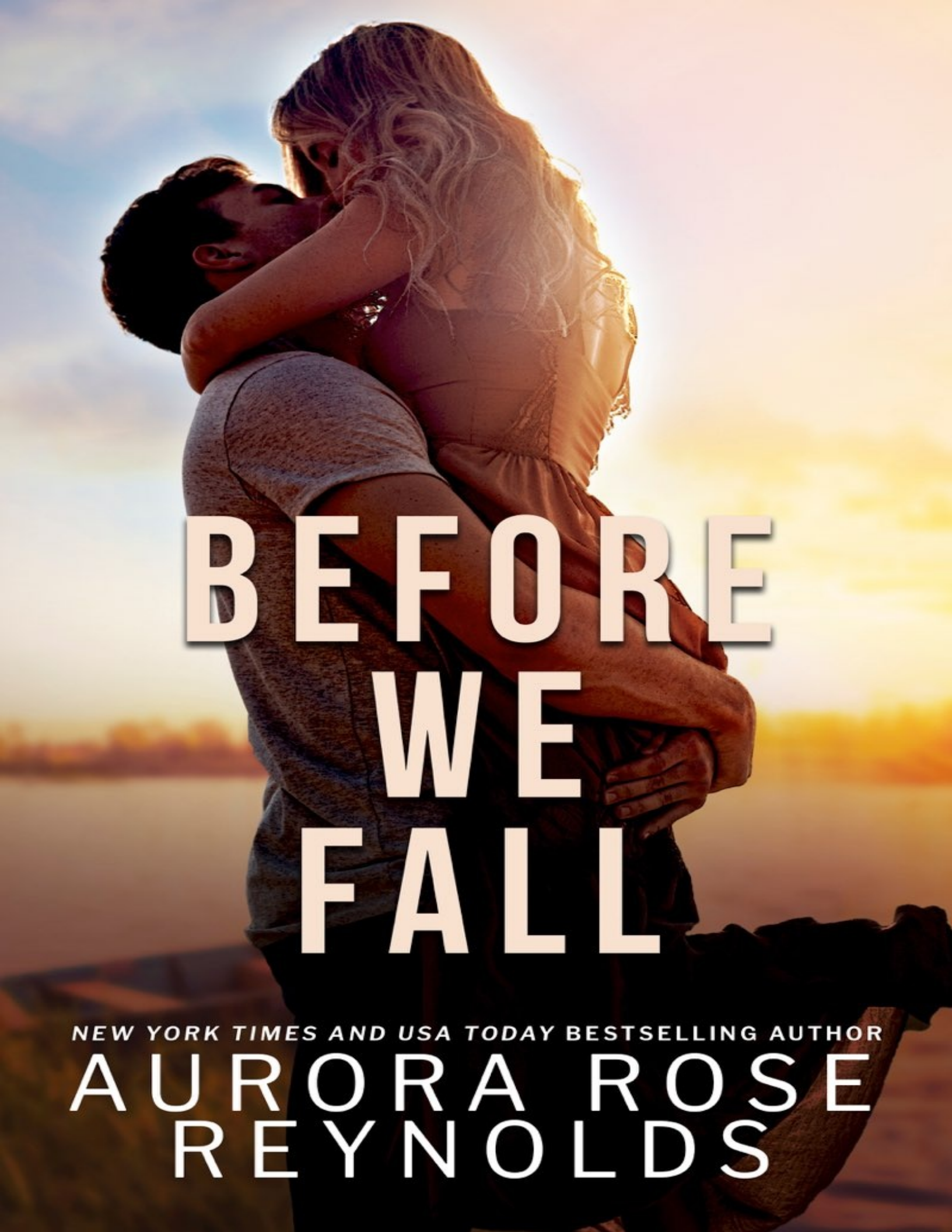

BEFORE WE FALL
NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

before we fall

TUCKER & MIRANDA

LOVE ISN’T COMPLICATED, BUT SOMETIMES LIFE IS.

AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

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dedication

To every young girl that is just trying to figure out where they fit in.
Even if you don't believe it right now, someday you will find your tribe, and they will accept you just the way you are.
You are amazing, you are smart, you are kind, and you have the ability to change this world for the better.

CHAPTER ONE

miranda

I *'m going to be sick.*

Holding my balled-up hand against my stomach, I read the text that just popped up on Bowie's computer again and try to convince myself that I'm misunderstanding what I'm looking at.

It doesn't work. No matter how many times I reread the message, it still says the same thing.

What time do you think you'll be here? Tucker is working late, so we don't need to worry about him.

The simple question seems innocent enough, but the photo attached to the message of a beautiful woman with dark hair who's wearing a red lace nightie proves I haven't made the wrong assumption.

"Mommy!" Kingston shouts, making me jump, and I slam the laptop closed and watch my beautiful boy with his dark hair and brown eyes—both traits from his father—hop-skip from the living room and into the kitchen. "Can we go outside now?"

"Yeah." I slid off the stool I pulled out so I could look up a recipe for dinner tonight, not having a clue that doing so would change everything. "Let Mommy get on her shoes."

"Okay," he sings, following behind me to the front door.

"How about we walk down to the park?" I suggest, putting on his coat first. It takes me a few tries to get it zipped, because my hands are shaking so badly.

"Yes." His tiny arms shoot into the air, and I can't help the smile that curves

my lips.

“All right, let’s go.” I open the door after I’ve got my shoes on, and he bounces out ahead of me, then waits for me to lock up before he reaches for my hand.

Holding onto him tightly, I move on autopilot down the sidewalk, past house after house, all of them similar to the one Bowie moved us into just weeks after we found out we were pregnant with Kingston. Our boy was a surprise gift from our honeymoon in Jamaica and a complete shock to me, because I had been on birth control at the time and was not planning on being a mom.

Or not at that moment in my life anyway.

At that time, I was working at a hair salon as a stylist with a goal of opening my own shop within the next couple of years, but getting pregnant changed that. For the first five months, I was so sick that I could hardly get out of bed, and for the last four, I was put on bed rest, because my doctors were concerned I would miscarry.

Bowie was great about everything and had no problem stepping up and taking care of us when I could no longer work. And after we had Kingston, we just decided I would stay home until he started preschool. And with Bowie’s job as a police officer, he was able to take an extra shift here or there, so we never struggled.

Now, I wonder if it was too much, if the responsibility and stress of him being the sole provider for our family changed the way he felt about me, about us.

With my throat tight, I shove that thought away. I might not work outside the house, but being a stay-at-home mom is a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week gig. I do not get time off. Heck, I can’t even remember the last time I went to the bathroom on my own, let alone left the house by myself. And when Bowie does have a day off, I always make sure he never has to worry about Kingston or anything around the house.

Just last weekend, he went out of town with friends to go fishing.

Or maybe he didn’t. Maybe he spent the weekend banging another woman while I was home with our son.

Did I miss the signs? How long has it been going on?

Things between us have been… well, if I'm honest, *not great*. But that happens, right? The ups and downs in relationships, the times where you feel completely disconnected from your spouse. I know I've been feeling like that for a long time—longer than I'd even like to admit. I just convinced myself that things would get better when Kingston got a little older and he didn't need me so much.

"Mommy, can I go on the slide?" Kingston asks, dragging me from my thoughts, and I look around, realizing we've already made it the five blocks to the park.

"Yeah, just be careful on the way down."

"I know," he groans like he's had sixteen years of me annoying him with my overprotectiveness and not just three.

I watch him run across the mulch that covers the ground to the jungle gym with a slide attached, then I take a seat on the bench. Taking my phone out of my pocket, I tap the screen and see a message from Bowie letting me know he's going to be late tonight and not to wait up for him.

Numb, I message him back a quick **Okay**, when all I really want to do is rage, to tell him I know he's a liar, to ask how he could do this to us. He knows that cheating is not something I would ever forgive, not after growing up the way I did. My childhood was filled with turmoil, heartache, and confusion, watching my mom being cheated on by my dad and her constantly taking him back, knowing he'd just do it again.

That is not the life I want for our son. I do not want him to think that kind of relationship is normal, because it's not. And I deserve better than a man who would do that to me.

"Mommy, come push me!" Kingston shouts, and I tuck away the pain I'm feeling and head across the mulch, forcing a smile for my baby.

I have a lot of thinking to do. I'm not the only one in this situation, the only one who will be affected. And with me so dependent on Bowie, it's going to take me some time to leave.

CHAPTER TWO

miranda

Sitting on my back deck with the baby monitor on the table so I'll know if Kingston wakes up, I chew the inside of my cheek as my best friend Emma digests what I just showed her on Bowie's computer.

Which is way more than I saw earlier today.

In fact, there are weeks and weeks of texts back and forth between Bowie and Naomie, the woman he's been seeing. For at least the last two months, when Bowie told me he had to work late, he's been with her. And last weekend, when he was supposed to be fishing with friends, he was actually at a cabin he must have rented for the two of them to get away.

"That motherfucker," Emma whispers after a long moment, lifting her pretty green eyes off the computer screen to look at me. "How fucking stupid is he?" Like any good best friend, her outrage on my behalf doesn't surprise me. Just like it didn't surprise me that she knew something was off when I called her this evening while making dinner, and she told me without hesitation that she was coming over with wine as soon as I got Kingston to sleep.

"I'm guessing he doesn't realize how stupid he is. He probably doesn't know that his texts can be read from his computer. Or if he does know, he didn't think about me using it, because I have my own and wouldn't normally use his." I take a sip of the wine.

"Who is Tucker?"

"I have no idea. Her husband or boyfriend, I guess," My throat gets tight, wondering if he knows or if he's going to be as blindsided as I was.

“She knows Bowie’s married.”

“I know.” She referred to me more than once, asking if he thought I suspected anything. She also asked about Kingston like she knew him and cared about his well-being. What a fricking joke. “As easy as it would be, I refuse to put the blame on her. I’m married to Bowie, not her. He should have been the one to walk away.”

“You’re a better person than me.” Her eyes go to the glass sliding door, where you can see into my living room and the family photo of Bowie, Kingston, and me that is hanging on the wall above the fireplace. A picture we took a month ago, looking at it now and the smile on Bowie’s face makes me sick to my stomach. “So, what are you going to do?”

“Leave him.”

“Good.”

“Is it?” I shake my head. “Should it be so easy to get to that answer? Shouldn’t I at least be thinking about working things out or trying to for Kingston’s sake?”

“Fuck no, M. You should not be thinking about working things out. We both know how that story ends. You confront him, he promises to never do it again, then a year or five or even just a month from now, you find out he’s screwing someone else. Fuck that!”

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back on my shoulders and scrub my fingers through my hair. “I need to get a job. I need to get an apartment or a house for Kingston and me. I need to… I have so much I need to do.”

“You know Polly always has a chair at the salon for you, and I have a client who works in real estate who I’m sure can help you get a place. You’ll be okay.” She reaches for my hand. “When are you going to tell him you know?”

“I need to get things sorted out before I confront him. You know he can be __”

“A dick?” she inserts.

“—difficult when he’s backed into a corner.” I lightly kick her, and she presses her lips together. She never liked Bowie. None of my friends or family did, but they all love me and knew I was in love with him, so they put their own

feelings aside. But Bowie never liked any of them either, so there was no love lost. I just had to learn quickly to carefully juggle each relationship.

“He’s going to fight you.”

“I know.” And he will every step of the way, and I’m sure he’s going to put me through the wringer when it comes to visitation and everything else to do with Kingston. He will probably make it difficult for me to leave as well. “That’s why I need to make sure all my ducks are in a row before I confront him. Otherwise, I’ll be fighting an uphill battle.”

“I would offer for you to stay with Eli and me, but our place is—”

“I know,” I cut her off. The studio she and her boyfriend live in is small, and there is no way two extra people could stay there.

“But I can give you a loan if you want, you know, to help you get into a place of your own.”

Tears fill my eyes for the first time today, and I drag in a shaky breath. “Thank you.”

“You know I’m here for whatever you need.”

“I know.” I hug her back after she gets up and wraps her arms around me.

“You’ll get through this, M. You’re the strongest person I know,” she whispers, and my eyes slide closed.

I am strong, but sometimes it sucks having to be so strong.

Especially when it’s because you don’t have any other choice.

CHAPTER THREE

miranda

Standing in my bathroom, I put the final touch on my makeup while Kingston sits on the counter with his iPad, watching a video about farm animals. It's been seven days since I found out Bowie is having an affair, and since then, I've gotten my job back at the salon, found a place to rent thanks to a woman named April, who happens to be the client Emma told me about. And yesterday, I got Kingston put on the waiting list at a couple of daycares, since I will be working during the day and can't take him with me.

I've also avoided almost all contact with my soon-to-be ex-husband, which has been easier than it should've been. Then again, with him staying out late almost every night and claiming exhaustion when he is home, *he's* the one who's made it easy for me.

But try as I might, I couldn't avoid him this evening, even though the last thing in the world I want to do is get dressed up to go with him.

Tonight, is the annual Policemen's Ball, something I used to look forward to attending with him, because it gave me an excuse to buy a pretty new dress and get dolled up—two things I love doing. However, this year is obviously different, so I didn't buy something new, even though I said I was going to. Instead, I put the three hundred dollars Bowie gave me in my new bank account and borrowed a dress from a friend of mine, Whinny, who is an avid pageant participant.

"You wook pretty, Mama," Kingston says, and I look over at my sweet boy.

"Thank you, lovie." I lean over and kiss his forehead before focusing back

on my reflection in the mirror.

With my long blonde hair down in waves and my makeup darker than I would normally wear it, because Bowie hates when I wear makeup, I add a red lip as an extra “screw you,” then step back and check myself out.

I wasn’t sure about the emerald-green dress Whinny insisted I wear tonight, since my body has changed so much since having Kingston, but the silky fabric skims over my breasts that are now larger, my wider hips, and just brushes the floor, since I don’t have my heels on yet. The material is unforgiving, but I have to admit—it looks good on me.

“Mommy is going to get her shoes.” I lift Kingston off the counter and hold him on my hip as I step into the closet. “Then we’ll go downstairs. Aunt Emma should be here soon.”

“I want to stay wif you.”

“I know, love, but Mommy has to go out with Daddy. And remember, you love hanging out with Aunt Emma.” I place him on his feet so I can reach up to one of the higher shelves where my heels are. “Tomorrow, you and I will go to the park, okay?” I ask, hoping to distract him.

“I’ll get them.” Bowie’s body presses against my back, and my skin crawls as he reaches above me for the heels I was trying to get.

“Thanks.” I step away from him as he hands them to me, holding the shoes against my chest. When I turn to face him, his eyes roam over me as mine do the same to him.

The first time we met, he came into the salon for a haircut in his uniform, and I was not even a little impressed. I mean, sure, he was and still is a good-looking man, with his olive skin, dark hair, and brown eyes. But his obvious arrogance was a huge red flag, so I turned him down when he asked me out. I expected that to be the last time I saw him, but he surprised me by showing up almost daily to visit me at work, and eventually he wore me down, and I agreed to a date.

It was then that I found out how funny, charming, and attentive he could be. And not even four months later, I was in love and planning our wedding. Now looking at him, I feel nothing. That love I once had for him is gone and has been

replaced with disappointment. If he would have been honest with me and told me that he no longer loved me and that he wanted something else, it would have hurt, but I would have respected him for being truthful. Now? Now, I don't even have that.

"Don't you think the red lipstick is too much?" he asks, dragging me from my thoughts, and I force a smile as I walk past him.

"Nope."

"Nope," Kingston repeats, following right behind me, and I sit on the edge of the bed. After putting on the strappy gold heels, I stand and walk back into the closet to grab my clutch just as the doorbell goes off. "Can you take Kingston with you and get that? It's Emma," I call out.

"Yeah," I hear him agree.

After putting the things I'll need into my beaded clutch, I grab my dress coat and carefully manage the stairs in my heels, then head into the kitchen, where I can hear Emma laughing with Kingston.

"Are you ready?" Bowie asks as soon as I walk around the corner—without even an appreciative glance in my direction.

"Yep." I look from him to Emma. "Thank you."

"Any time." She places Kingston on his feet, then comes over to me and wraps me in a hug. "Are you okay?" she whispers, and I nod. "Just so you know, if I didn't love dick so much, I'd totally bang you."

"Shut up." I laugh, and she lets me go with a wide smile on her face.

"Just saying."

"What?" Bowie asks, looking between us with a frown.

"Nothing," we say at the same time, and I squat down, holding my arms open for Kingston, and he runs toward me, almost knocking me over. "Be good for Aunt Emma, and Mommy will be home soon."

"Pwomise?"

"Promise." I kiss his cheek, then wipe away the red stain my lipstick left behind. "I love you."

"Wov you." He gives my neck one last squeeze, then hugs his dad before Emma calls for him to join her in the living room, where she's pulling out a

game.

Walking ahead of Bowie out to the garage, I get into the front seat of his truck and click my belt into place as he gets in behind the wheel.

We don't talk the entire drive downtown, and he doesn't make a move to touch me, which makes me wonder if he won't be relieved when I tell him that I know about Naomie.

Maybe he's in love with her.

Maybe they are in love with each other.

That thought should hurt, but it doesn't. I'm numb, completely void of any emotion when it comes to him.

When we get to the hotel the event is being held at, he valets the car at the front, then the two of us walk in side by side. He doesn't touch me until people look in our direction when we enter the ballroom, and that's when he places his hand on my lower back.

"Do you want a drink?" he asks, and I step away from him and look around.

"Yeah, I'm just going to find out where we're sitting. I'll meet you at the bar." I turn away before he can reply, and I walk over to a long table covered with folded note cards that have names printed on them in gold. Just when I find Bowie's card and mine and pick them up, the name Tucker Beckett catches my attention.

It can't be. Can it?

Scanning the cards around Tucker's, my heart starts to pound when I see **Naomie Beckett** on the card under his.

Does she work with Bowie, or does Tucker? Either way, I didn't plan for this. I didn't prepare myself for seeing the woman Bowie is sleeping with and her husband she's cheating on.

"Pardon," a deep voice says, reaching in front of me, and when masculine fingers pinch the top of the card I was just looking at seconds ago, in slow motion, my eyes move from the hand now holding Tucker's card, up the sleeve of a black suit jacket, to a wide chest and then a gorgeous face.

With my heart racing and my palms suddenly sweaty, I take in a gulp of air as a set of haunted crystal-clear blue eyes surrounded by thick lashes meet mine.

I'm going to pass out.

"Are you all right?" he asks, wrapping his fingers around my upper arm when my heel gets caught on the bottom of my dress as I try to take a step back and away from him.

"Yes, sorry." I right myself, then feel the blood drain from my face when a woman wearing a red dress with dark hair walks toward us while calling his name. The same woman I saw in the photo on Bowie's computer. "I'm so sorry." I stumble, backing up. "So, so sorry," I whisper, and his brows drag together.

Spinning in my heels, I rush out of the ballroom and scan for somewhere to pull myself together, thankfully finding a small alcove a little ways down the carpeted hall. With my hands shaking, I pull out my phone and dial Emma's number. She's the only one who knows what's going on, the only one I can talk to right now.

"Hey, are you coming home already?"

"She's here."

"What?"

"She and her husband are here." I shake my head. "I saw his name… and then hers… and they're both here," I ramble.

"Breathe, M. I don't understand." She sounds confused, and I squeeze my eyes closed.

"Naomie and Tucker." I swallow. "Bowie had to know they would be here, right? He had to know that. I mean, it's obvious now that he works with one of them. Or maybe he works with both of them. I don't know."

"M, you need to come home right now!" she shouts, sounding panicked.

"I can't. You know I can't." I drop my eyes to my feet. "If I just take off, he'll know something is up." I spin around when I swear I feel someone watching me, and my phone slips from my grasp when I see Tucker standing just feet away.

Oh God

He steps toward me, and I back away from him, bumping into the wall behind me as he bends to pick my phone up off the ground between us.

"End the call," he orders, holding my phone out toward me, and my pulse

skitters.

With shaking hands, I put it to my ear. “Emma, I have to go.”

“Who is that? What’s going on?”

“Tucker’s here.”

“Oh, Jesus, M. I have to tell you something.”

“End the call,” Tucker repeats.

“I called him!” Emma shouts, and my heart drops into my stomach. “I… I tracked him down and told him about the affair, pretending I was you. I asked him for some time. I didn’t want him to find out some other way and for your plan to go to shit if he did.”

“Oh God,” I whisper, watching Tucker’s expression turn cold.

“I’m so sorry, M. I had no idea he would be there tonight.”

“I’ll call you back,” I whisper, but I don’t hang up the call. Instead, I take it away from my ear and hold it at my side. Just in case the anger I see in his gaze leaks out on me.

“You’re Bowie’s wife?” he asks, and all I can do is nod stupidly as I look into his eyes. I can’t believe this is happening. “What the fuck?”

“I… I didn’t call you. I mean, I should have called and told you, but… I just….” I rub my lips together when his stubble-covered jaw twitches. “When I found out, I… I wasn’t thinking about you or anyone but me and my son.” I wrap my arms around myself, and my chin wobbles as I fight back the urge to cry. God, I do not want to cry. Not right now. “I’m working on getting things sorted so that when I confront him, my son and I will be okay.”

“Yeah, whoever the fuck it was who called me said all that shit when they were pretending to be you.” He rips his fingers through his dark-blonde hair, and his gaze goes to the wall above my head.

“I’m sorry Emma did that,” I whisper, and his eyes swing back to mine.

“You’d rather me not know?”

“Of course not.” Guilt twists around my insides, and his hands ball into fists at his sides as he tracks the single tear I feel slide down my cheek.

“Get your shit sorted, so I can deal with my shit,” he bites out, then without another word, he turns around and storms off.

I watch him disappear around the corner, with my heart lodged in my throat and my mind spinning from what just happened.

“M!” Emma calls from the phone still in my grasp, and I lift it to my ear.

“I’m here.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I wipe the wetness off my cheeks and step back out into the hall, looking both ways for the restroom.

“I’m so sorry. I … God, I should have told you that I called him.”

“You should have.” I head for the bathroom and stop just outside the door. “I’ll text you in a bit.”

“Are you mad?”

“So mad,” I whisper.

“Okay, but remember I love you.”

“I know, and I love you too.” And I do, but that doesn’t change the fact that I want to strangle her right now. She overstepped, and worse, she didn’t give me a heads-up, which in this situation is bad—really, really bad.

After a quick goodbye, I tuck my phone back into my clutch, then open the door to the restroom and walk past the few women in line to check my refection in the mirror above the sinks. Thankfully, my mascara is still in place, so I just touch up my lipstick, then leave the restroom.

My nerves are a mess when I walk back into the dimly lit ballroom and glance through the people mingling in small groups, checking for Bowie, because I’m not ready to deal with him yet. Not when I feel so raw and on edge, like I might come out of my skin. Just as I take out my card and start searching for my table, I see Nova—Bowie’s chief’s wife—talking to a group of women. When she spots me, a smile lights up her pretty face, and she rushes in my direction.

“Oh my God, girl, look at you!” She grabs my hands, holding them out away from my body. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.” I force a smile, then shake my head as I take in her dress that only she could pull off. The short rose-gold sequined number looks amazing on her, especially up against her gorgeous brown skin. Then again, I have never

seen her look like anything other than the model she used to be. “You look stunning.”

“I know, right?” She shimmies with her arms in the air. “When I saw this dress over the summer, I bought it on the spot, knowing it would be perfect for tonight.”

“It really is.” I look around for her husband, who is normally within arm’s reach of her. “Where’s Devon?”

“Sitting at the table with a drink. He’s in a mood tonight.” She rolls her eyes. “So how have you been? How’s my baby-king?”

“Good, growing up way too fast and driving me insane most days.”

“Boys are like that.” She laughs. “Now, you and Bowie need to have a girl to even things out.”

“That’s never happening,” I say without thinking, and her eyes narrow with suspicion.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Miranda Owens.”

“Don’t use your mom voice on me.” I glance around. “I can’t talk about it here.”

“Are you and Kingston okay?” she whispers, and my face softens.

“Yes,” I assure her, and she reaches for my hand.

“You know if you need anything, I’m just a phone call away.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, knowing that’s not an empty offer. When Bowie and I got together, she took me under her wing. I was so thankful for her, especially during the early days when dating a police officer scared the crap out of me. Then once again, right after I had Kingston, when I had no idea what I was doing and none of my friends had kids.

“I’m going to head to our table,” says a woman I don’t recognize, who approaches Nova when the music cuts off and they announce dinner is going to be served.

“I’m coming,” Nova tells her, then her eyes come back to me. “We’ll have a drink after dinner and catch up.”

“I’d like that.” I squeeze her hand, then watch her walk off.

I look down at the card in my hand, then glance through the centerpieces in the middle of each table, looking for the number that matches ours. My heart tumbles into my stomach when my eyes land on Tucker and Naomie, who are seated at the table directly next to the one Bowie and I have been assigned to.

This can’t be happening.

“I’ve been looking for you. What table are we at?” Bowie’s statement makes me jump, and my hands shake as I show him the card.

“Thirty-five.”

“Come on,” he urges me forward, placing his hand on my lower back, and my muscles tighten painfully around my bones as we make our way across the room.

I try… *really* try… not to look Naomie’s way when we get closer to our table, but my eyes are drawn to her anyway. She’s gorgeous—stunning, actually—and the complete opposite of me in every way, with her dark hair, sun-kissed skin, and model-thin frame. The kind of woman I know Bowie dated before me.

When her gaze catches mine and her lips press into a thin line like she’s upset to see me here with my husband, I drop my eyes to my feet and focus on breathing.

As soon as Bowie and I reach our table, he introduces me to the people we’re sitting with as his wife, and I smile appropriately, feeling like a total fraud. Maybe I’m going about this all wrong. Maybe I need to just rip off this Band-Aid and get it all over with.

Picking up my water, I glance over at Tucker and find him with his expression blank. I can only imagine what he’s thinking, what he’s feeling right now. And I despise that, because of me, he’s been forced to pretend things are normal when they most definitely are not.

CHAPTER FOUR

tucker

When I met my wife, I was stunned by her beauty, impressed by how intelligent she is, and naive enough to believe she was real.

Four years later, the blinders are off.

Picking up my glass of scotch, I take a drink and let the burn from the amber liquid wash away some of the anger sitting in my gut.

Anger that was pure rage a few days ago when I got a call from a woman telling me that my wife was sleeping with her husband.

I was not surprised when she told me about the affair. Naomie's and my relationship has been on the rocks for a couple of years now. And shit only got worse when she came home months back and admitted to me that she went to my brother Clay for comfort after miscarrying our child and that she tried to kiss him. I was angry and stupidly placed the blame on him instead of directing it toward her. I let my own grief convince me it was his fault, that she was vulnerable, and he took advantage of her in that moment.

I'm not even hurt by her betrayal. Again, our marriage has been coming to an end, and she's known I've had one foot out the door for months.

No, I'm pissed that she would fuck a man who has a wife and kid, because without a doubt, she knew that shit going in. She'd want to know who her competition was and exactly what she was up against when it came to getting what she wanted. Whatever that might be. She's not a stupid woman; every move with her is calculated.

Shit, there are times I wonder if she played me from the start, that our chance

meeting wasn’t by chance at all, instead a set-up she engineered. A long game that didn’t quite go as planned, since my brother, Clay, who she might’ve actually been after, didn’t take the bait of jealousy she was dangling in front of him.

My cell vibrating drags me from my thoughts, and I pull it out of my pocket, checking the screen. Finding a text from one of my other brothers, Miles, telling me to call him, I tuck my phone away and slide my chair back away from the table.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” Naomie asks, and I drop my eyes to her hand, biting back the curl of my lip when she grabs onto my wrist.

“I gotta make a call.”

“Are you going to at least come back and dance with me?” She pouts.

“I’m sure you’ll find someone else to dance with.” I leave the table after a couple of chin-lifts to the men sitting with their women and head out of the ballroom. When I get outside, I dial Miles and put my phone to my ear.

“Sorry to pull you away from tonight, but I just got a call from a detective out in Madison County, and the body of a teenage girl just showed up in his jurisdiction.”

Fuck.

“Have they been able to ID her?”

“Not yet, but her description matches Kristen Stable,” he says quietly, and my hand balls into a fist.

Kristen, the seventeen-year-old girl with a history of running away, was reported missing by her mom two weeks ago. With her history, the cops who took the report didn’t take her mom seriously when she told the officers that this time was different. When the case landed on my desk, I knew she was right. Like most kids today, Kristen had an obsession with her phone and a couple of the apps on it. She was constantly posting videos on a regular cycle throughout the day. The day she disappeared, all activity stopped, and her phone was turned off.

“Cause of death?”

“Unknown. She was found in the woods, and you know how that goes.”

“Yeah.” My jaw clenches. “Are you headed out there?”

“Leaving the city now.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I tell him.

“I got this. I’ll fill you in tomorrow.”

“I’ll meet you there.” I hang up before he can repeat his earlier statement, then tuck my phone away and head back inside to let Naomie know I’m taking off as a courtesy. Something I’d normally do but have no desire to do now.

With dinner now over, the dance floor is packed, and music is filling the huge room. I scan the space for Naomie, but my eyes catch on Bowie’s wife sitting alone at her table with her eyes across the room. Even with her expression void of emotion, I can tell in one glance that she’s doing her best to keep herself together. Following her gaze, I find Naomie and Bowie huddled closer together than a man and a woman who are married to other people should be.

When I look back to where Bowie’s wife was, she’s no longer at the table, but I catch a glimpse of her right before she disappears out a set of glass doors on the left side of the room.

I know I shouldn’t follow.

I know I should just let her be.

But my feet carry me in her direction anyway. Exactly like they did earlier this evening before I even knew who she was.

When I push through the door she walked through, I realize they lead out to a covered patio with loungers and chairs set up around gas fireplaces. I scan through the dim light and find her leaning into a glass banister that overlooks some of the city. She looks like a still shot from an old movie with her curvy body encased in green silk, her full red lips, and her smokey gaze staring off into nothing as her long hair falls down her back in waves of gold. Taking my cigarette pack out of my pocket, I pull one out and light it as I walk toward her.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” she murmurs, turning her head my way, and I let out a puff of smoke.

“I know.” I lean into the banister next to her.

“They aren’t even hiding it,” she whispers, breaking the silence after a long moment.

“I caught that too.”

“Maybe I should just tell him I know. You know, just get it over with.”

“What will happen if you do that?”

“I don’t know.” She rubs her lips together. “I thought he’d panic and make it hard for me to leave, but now, I think…” She shakes her head. “I think he’ll be relieved that it’s all out in the open.”

“You’ve already gotten both of us on this ride, babe. I think you need to follow your original gut instinct and handle your shit before you confront him.”

“Miranda.”

“Pardon?”

“My name is Miranda, not babe.”

“Right.” I smile.

Jesus, I should not be smiling right now. Not with her.

“Maybe you’re right.” She sighs. “I just…. God… I just want to rip his stupid face off and tell him what a dick I think he is.”

“You’ll get your chance to do that.”

“True.” Her eyes meet mine, and her voice softens into a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you apologizing for your husband fucking my wife?”

“No.” She lets out a hollow laugh. “I’m sorry that you can’t confront her or… you know, do whatever you’re going to do.”

“I’ve got shit I need to sort out too. The extra time might help me out in the long run.”

“Do you guys have kids?”

“No.” Relief and devastation twist around my insides. That dream crashed and burned after the miscarriage, after I knew my marriage was over but before I was willing to actually toss in the towel.

“Thank God.” She shivers, and I toss my half-smoked cigarette into a standing ashtray a few feet away.

“You should go inside. It’s cold out here.”

“You’re probably right.” She glides away from the banister and heads toward the doors. Stopping before she reaches it, she looks at me over her shoulder. “Good luck, Tucker. I hope everything works out for you.”

“Yeah, you too, babe.” I watch her disappear inside, and I take a couple of beats before I follow her in. When I don’t see Naomie or Bowie but spot Miranda talking to a woman near the bar, I take off for valet and wait for them to get my SUV, putting this evening out of my head so I can focus on work—the one steady thing in my life.

CHAPTER FIVE

tucker

Standing on Kristen's mother's front porch the next morning, with the sun just beginning to touch the sky, I watch the color drain from Barbara Stable's face when she answers the door. I don't know if it's mother's intuition or a sixth sense, but she knows why we're here before Miles or I have even said a word.

"Mrs. Stable," I greet, dipping my chin. "Do you mind if we come in to talk to you for a few minutes?"

Without a word, she holds open the door for us to step inside, and her thin frame that has only gotten frailer since the first time I met her shakes as she leads us to her eat-in kitchen.

"Would either of you like some coffee?" She looks around like she just realized where she's standing.

"No thank you, ma'am." Miles pulls out a chair for her and waits for her to take a seat. When he sits down across from her and takes her hands, whatever strength she had been holding onto to keep the tears at bay washes away in an instant.

"Please don't tell me she's gone." The whispered plea is barely audible through the stark pain in her voice.

"We're sorry," I say quietly, hating that fucking word. The five letters will never encompass the regret, sadness, or the anger I feel for her loss. How could they? But then, what are you supposed to say to someone who is hurting? No words will ever be enough to soothe away the anguish, not in this kind of situation. Not when a mother has lost her seventeen-year-old daughter to a

monster who should not exist.

“How?” She looks between us, and I listen to Miles explain some of what we found out this morning. Each detail opens wounds that will never truly heal, not for Barbara, and it’s times like this that I hate my job. It’s times like this that I wish I didn’t have the need to right a wrong so someone else didn’t have to feel the same fucking pain I’ve felt.

A useless endeavor on my part.

There is always another victim, always another family left behind, feeling helpless after the tragic loss of someone they love.

Last night, when I made it out to Madison, the coroner was already on site. And before the sun was even up this morning, Miles and I joined him while he completed the autopsy on the girl found in the woods. He confirmed what we already knew.

The girl was Kristen Stable. What we didn’t know was how she died, but by the time we left his office this morning, we had that information too. She had been brutalized in ways no woman ever should, then strangled with what was most likely a belt. Her death was not painless or quick. She suffered as she fought for her life, but her strength in her final moments gives me hope that we will be able to find the man who did that to her.

She went down taking pieces of her attacker with her—under her nails, between her legs, and on her clothing. The man who killed her was not a professional. He left evidence behind, mostly likely assuming that if someone ever came across her body, time and the natural cycle of decomposition would have cleaned up the scene for him.

He had no clue that the piece of land he left Kristen on was owned by a family with three young boys who used every inch of it as their playground. When one of them found Kristen’s body yesterday afternoon, he ran home and told his older brother, who rode out on his four-wheeler to check if the kid was telling the truth. And after confirming that his brother wasn’t lying, he called 911.

Thankfully, the sheriff who worked in Chicago before moving to Tennessee had the smarts to check missing person reports not just for his county but the

surrounding ones. When he saw Kristen's case still open and her photo, he called Miles.

"I know you're going to want to take some time to call friends and family this morning, but I'd like you to think about who Kristen was spending time with and if there is anyone you can think of who had a special interest in her," Miles says, dragging me from my thoughts, and I focus on Barbara's tear-stained face.

"You think it was someone she knew?" She shakes her head, then wraps her arms around her middle. "Everyone loved her. No one she knows would have hurt her like that."

Fuck, I wish that were true, but nine times out of ten, that isn't the case.

"We know it's difficult," I put in quietly, "thinking someone she trusted could betray her. But is there anyone … anyone you didn't already tell us about? A teacher, the parent of a friend, anyone she told you made her feel weird?"

"No," she denies without thinking about the question, because it's something no one wants to dwell on. It's one thing to imagine a monster hiding under your bed at night. It's another to know monsters are real and that they don't hide in the dark but live and breathe like the rest of us and are normally someone you might consider a friend.

"All right," Miles says gently, knowing like I do that we won't get anything else from her today, not when she's so raw. "Do you want us to wait with you until a friend can get here?"

"No," she whispers, then her eyes lock on Miles before she moves her gaze to mine. "You'll find him." She swallows, looking between us. "Promise me you'll find the person who hurt her."

"We're going to do everything we can to get justice for Kristen," Miles tells her, and my hands ball into fists. He and I learned years ago that you never make a promise you can't keep, not to a family and not to yourself. That shit will eat away at you and make it impossible to live or move on.

Not that moving on is possible anyway. Each unsolved case I have sitting on my desk travels with me every single day, takes up space in my head, and drives me to madness, like a puzzle with one single piece missing.

After promising her we'll be in touch, we leave her in her small kitchen as

she makes her first phone call and head outside.

Swinging up into the passenger seat of Miles's truck, I scrub my hands down my face, exhausted, not just physically but mentally.

"You good?" Miles asks, and I glance over at him.

"Peachy. You?"

"You're full of shit. What's going on with the Naomie situation?" he asks, knowing about the affair, since he was with me when I got the call a few days ago.

"I met Bowie's wife last night."

"Shit, I didn't even think about her being there."

"She had no clue I knew about the affair."

"Pardon?" He slows to a stop at a red light and turns to look at me. "She's the one who told you."

"Apparently, her friend was the one who called me, and she had no idea."

"Oh fuck."

"She ran off like she saw a ghost when she saw Naomie and me last night. She had no idea I'd be there. I don't think she knew that Bowie works with me."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Yeah." I leave it at that. There's no way I'm telling him that I tracked her down not once but twice last night. Not when I don't even understand the reason I did that.

"Have you called that lawyer Dayton told you about?" he asks, referring to our brother, Dayton, who's a lawyer out in Colorado but has connections all over the US.

"She's getting the paperwork together. And with the evidence I was able to get on Naomie, she claims I should be good when it comes to paying alimony."

"Thank fuck."

"You can say that again," I mutter. "Because there is no fucking way I would have given her a penny, even if that meant going against some judge's orders."

He grunts his agreement without another word. Then again, there is nothing to say. He knows I've paid more than my fair share over the years. I've taken care of her during our marriage, given her everything she wanted and more than

she needed. And after four years, I’ve got nothing to show for the time I wasted trying to make shit work between us.

CHAPTER SIX

miranda

Hearing footsteps, I take my eyes off Kingston, who's in the living room, dancing along with a video playing on TV, and I watch Bowie hold up a stack of papers as he walks toward where I've been sitting at the island in the kitchen.

"What the fuck is this?" he asks, and my heart drops into my stomach when I realize he found the lease for the apartment I've rented and the documents I got from the lawyer a week ago.

How did he find them?

I know I hid them in the bottom of my pajama drawer—somewhere he never goes.

"Hello?" He slams the papers on the island, and I jump, causing the coffee in my hand to slosh over the side of the cup.

"I—"

"You want a divorce?" he cuts me off, and I stare at him as I try to get my thoughts in order. I had a whole plan for the way this conversation was going to go. I've gone over everything I'd say countless times in my head, but it's not a conversation I planned on having for at least a few more days. And I wasn't planning on Kingston being here when it did take place. "Are you going to answer me?" He raises his voice, and my spine stiffens.

"Lower your voice," I hiss, glancing over at Kingston to make sure he's still distracted.

"Don't tell me to lower my voice. What the fuck is this?" He picks up the papers and waves them in front of my face.

“I know,” I say quietly, feeling all the anger I’ve kept bottled begin to bubble to the surface.

“Know what?”

“About Naomie,” I whisper, and his head jerks back.

Surprise? Shock? I don’t know what it is, but it’s obvious he thought he was hiding his affair well.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t lie. I’ve known about her for more than two weeks, Bowie, and I know you’ve been sleeping with her for a whole lot longer than that.”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“Oh my God,” I breathe, staring up at him. “You think I’m an idiot.”

“Right now, yeah.”

“Okay.” I set down my coffee, slide off my stool at the island, walk to where his laptop is on the kitchen table, and grab it.

“What are you doing?”

“Hold on.” I open the screen, click on his Messages app at the bottom, then I click on the name Nick, because he was smart enough to know that if I saw a text from some random dude named Nick pop up on his phone, I wouldn’t think anything of it. “Here you go.” I hand him his computer, and his face pales when he realizes what he’s looking at.

God, he really had no idea those messages were on there.

“This isn’t—”

“Do *not*… say it’s not what I think it is.”

“Miranda…” He sets the computer down. “I—”

“I don’t want this to be ugly,” I cut him off, my heart thundering against my ribcage. “I don’t want to fight with you. I just want us to figure out how to raise our son together.”

“She means nothing. It meant nothing.” He walks toward me, and I hold up my hands.

“I don’t care.” I shake my head. “I told you when we got together that I would rather you leave me than cheat on me, and I meant that.”

“I love you,” he whispers, clenching his fists at his sides.

“You don’t,” I whisper back. “Not the way you should.”

“You’ve been so fucking distant, Miranda. When is the last time we had sex? When is the last time we spent time together?”

My throat burns. “God, it would be so easy to take the blame, to say you’re right, that I have been distant, that our sex life is non-existent because I’m flipping tired. To tell you that when I do have a minute to myself, the last thing I want is to spend time with you or anyone else.” My eyes start to water. “All of that is true, but as my husband, you could have helped me out more, given me a break when you were home so that I didn’t always feel so overwhelmed.” I drag in a shaky breath. “But I messed up. I did too much without asking anything of you. I put you first, because I knew you were working to take care of our family, and I appreciated that sacrifice. But you never realized I was making sacrifices too.”

“Sweetheart—”

“Don’t.” I use the sleeve of my sweater to wipe the tears off my cheeks. “You cheating is not my fault, Bowie, and I refuse to take the blame for it.”

“You’re right.” He swallows hard. “You are absolutely right. I fucked up.” I nod, because he did, and there is nothing else to say. “But I love you and our family. I want to make this work.”

“I don’t have it in me to give you that.” I lift my shoulders. “I’m sorry, but I don’t, and I won’t get over this. I won’t be able to move on. I’ll always resent you, and that is just not fair to you, me, nor Kingston.”

“So that’s it? We’re just done because you’re too fucking scared to give me a second chance?”

“You saw her last night. You didn’t get home until almost one. You didn’t have any regrets or second thoughts about what you were doing until right now. Until you knew that I know about her.”

“I love you!” he shouts, and I look over at Kingston, who is now looking at the two of us.

“I haven’t furnished the place I rented, so I’ll need a few days to get that sorted out,” I say calmly, sending Kingston a reassuring smile before I focus

back on his dad. “And I know you and I will have a lot of stuff to figure out, but I don’t think right now is the time to try to do that.”

“You’re not taking my kid from me.”

“Of course I’m not. You’re his dad. He loves you. And us not being together isn’t going to change that.”

“This can’t be fucking happening. You can’t just decide you’re moving out, that you’re leaving me.”

“I know this is going to be hard for a while, but I think you’ll realize it’s for the best.”

“You’re just giving up. That’s it? You’re just moving out and giving up without even trying?”

“I got Kingston into a daycare close to the salon. The cost is a little steep, but I figured that between the two of us, we can pull it off.” I keep on track, because there is no use in rehashing the same thing over and over again.

“Did you ever even think to ask me about any of this?” The question sends my anger boiling over.

“Did you ever think about me?” I shoot back, and his jaw clenches.

“I know you’re working this evening. Maybe you can find a couch to crash on for a couple of days until I can get my place set up and move out.”

“This is my fucking house. I’m not staying somewhere else.”

“Okay,” I agree, because there is no point in arguing with him, not when he’s angry.

“Ice,” he whispers after a moment, and my chest gets tight. I know he’s saying I’m cold as ice, that I have no feelings. It’s something he’d say to me on occasion over the years when I didn’t give him the reaction he wanted. I hated it then, and I hate it even more now. I start to move around him, but he grabs onto my arm, stopping me. “You can’t leave me.”

“Don’t you see?” I look into his eyes, eyes that used to be my favorite until he shared them with our son, who then took that top spot. “I already have.”

“Daddy!” Kingston calls, and Bowie looks over at him, his chest expanding on a deep breath before he lets me go.

“What’s up, bud?” He walks over to Kingston, and my chest aches as he

picks him up and kisses his cheek.

I might have mentally prepared myself to leave Bowie when I found out about Naomie, but I never could have prepared myself for this. I know he loves our son, and I know that even if I'm not going to keep them away from each other, their relationship is going to change, and I hate that.

When Bowie looks at me with tears in his eyes, I understand for the first time in my life why my mom had such a hard time leaving my dad all those times she found out he was cheating. Seeing his regret and pain almost makes me doubt my decision to walk away.

But I know two things. The first, things will never be the same. I know I don't have it in me to get over his betrayal. And second, if I stayed, the resentment would eat away at me a little each day until there was nothing left of me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

miranda

When the doorbell goes off, I open my eyes and look down at Kingston, who's tucked in the crook of my belly still asleep, and I kiss the back of his head. I know I'm setting myself up for disaster, sleeping with him these last couple of weeks, and it's going to be difficult to break the habit, but that's a bridge we'll cross when we get into our new place. After carefully getting up, I tuck the blanket around his shoulders, then pad across the carpet, grabbing his baby monitor and my robe on the way out the door.

Glancing into the master when I walk past, I find everything as I left it last night—the bed made, boxes stacked up along the wall, and my suitcases open and overflowing with clothes on the ground at the foot of the bed. Bowie didn't say a word to me except goodbye when he was leaving for work yesterday, and last night after his shift, he obviously didn't come home.

I don't know if he went to Naomie, or if he decided to crash on a friend's couch. He didn't tell me his plan, and I didn't send him a text to ask. I also didn't check his laptop for new messages between Naomie and him. That's a can of worms I refuse to open. Things are already messy enough as they are.

When I get downstairs, I drag in a breath when I recognize the outline of Bowie's mom, Patty, through the smoked glass on the side of the front door. He must have called her last night, and since she lives in Kentucky, not far but also not close, I'm sure she thought her presence was needed here and decided to make the three-hour drive. Not a surprise. When I met her, I fell in love with her instantly. She's one of the kindest women I know, and she loves her kids beyond

reason, as any mother should. She's also a fixer.

Only this can't be fixed. So her trip here is in vein if that's her plan.

Tying my robe around my waist, I open the door and watch her force an uncomfortable smile. "Hey, honey."

"Hey, Patty." I give her a one-armed hug when she embraces me, then step back and hold open the door as she grabs the handle to her suitcase. Yep, Bowie called her. "Bowie's not here."

"I know." She takes off the thin jacket she's wearing, hanging it over the banister. "He told me that he wouldn't be home until later this morning." She looks around. "Is Kingston still sleeping?"

"He is," I say over my shoulder as I walk to the kitchen. "I'm sure he'll be up soon. Do you want some coffee?"

"Yes, thank you." She follows behind me, and I catch her eying the boxes I started to pack last night as she steps into the kitchen.

"Bowie told me what happened." I glance her way to let her know I heard her. "He feels horrible." She shifts on her feet. "I understand why you want to leave him. As a mom and a woman, I get it, Miranda, but—"

"Please don't," I cut her off, not harshly but firmly, and she snaps her mouth shut. "If you came here because you think you can convince me to give him a second chance, Patty, I'm letting you know now that you're wasting your time. I love you. I appreciate that you love your son. But what he did is not something I'll just be able to get over and move on from. Like I told Bowie, I know things are going to be difficult for everyone for a while, but I hope with time we can all figure out how to do what's best for Kingston, since he's really the only person in this situation who matters."

"I knew you'd say that." She lets out a long breath. "I told him there is just no way you'll change your mind, and I sure wouldn't be the one to get you to do that. But it doesn't hurt to try, right?"

"Right." I agree softly.

"I … I hope you know I love you."

My chest gets tight, and darn if I don't hate Bowie a little more, because even though she's saying she loves me, I know things between us won't be the

same once I move out of this house and divorce her son. Eventually, Bowie will find someone else, and she will have a new daughter-in-law and possibly more grandkids. I'll be the ex-wife who is only talked about when Kingston can't be around for a holiday or a family event because it falls during my time with him.

"I know, and that feeling is mutual."

"Mommy!" Kingston's shout comes through the baby monitor on the counter and from upstairs, where I'm sure he's waiting at the baby gate.

"Do you want to go surprise him? He'll be excited to see you," I say, and she nods before leaving me in the kitchen to finish making coffee.

Hearing Kingston giggle, obviously happy to see his grandma, I smile, then pick up my cell when it starts to ring.

"Hey, what's up?" I answer when I see it's Emma calling. Thankfully, she and I were able to move past her calling Tucker after a long conversation about boundaries and overstepping.

"Well, I just scored you almost all the furniture you'll need for your place."

"What?" I whisper.

"My building is about to go through renovations, and they are selling everything, including all the furniture from the units that they use for short-term rentals. I got you a dining table, couch, chairs, a king-size bed frame, a couple of lamps, and some wall art. They didn't have a mattress, but I didn't think you'd want a secondhand one anyway."

"Emma, I can't afford all that," I tell her quietly. The hard truth is I'm going to be struggling for a little while with all my expenses until I can build my clientele list back up at the salon.

"This is on me, and seriously, I got it all for a steal. You'd be shocked by the price I paid."

"Emma." I sigh.

"Don't say my name like that. Just say thank you."

"Fine, thank you."

"You're welcome. When Eli gets off work, he and a friend of his are going to pick everything up and take it over to your new place."

"He doesn't have to do that. I'm sure I can—"

“It was his suggestion,” she interrupts. “And you’ve got enough to do.”

“Tell him thank you for me.”

“I will,” she says quietly, then asks, “Is Bowie home?”

“No, but Patty got here just a little bit ago.”

“Oh wow. Okay, how’s that going?”

“It’s good,” I assure her quickly when I hear footsteps on the stairs.

“Okay, good.”

“I’m gonna get off here. Kingston has his first day at daycare today, so I’m going to get him something to eat, then head out to drop him off.”

“Are you still taking the class tomorrow?” she asks, referring to a master cutting and color class the salon is putting on—a refresher I need before I start back next week. Even if I’ve been doing hair for a few friends, including Emma, I still feel out of practice.

“Yep, I’ll be there.”

“Awesome, let me know if you want me to come by tonight to help you pack some more. That way, you’ll be ready to move this weekend.”

“I’ll let you know.” I smile at Kingston when he runs into the kitchen ahead of Patty.

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you too.” I hang up and set my phone down.

“Hey, lovie.” I pick Kingston up, and he wraps his arms around my neck. “Are you so happy Grandma is here?”

“Yes.” He burrows his face into my neck, and I rub his back.

“Still sleepy?” I whisper against his ear.

“No.”

“Hungry?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s get you something to eat, then get you ready to go to school.” I carry him over to his booster seat at the table while Patty makes herself a cup of coffee. “Pancakes or oatmeal?” I smooth his wild hair back away from his face.

“Pancakes.” He yawns, and I grab his tablet and hand it to him before going to the pantry.

“He’s starting school today?” Patty asks when I get over to the stove.

“Yeah, next week, I start back at the salon, so I want him to get used to being there.”

“I could keep him. I’m planning on sticking around for a while.”

“That’s sweet, and I know he’d love that, but I really think it’s time to start getting him used to being around other kids, since he should start pre-k after this summer.”

“Already?”

“He’s going to be four at the beginning of August,” I remind her.

“Where did the time go?” she asks, then she turns to look out of the kitchen when the front door is opened, and knowing it’s Bowie, anxiety floods my system like a tidal wave. “Hey, honey,” she greets her son as he walks into the kitchen, and I busy myself with making pancakes for Kingston.

“Mom.” He kisses her cheek, then he goes to Kingston and kisses the top of his head. When his eyes meet mine, I really wish I could fast-forward through this part of our separation. The awkwardness is thick enough to cut with a knife, and I don’t think either of us knows how to be around the other at this point and time.

“You’re packing stuff up already?” he asks, looking at the boxes against the wall.

“Yes, Saturday, Emma and I are going to rent a truck and get things over to my new apartment.”

“I work Saturday and Sunday night.”

“Okay, I’ll make sure everything is downstairs. That way, we don’t disturb you.”

“I don’t care about that, Miranda. I’d like to know where my kid is going to be living part of the time.”

“I’ll give you the address so you can check it out, and Monday, you can come over after I pick Kingston up from daycare, unless you want to pick him up.” I take the pancakes off the pan and place them on a plate, then add some syrup before I cut them up.

“I’ll pick him up,” he says easily, and the tension that was held in my

muscles since he got home loosens a little.

Maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to get through this transition after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

miranda

I thought I knew what being tired was, but as I make my way up the walkway to the front door of my new apartment, I now know I was wrong.

I forgot what it was like to be on my feet all day doing hair for client after client, and I never experienced working full time while being a parent, so this week has been an exhausting adjustment.

The good news is Bowie has the night off and he doesn't work tomorrow, so he asked to keep Kingston so he and his mom can take him to the zoo in the morning, meaning I get a night to myself for the first time ever. And my plans involve nothing but a hot shower, a glass of wine, and my bed. Even the boxes I still have left to go through and unpack are not on my list of things to do this evening. Tomorrow, when I'm rested, I'll start that project.

When I get to the alcove where my apartment door is, I notice the door across the way is open, moving boxes in the hall, and voices coming from inside.

When Emma's client April found this place for me, the leasing agent showed her and I both apartments that were available, but I chose mine since it has a bigger second bedroom and a master bath. A luxury I could have done without, but since it was only twenty dollars more a month, I figured why not.

Taking out my key, too tired to even think about introducing myself to my new neighbors, I let myself into my place and lock the door behind myself. Kicking off my heels, I leave them where they land, then drop my purse on top of a stack of boxes and take off my coat. After hanging it in the hall closet, I pad to the living room that is open to the kitchen and flip on the light.

Our apartment may not be as big as the house we shared with Bowie, but we're settling in, making it our own. And thanks to Emma, I have furniture that I didn't think I'd have for a lot longer, and really nice furniture at that. I expected everything to be worn and obviously used, but it all still looks brand-new and great in the space. The couch is simple, with the added bonus of being a pullout bed. The dining table matches the couch, with the chairs having a similar beige color on the cushions, and the floral art she got is also beautiful in peach, pinks, and gold. Plus, the king-size bed frame she got for me is gorgeous, and I got a mattress for free from my boss Polly, who was upgrading to one of those fancy ones that constantly contours to your body while you sleep.

To top off all that goodness, Bowie has been cool about letting me take stuff we need from the house, including the TV from the living room that he loved. Really, he's been cool about everything, which has been a huge weight off my shoulders. I don't know if that's because he's still seeing Naomie and enjoying his time with her without the worry of me finding out. I'm not asking; I'm also trying not to think about it, because when I do think about Bowie and Naomie, I think about Tucker and wonder how he's doing and if he's okay.

I had Emma call to tell him that things between Bowie and me were done, so he could do whatever he needed to do with Naomie, but all he said to her was "okay" before he ended the call. A call I maybe should have made myself but didn't, because again, I don't want to think about him, and hearing his deep voice would definitely make me do that more than I already am.

Right now, I'm just focused on Kingston and glad there's no drama between Bowie and me. I mean, sure, we still have to meet with a lawyer to go over a custody agreement and sign the divorce papers, but the last week has given me faith that we'll be able to work things out like two adults who only care about their son's welfare.

Going to the fridge, I open it up and stare at the contents. Since it's just me, I don't need to cook a full meal like I normally do, so I grab a container of hummus and a bag of peeled carrots. Standing at the counter, I start to eat, and the quiet hits me like a ton of bricks. Until this moment, I didn't think about how it would be here without Kingston around, his laughter filling the air or his

shows playing way too loud in the background as he dances to the music. It's going to take time to get used to my new normal of sharing my time with him when it's been the two of us every day since he was born. Though I doubt time will make it any easier.

When I finish eating, I pour myself a glass of wine and take it with me to the bathroom, where I start the shower. Since I can, I take the extra time to scrub, buff, and shave, then get out and put on my robe.

Feeling refreshed and not as tired as I was when I got home, I take what's left of my wine into the living room and curl up on the couch with the remote. I don't have cable, but I do have a device that gives me a few channels and movies, so I put on a favorite of mine, *Runaway Bride*, then dial Patty's number so I can talk to Kingston before he has his bath and goes to bed.

"Hey," she greets on the second ring.

"Hey, Patty. Is Kingston around?"

"Yep," she says, and I hear him laughing in the background. "Kingston, Mommy's on the phone."

"Mommy!" I hear him shout, then the phone is jostled, and I can hear Patty telling him he has it upside down.

"You've got him now," Patty says, and I laugh.

"Hey, lovie."

"Hi, Mommy. Where are you?" he asks in his tiny voice, and my chest gets tight.

"I'm at our new house. Are you having a good time with Daddy and Grandma?"

"I miss you," he whispers, and darn if that tightness in my chest doesn't move to my throat.

"I miss you too, baby, but I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay," he agrees, sounding sad, and I start to regret calling him. I don't want him upset, and I hate that he doesn't understand what's happening, that his little mind can't comprehend why Mom and Dad are no longer living in the same house.

"Be good for Grandma and Daddy, okay?"

“Okay, wuv you.”

“I love you too,” I say, then I hear him giggle.

“Hey,” Bowie says, coming on the line.

“Hey, is he all right?”

“Yeah, he’s already back to dancing.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Are *you* all right?”

“This is just going to take some getting used to.”

“Yeah,” he agrees softly but doesn’t say more.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow afternoon.”

“All right, have a good evening.”

“You too.” I hang up, drag in a breath, then pick up my wine and take a sip, knowing one day this won’t be so hard.

But that day is not today, so right now, this just sucks.

CHAPTER NINE

tucker

Sitting at my desk, I go over the file that just landed in my inbox from the lab processing all the evidence for the Kristen Stable case. From the DNA evidence that was collected and ran through CODIS, we now know that whoever killed her had no prior violent crime arrest. If they had, their information would be in the database. Not a surprise, with how messy the scene was. Still, I was hopeful there would be something to go on.

I lean back in my chair and scrub my hands down my face.

"You good?" I pull my hands away and look over at Miles.

"The lab report came back for Kristen, and there were no matches in CODIS."

"Figures."

"Yeah." I crack my neck, then watch Miles stand. "Are you heading out?"

"I gotta pick up Winter," he says, referring to his daughter, my niece, not by blood but by fate.

Miles, Clay, Dayton, and I grew up in the same foster home. The family we lived with were good people, better than any of the other ones I lived with before them, meaning they didn't abuse us, they fed us, and they kept a roof over our heads. But in their family, we were still the outcasts, so over time, the four of us formed a bond that was stronger than blood, and that has never wavered. We fight like any family does and get pissed at each other from time to time, but at the end of the day, we have each other's backs.

"Where's Clay?" I ask, because normally when Miles is working, Clay picks

up Winter from school and keeps her until we're off unless her mom is in town.

"He had something to do with Willow," he says, and I lift my chin. Willow is Clay's fiancée; a woman I didn't think he should be with due to circumstances happening around the time they met and my own personal issues. I did and said some fucked-up things when he started seeing her, and it didn't help that I had the whole Naomie situation sitting on my shoulders.

Not the affair—it was before I even knew about that. It was after the miscarriage, when she went to him, and I made assumptions out of grief. I could have lost my brother because of my own stupidity. Thankfully, he's a better man than me. It took some time for us to get back on solid ground, but now, things are back to how they always had been, maybe even better. With Clay tied to Willow and the future they are building; I no longer have to worry about him doing something stupid and ending up dead.

"Do you want to roll with me?"

"No, I'm gonna head out soon. I want to go over and talk to Kristen's best friend again. Maybe she'll be more receptive if there aren't two of us there," I say, and he lifts his chin.

"Have you called Axel back?" he asks.

I watch him holster his weapon. "Not yet." I glance around to make sure no one is close enough to overhear. "You?"

"No." His jaw twitches.

"I'll call him and let you know what he says." He nods, then turns and walks off.

I drag in a breath. Miles and I work for the FBI and a little under a year ago, we were given the assignment to infiltrate the police department here after the FBI received information that there was corruption within the force. So far, we've found nothing to back up the claims that were made, but that doesn't mean anything. It takes time, lots of time, to find the closet with the skeletons hidden in it. That doesn't mean the people who Miles and I report to like waiting.

When my cell phone rings, I take the call, not recognizing the number.

"Beckett," I answer.

“You removed me from the bank account!” Naomie shouts in my ear, and I sigh as I roll my chair back and stand. I grab my keys along with the file off the top of my desk.

“I told you to speak to my lawyer if you have questions.”

“I don’t want to talk to that bitch; I want to talk to you. What the hell am I supposed to do, Tucker?”

My lawyer, Phoebe, isn’t a bitch. She’s just really fucking good at her job and gives no fucks when she’s protecting her clients.

“I’m at work, Naomie. I don’t have time for this.”

“You can’t do this. My lawyer said you can’t just cut me off. You can’t just leave me without anything. We’re still married.”

“My lawyer is turning in the paperwork to make the divorce official tomorrow. I left you in the house with the mortgage paid for the next three months; I didn’t kick you out. And you’ve still got your car that I paid for in full. Sell it, or… I don’t know… get a fucking job?” I suggest sarcastically.

“Don’t be a dick. I just got a job.” Her voice is strangled like she’s about to cry. “I won’t get paid for another two weeks.”

“Then I guess you’ll have some money in two weeks, unless you sell your car before then.”

“I hate you. I didn’t think it was possible to hate you, but I—”

I hang up before she can finish and shove my cell in my back pocket, then grab my gun from the locked drawer of my desk and holster it.

As I’m heading out of the building, I catch sight of Bowie walking in with his duffle bag slung over his shoulder. His eyes catch mine for a brief second, then he looks away.

A month ago, two days after receiving a call from Miranda’s friend letting me know that Miranda had left him, I handed over the divorce papers along with the information and photos the private detective collected to Naomie. When she realized what she was looking at, she instantly began to cry and apologize, making excuses for what she had done. That lasted for less than five minutes, when she found her fake tears weren’t working, she got pissed and started trying to justify everything she did, by letting me know all the ways I fucked up.

Nothing she said caused me any pain, even when that was her intention. The only emotion I had while looking at her was regret. I wasted so much fucking time, hoping that shit would work, when deep down I always knew it was never going to.

The next day, I moved out, and as far as I know, she's still been seeing Bowie. If I were a better man, I'd warn him, but he can learn that fucking lesson all on his own.

When I get to my truck, I check the time, then type in the address for Kristen's best friend Carrie, then pull out of the parking lot. With Kristen now buried next to her grandmother, and her family over the initial shock of her murder, they have been calling Miles or me daily, asking for updates and giving us more leads to go on. So far, nothing has panned out, but her mom has been insistent for the last few days that Carrie knows something.

When I arrive at the house Carrie lives in with her father, I knock on the door, then scan the neighborhood as I wait. It's not one of the nicest areas in Nashville, but with people selling their homes for cash to the developers with enough money to tear them down and replace them with something bigger and better. Then flipping them for an even higher profit, I give it two years before this whole area is unrecognizable.

"They moved."

I turn to my left and see a woman standing on the stoop next door, smoking a cigarette.

"When?" I make my way down the sidewalk and stop outside the swinging metal gate to her yard that is falling off its hinges.

"They've been moving out for a month. I think they just finished last weekend." She shrugs one shoulder. "The owner got a good price so they moved into an apartment across town." She squints. "I think The Hills." I look at the house, then back at her when she asks, "Are you a cop?" I lift my chin, and her nose scrunches. "You got questions about Carrie's friend, the one who died?"

"Do you know anything about that?"

"Just that she was murdered. I saw her here a couple of times with Carrie, then recognized her from the news. Pretty girl." She takes a drag off her cigarette

and lets out a stream of smoke. “This world is fucked up.”

She’s not wrong about that. “You said they moved to The Hills?”

“I think so. I didn’t talk to Buck much. He works nights and sleeps during the day, but I think I remember him mentioning that place.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“No problem.” She heads inside as I walk to my truck.

When I get behind the wheel, I find the number for Carrie in my file, but when I dial it, the message I get lets me know the number is not in service. So, I call the apartment complex and make sure someone is in the office before I head that direction.

It takes a good twenty minutes and about a dozen phone calls before the manager at the complex is willing to give me the apartment number for Carrie and her dad, and by the time I leave her in the office, I’m half-tempted to ask if she’d want a job working for national security.

Leaving my truck parked where it is, I walk down the sidewalk toward where Carrie’s apartment is located. As I pass the park in the middle of the complex, a woman in jeans and a bright-pink sweatshirt with **MAMA** written on the front in gold, pushing a young boy with dark hair on a swing, catches my attention. I recognize Miranda immediately. Even with her hair up in a bun and not a stitch of makeup on her pretty face, she still looks as gorgeous as she did a month ago when I found her standing outside at the policemen’s ball.

“Tucker?” she calls out as I start to walk past her, and I stop, then watch her help her son off the swing. When he runs off toward the slide, she walks up to the metal fence surrounding the small playground. “I… I thought that was you.” She gives me an unsure smile.

“How have you been?”

“Good.” She shrugs, wrapping her arms around her stomach. “You?”

“I’ve been all right.”

“Good,” she repeats softly, then rubs her lips together as we stare at each other, neither of us knowing what to say.

“You live here?” I break through the awkwardness of the encounter that is swirling around us like silk caught in the tide.

“Yeah, for about a month now. It’s nice, quiet, and Kingston loves that the park is just a few steps from our front door.”

“That’s your boy?”

“Yeah, that’s Kingston.” She looks over at him, and a smile lights up her face, making her even more gorgeous.

“He’s cute.”

“I know.” She turns her smile on me, and my gut clenches. “So, you’re good?” The words are simple enough, but they are laced with a thousand questions.

“Yeah, babe, I’m good.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I…,” she cuts herself off. “I’m just happy to hear that.” She looks around, then focuses on me and tips her head to the side, studying me. “So what are you doing here?”

“I’m checking up on someone for a case.”

“Oh.” Her expression shifts to one filled with concern. Fuck, I should not like that look pointed at me.

“I gotta go,” I tell her, and she rubs her lips together again, then her chest rises and falls.

“Of course. It… It was good seeing you, Tucker.”

“You too.” I jerk up my chin before continuing down the sidewalk, and I don’t look back, even as I feel her eyes boring into me from behind.

CHAPTER TEN

tucker

Knocking on Carrie's door, I wait as I listen to footsteps get closer, then wait some more as I stare at the peephole. When the person standing on the other side doesn't answer, I knock again, and the door opens an inch, one darkly lined eye peeking out at me.

"Carrie."

"Hi." She eyes me warily, opening the door a little more. "My dad's not home."

"That's okay. I just have a few questions for you. Do you have a couple of minutes?" I push because I don't need her father's permission to speak with her.

"I…." She licks her lips. "Okay."

"We can talk outside, if that makes you more comfortable."

She nods and steps outside, closing the door, and I lead her to the sidewalk.

"How have you been?"

"All right." She shrugs, looking anywhere but at me, then she drops her eyes to her feet. "Did you find anything out?"

"Not yet. That's why I'm here." I study her, taking in her hair that is dyed black, her dark makeup, and her baggy clothes that make her look bigger than she is.

In photos that Kristen's mom has of her daughter around the house, she used to have a Southern Belle appearance—blonde hair, tan, and always smiling. Then at some point she adapted the same gothic style as Carrie, dyed her hair a dark-blue, and started wearing too much makeup.

“I know you mentioned the last time you saw Kristen was the day before she went missing.”

“It was.” She twists her fingers around the bottom edge of her oversized shirt. “She came by my house to pick up a book, but I only saw her for like a couple of minutes.”

“She came to pick up a book,” I repeat, because she never mentioned that before when we’ve spoken to her.

“We had a test for science the next day, and she forgot her science book at school.”

“So, she came to borrow yours?”

She nods.

“Did she tell you where she was going when she left your house?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “She…. I don’t know. She had been weird for like a week, and when I would ask her what was going on, she wouldn’t tell me.”

“Do you know if she was seeing anyone, or was there anyone she liked?”

“No, I already told you that. She always had guys who liked her, but she… she never liked any of them.”

“Were any of the guys who liked her aggressive when they told her or showed her that they liked her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, but I don’t know for sure. We never hung out with guys when we were together. M-My dad is kind of strict about that kind of stuff.”

“All right,” I say gently when I see she’s beginning to get agitated. “Do you know any of the guys’ names who liked her?”

“No.”

“Carrie, I know this is difficult, but it would really help me out if you could give me some names.”

“I don’t know anyone.”

“All right,” I give in and take my wallet out of my back pocket. “I’m gonna go, but if you can think of anyone, I want you to call me.” I pass her over my card, and she takes it before rushing off toward the alcove where her apartment door is. I watch until she’s safely inside.

As Kristen's best friend, Carrie likely would have known all Kristen's darkest secrets, and at their age, both girls would have likely been boy-crazy, even if they weren't supposed to be. I know from previous conversations with Barbara, Kristen's mom, that Carrie's dad works nights at one of the local factories, which leaves her at home alone a lot. And without supervision, it's anyone's guess what she and Kristen would do when they were together.

"Kingston, stop!" Miranda's fear-filled shout rips through the air, and I take off in a jog toward the playground where I saw her last. When I hit the parking lot, I catch a glimpse of Miranda in her pink sweatshirt, running after her son, who is seriously quick on his feet for a kid his size.

I see the red taillights of a car that's about to back out of its spot at the same moment Miranda does, and she screams as I make it to him, lifting him off the ground and slamming my hand into the trunk of the car before they can hit me. The driver slams hard on the brakes, probably scared to death, and Miranda makes it to us.

"Oh my God!" she cries, taking her son from me with her shaking hands. "I … He just bolted as soon as the gate was open. I couldn't catch him." Tears stream from her eyes as she hugs him to her chest.

"He's okay." I catch the eye of the driver in the side mirror and lift my hand before escorting Miranda and Kingston to the sidewalk.

"Thank you," she whimpers, her whole body shaking, and Kingston starts to cry, probably confused about what just happened and why his mom has him in a vice grip.

"Where's your place?"

"Just over there." She looks up at me and whispers, "Thank you."

"You don't have to keep thanking me." I place my hand against her lower back and walk her across the lot to the other sidewalk.

"I do. He could have …" She shakes her head. "He could have been run over."

"He wasn't." I realize she's leading us to the apartment across from the one Carrie now lives in. When she takes out her key and attempts and fails to get it in the lock, I take it from her and open the door, then follow her inside. With the

two of them crying and Miranda almost hyperventilating, I squat down next to her as she sits on the couch with him on her lap. “You need to breathe and calm down. He’s okay, but you’re scaring him,” I say gently, and her red-rimmed eyes meet mine over the top of his head.

“I know. It’s just …”

“He’s okay,” I remind her before her mind can wander down that road. “Do you want some water?” She nods, so I stand and go to the kitchen. It takes a second to find a cup, but when I do, I fill it with water and walk it back over to her.

She takes it with her hand still shaking, and as she takes a sip, Kingston turns his head my way. When his eyes meet mine, he studies me with a curious light in his eyes.

“Who ah you?” His tiny voice and wrongly spoken words make me smile, reminding me of when Winter was his age.

“I’m Tucker.” I hold out my fist, and he bumps his against it.

“Tucker.” His head falls to his mom’s shoulder, and I nod.

“Thank you for catching him.” Miranda rests her cheek on top of his head. “I … I don’t even want to think about what would’ve …” Her breath catches, and her eyes slide closed.

“He’s safe.” My fingers twitch with the urge to touch her.

With Kingston done crying and being held, he wiggles out of her arms and heads to a basket filled with toys next to the TV. After dumping everything out onto the floor, he picks up a book and brings it over to me.

“That’s his favorite book,” Miranda tells me, and I take it from him when he presses it against my hand. Flipping it over, I look at the cover and read the title.

“*Giraffes Can’t Dance*.”

“Read,” he says, and fuck if I don’t recoil at the idea. I should not be here right now. Not with Miranda and her son. I should have let her into her house, given her the key, and taken off. “Read,” Kingston repeats, and I glance over at Miranda. I don’t know what she sees when she looks at me, but she holds out her hand to her son.

“Lovie, Tucker has to leave. Mommy will read it to you.”

“No, *you* read,” he demands up at me, and I meet his gaze.

“Lovie,” she repeats, but he doesn’t even acknowledge her as his eyes stay locked on mine.

“It’s all right,” I give in, before I can think better of it, then reluctantly I take a seat on the edge of the couch. As soon as my ass is on the cushion, he comes over and leans against me, and I open to the first page.

The story comes to an end in less than five minutes, but when I start to close it, he grabs the book and opens it back to the first page.

“Again.”

Shit.

“How about you watch your show instead?” Miranda turns on the TV, and after a few clicks, the sound of little kids singing fills the living room, and Kingston becomes entranced by the show playing.

Standing, I hand Miranda the book I’m still holding, then take a step back when my cell rings. I pull it out of my pocket and check the screen, seeing it’s Miles, then look down at her.

“I’m gonna head out. I gotta take this.”

She nods, then without a word she walks behind me to the front door.

“Tucker.” She grasps my wrist when I open the door, and I turn back to her, finding her pretty eyes looking up at me. I wait, but she doesn’t say anything.

Maybe she doesn’t need to.

I jerk up my chin, my mouth dry when she lets me go. I step outside, ignoring the urge to take her in once more before the door closes behind me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

miranda

I pull into the parking spot in front of the courthouse downtown and shut off the engine, dragging in a breath that does nothing to help calm my rattled nerves.

Today, Bowie and I are meeting with the judge to go over our final parenting plan before we sign our divorce papers. It's something I've been prepared to do for weeks, but now that the day is here, I'm a mess. I'm not questioning my decision to divorce Bowie. I'm actually relieved I will no longer be his wife, and I think Bowie feels the same, especially after Kingston told me that he had dinner with his dad and "Moni" a few nights ago.

Though he said her name wrong, I still knew who he was referring to. I can admit that I was upset when he told me that information in his sweet, happy voice. The emotions I have when it comes to Bowie and Naomie's relationship are still raw. And I wished I would have had a say in our son meeting her, but I know Bowie, and he would never ask me for my permission. Heck, he hasn't even told me he's still seeing her. Then again, I'm noticing he has an issue with being honest, like him claiming he was hurt when I told him I wouldn't give him a second chance and saying she meant nothing, when she obviously did and still does.

But with all that set aside, what has me rattled today is not the fact that Naomie might become a fixture in my son's life; it's how today is going to affect Kingston. So far, Bowie and I have been good about working around each other's schedules, but I'm concerned that having something in writing might change that. I also hate the idea of missing out on any time with my baby,

especially holidays, and I know I won't have a choice in giving some of those up.

With another deep breath, I push open my door and get out of my car. Since I have work after this, I wore my black bootie heels, my black jeans that end just above my ankle, and a black wraparound sweater with my long emerald-green jacket over it to fight off the chill in the air. I'm sure I look like I'm going to a funeral, but I guess in a way I kind of am.

When I get into the courthouse, I go right to the desk to check in after going through the metal detectors and then walk through the door the woman behind the desk sends me to.

The small courtroom is empty, so I take a seat in one of the chairs at the back and wait for Bowie and the judge to show up.

Hearing the door open behind me, I turn to watch Bowie step inside, and he gives me an awkward smile that I return with one of my own.

"Did Kingston get off to school okay this morning?" he asks as he takes a seat in the aisle across from me.

"Yeah, he's always excited to spend time with his friends."

"He seems to really like it there."

"He does, and it's good. I'm glad he's doing this now; that way, the transition into preschool after this summer will be a little easier."

"Me too." He pushes his fingers through his hair. "Does he know I'm picking him up?"

"I told him," I say, and he looks like he wants to say more but decides not to and looks at the front of the room.

I take out my phone when it dings and smile at the text from Emma.

You & me. Saturday night.

The photo attached shows two women who are obviously wasted with party hats on, one wearing a sash that says **Divorced**.

Texting her back:

I'll think about it.

I tuck my cell away just in time to watch a female officer in an unflattering khaki uniform step into the room from a door at the front, and a second later, the judge steps in right behind her.

“You can approach,” the officer says, and my stomach twists and my hands tingle as I get up and walk to the front of the room ahead of Bowie. As I take a seat at a desk on the right side, Bowie does the same on the left.

“I received the paperwork from both your attorneys this morning, and it seems you’ve come up with a custody arrangement that is currently working for the two of you,” the judge says, looking between Bowie and me, and I nod. “With both of you working, I understand there will be times you might have to deviate from your set schedule, so I’m going to assume that will continue, even with the agreement in place.”

“It will,” I say softly, and I see Bowie nod out of the corner of my eye.

“As for holidays, that’s always the most difficult part of an agreement. I understand no one wants to give up their time on those days, so I’m going to put down that you will each have every other holiday throughout the year, and each year, you will switch so that it’s as equal as possible.”

I nod, even as my hands tighten into fists.

“Take these down to them,” he tells the officer, and she brings a stack of papers to me and a set to Bowie. “Once you’ve both confirmed that you agree on those days, just sign those papers.”

I look over it, the information that’s not much different than what my lawyer showed me just a few days ago, only adding that Bowie will get the first Thanksgiving, and I’ll get Christmas, and so on and so forth, so I sign.

“Child support is set for four hundred dollars a month,” the judge says, and I bite my bottom lip, because that money isn’t even enough to cover the bills but is much more than I was expecting to get. “Now, for your divorce.” The judge looks between Bowie and me. “I have to ask that you’re both sure this is what you want.”

“It is,” I say, catching Bowie nod out of the corner of my eye.

“All right, just sign the papers Angie is going to give you. We’ll get that finalized, and you’ll be free to go about your day.”

With a few swipes of my pen on the dotted line, I feel a weight lift off my shoulders, weight I didn't realize I was still carrying around until now. I'm free, and it feels good. Or maybe I just feel good. Even with everything that has happened, I've been happier, less stressed, and I'm starting to feel a little like my old self. I don't know if that's because I'm no longer living my life with the sole purpose of keeping Bowie happy, but whatever it is, I know it's good.

When the judge dismisses us, we get up and head out the back door side by side. It's a little odd, given that just a few years ago, we walked into a courthouse together to get our marriage license so we could get married, and now we are leaving one divorced.

"So what are your plans this weekend?" Bowie asks when we step outside.

"I don't really have any plans since I work Saturday. What are you and Kingston doing?"

"I was thinking I'd take him to check out some cars and to that place he likes with the indoor playground."

"He'd like that." I rub my lips together and then do what I don't want to do but know I need to, because I want honesty between us more than anything. "Kingston told me that he and you had dinner with Naomie."

"We did." His expression turns guarded, and I nod.

"I just…. I mean…." Frick, I hate this so much, because I don't want him to think I care that he's still seeing Naomie, because I don't. But I'm worried about my baby. "I wish you would have told me you were going to do that."

"You asked for a divorce Miranda. You left me, which means you don't get a say in what I do or who I'm dating."

"I know," I say calmly, because his jaw is starting to twitch, and I don't want to fight with him.

"Good," he bites out, and I drag in a breath. Okay, so it's obvious he and I will not be able to talk about his new relationship. Then again, I already knew we wouldn't, didn't I?

"I'm going to go." I adjust my bag on my shoulder and take a step away from him. "Tell Kingston I'll call him this evening before he goes to bed."

"I'll let him know," he mutters, and I turn on my heels and head for my car.

I arrive at the salon twenty minutes later, because traffic is a mess, and when I pull open the front door, streamers fly through the air around me, making me jump.

“Congratulations!” everyone cheers while Emma rushes to me, wrapping me in a hug.

I laugh as I hug her back, then look through the balloons floating in the air and my friends who are all wearing happy smiles. Some of them I haven’t seen in forever, because being married and having a kid has made it more difficult to get together.

“You guys are the best,” I say softly to Polly, the salon owner, when she hands me a glass flute that looks like it’s filled with orange juice but I’m sure also includes champagne.

“You deserve all the good things.” She rubs my shoulder, and I swallow over the burn in my throat.

“So how are you feeling?” Emma asks as I hug another friend of mine, Fern.

“Good, relieved that it’s done,” I say honestly.

“You seem happier,” my friend Whinny whispers as she hugs me.

“I feel happier,” I whisper back, and she gives me a soft smile when she lets me go.

“Well, I think today calls for a toast.” Emma holds up her glass, and we all do the same. “Here’s to bigger and better dick and men who don’t fuck around.” She winks at me. “Out with the old and in with the new, babe.”

“You’re so crazy.” I laugh.

“I’ll drink to that.” Polly smiles, clinking her glass against mine, and I look through my friends—women I admire, women who have proven they are there for me no matter what.

“Thank you, guys.” I take a sip of my drink, then giggle when the song “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair” starts to play through the overhead speakers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

miranda

When my cell rings, I check the screen, then set the broom I was using to sweep under my station aside and pick up my phone when I see it's my dad calling. I feel like I've spoken to him more in the last month than I have in the past year, and even though I get that he's worried about me, I think it's more than that, like some kind of deep-seated guilt he's holding onto.

He lost his mind when I told him that Bowie had an affair and that we were getting a divorce, and he was so mad I had to talk him down from buying a plane ticket for the sole purpose of flying to Tennessee to "kick Bowie's ass," as he put it.

His reaction actually shocked me. I mean, he cheated on my mom a dozen or more times, so I assumed he would have some kind of weird sympathy for Bowie. Really, I thought he'd attempt to convince me to give Bowie a second chance, which is why I didn't tell him nor my mom that I was leaving Bowie until I moved out of the house. I did not expect either of them to encourage me to follow through with the divorce or to tell me I deserved better.

Really, I wanted to ask my mom if she ever thought she deserved better, but I knew that wouldn't be fair to her, especially after so many years. As far as I know, my dad's last affair took place when I was in my senior year, and I confronted him myself about what I found out through friends. I still remember the embarrassment and devastation on his face as I told him that I thought he was disgusting and hoped Mom would leave him.

It sucked doing that, but up until then, him cheating was just something *I*

knew about, because I lived in the house with him and my mom. My friends telling me they knew he was sleeping with someone else had rocked my world. We hardly spoke the six months before I graduated and moved out, and there was always an awkward tension when we were in the same room. And although I think we've both made attempts to better our relationship over the years, it never felt the same until recently.

Spinning my empty salon chair around, I take a seat and put my cell to my ear.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey, cookie," he greets with a smile in his voice. "I got some great news."

"What's that?"

"Mom and I just bought an RV."

"What?" I watch myself frown in the mirror above my station.

"A friend of mine was selling his RV, and your mom and I just bought it," he says, sounding excited.

"You bought an RV," I repeat, picturing him standing outside one of those giant buses that take up the whole road, a smile on his face.

"Yep, and as soon as we finish out this school year, we're heading your way," he says, and I know he's referring to summer break, since he's the principal at the high school where I grew up, and my mom teaches fifth grade, something that gives them both the summer off from work.

"Do you even know how to drive an RV?"

"No, but I'm going to take a class, and so is your mom."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," I mumble.

"Cookie, it's just a car."

"It's not a car." I rub my forehead. "And Tennessee is at least a three-day drive from where you live."

"Well, since we have the RV, we'll be able to take our time. We're thinking it will probably take us a week to get to you, since we'll stop and do some sightseeing on the way.

"Dad, I love that, but I don't have anywhere for you to park an RV when you get here. I live in an apartment complex," I remind him gently, not wanting to

burst his bubble—even though it's a bubble that definitely needs to be burst.

"There are RV parks around you. I'll make a reservation at one of those, then rent a car," he says easily, then adds. "I figured we'd stay for a couple of weeks, then head up to New York, since your mom has always wanted to see a show on Broadway. And we'll stop back by you before we start are trek home."

"It would be awesome to see you guys," I give in, because it would be great seeing my parents, and I'd love for Kingston to have some time with them, especially since he only really knows them as voices on a phone.

"Then it's a plan. I'll send you pictures when I get off the phone."

"Okay," I agree on an awkward laugh.

"Love you, kid."

"Love you too, Dad." I hang up and grab the broom I had been using, trying not to think about my parents, who are both in their late fifties, driving a rock-star bus across the country.

"We're all set for tonight," Emma sings, and I turn to watch the door to the salon close behind her as she holds a hot-pink sash over her head.

"Oh, Lord," I groan as she comes to where I am and puts the sash over my head. "I'm not wearing this," I inform her, looking down at the black glitter letters that spell out **Just Divorced** along with a QR code so people can send money to a pay app for drinks.

"Just indulge me for one night. It's going to be fun." She slaps my hand away when I attempt to take it off.

"I agreed under distress to go out with you and the girls tonight. I didn't agree to have my newly single status used for free drinks."

"You're no fun." She pouts.

"I'm the funnest. Just ask Kingston."

"I think he'd agree with me that you're lame." She laughs, and I roll my eyes, because she's probably right.

"What's the plan anyway?" I ask, hoping to get an idea of what I'm in for, since her and the girls have all been tight-lipped about this evening.

"All I'm telling you is Eli agreed to be our DD for the night, and he promised me that he's not going to be a party pooper." I raise a brow, because I

know her boyfriend, and he most definitely is a party pooper. Not that he isn't fun; he's just a guy who'd rather sit at home, playing video games while drinking beer. He's not a guy who'd willingly agree to drive around a group of drunk women all night.

"How'd you get him to agree to that?"

"I offered up BJs whenever he wanted one for a month. A guarantee he won't let me down." She grins, and I laugh as I start to clean up my station.

"That would do it." I look over at her as she starts to set up for her next client. "What should I wear?"

"What you have on now is cute, so something similar," she says, and I look down at my tank that is tucked into my ripped-up jeans and the heeled boots on my feet. At least I'll be comfortable.

"All right." I grab my purse from my drawer, then lift my coat off the hook on the wall. "I'm going to head home and clean, since my schedule is clear for the rest of the day and I didn't feel up to doing it last night."

"Okay, and I'll see you tonight at seven." She gives me a quick hug before going to greet her client when she walks in.

Stopping by the office, I let Polly know I'm taking off, then head out to my car.

I get home fifteen minutes later and scan the parking lot, hoping that by some twist of fate I'll see Tucker again, then tell myself I'm not disappointed when I don't. Logically, I know he's the last man in the world I should have some weird fascination with, but even knowing that I can't stop thinking about him. He's the kind of guy you itch to figure out, to make smile, or to just give you *something*, because you know if he gives it to you, it'd be yours and only yours.

Annoyed with myself and my ridiculous train of thought, I sigh as I walk up the sidewalk. My steps slow when I see the girl who lives across from me standing under the awning between our apartments, with grocery bags at her feet and a frown on her face as she looks at her phone.

"Hey," I greet as I approach, not wanting to startle her, and she lifts her head, her black-lined eyes meeting mine. "Is everything all right?

“Yeah, I’m just waiting for my dad to let me in. I forgot my key when I went out to get groceries, and he’s sleeping,” she mumbles, and I nod as I take my key out of my bag.

“I’m Miranda. I live across from you. We haven’t had a chance to meet yet.”

“I’ve seen you with your son. I’m Carrie.”

“It’s nice meeting you, Carrie,” I say gently, and she nods as she chews on her bottom lip. Going to my door, I put my key in my lock, then look back over at her. “Do you want to wait inside my place until your dad gets up?”

“Umm….” She looks from my door to me, then starts to shake her head. “No thanks. He should be up soon.”

“Okay, if you change your mind, just knock.” With another nod from her, I let myself into my apartment and lock the door behind myself. Walking right to my room, I strip out of my clothes and put on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt, then go to the kitchen. Since drinking will take place this evening and I’m a lightweight, I need to make sure I eat something. Otherwise, I’ll either end up dancing on a table or passing out under it before the night is over, and neither option sounds appealing.

After heating up some leftover spaghetti, I eat it standing in the kitchen with the TV on, because the quiet when I’m home alone is still something I’m not used to yet, and at this point, I don’t know if I ever will be. When I finish eating, I rinse my bowl and then go check the peephole for Carrie, and I’m relieved when I don’t see her still waiting outside.

Every time I’ve seen her, she’s looked a little lost, and remembering what it’s like to be a teenager, I feel for her. Those teen years are rough, especially when you’re trying to figure out where you fit in at school, at home, and in your own body. I wish I’d had someone tell me at her age that nothing is as important as it seems, but I doubt I would have listened, even if someone did. That’s a lesson we all tend to learn the hard way, sadly.

Going to Kingston’s room, I put away his laundry that I washed and folded last night, then pick up his toys from the floor. A pointless endeavor since he’ll just drag everything back out as soon as he gets home tomorrow evening. After running the vacuum through the entire apartment and cleaning both bathrooms, I

think about finding an outfit to wear tonight, but instead I climb into my bed and set an alarm with enough time to get ready in case I fall asleep. Because Lord knows, regardless of my appearance, Emma will be dragging my behind out of the house at seven o’clock on the dot.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

tucker

"I think I'm drunk." Willow giggles as she sits down on Clay's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and causing the cheap plastic crown she's wearing to slip off her head. Catching it before it hit the ground, I toss it next to the bride-to-be sash that's already forgotten on the short table in front of us that is covered with drinks.

"Thanks." She grins at me, and I lift my chin.

"I think we're done for the night," Clay tells her when she rests her head on his shoulder.

"Not yet, I'm still having fun," she mumbles, totally out of it, and I chuckle as I stand.

"I think I'm gonna—"

"You're not leaving already, are you?" She sits up, cutting me off, and I glance at Clay.

"I think it's time for all of us to call it a night. It's almost midnight," he informs her, and she grabs my wrist, bringing my watch close to her face and squinting her eyes. After reading the time, she pouts out her bottom lip and faces Clay.

"This is our last night as single people. We can't just go home just because it's almost midnight."

"You're single tonight?" He raises a brow, and she rolls her eyes.

"You know what I mean. We're getting married the day after tomorrow. This is our last night out as an unmarried couple." She rests her hand on his cheek.

“Just a little longer?”

“Fine.” He gives in.

“Yay.” She kisses his cheek, then gets up and stumbles back over to her cousins and sisters, who have taken over the dance floor.

“You’re fucked,” I tell my brother, and he drags his eyes off his fiancée, grinning as he stands.

“I know.” He pats me on the shoulder. “Let’s go get another drink.”

“Are we heading out?” Dalton asks when he dislodges his mouth from the blonde on his lap.

“We’re gonna get another beer,” Clay says as we walk past him.

“Good, I need a fresh one.” He carefully removes the woman he’d been making out with, and she glares at his back when he doesn’t spare her another glance.

“Where’s Miles?” I look around. Even close to midnight, the club is still packed, though most of the people here are friends of Willow and Clay, who were invited to their joint bachelor and bachelorette party, since a lot of them won’t be able to fly out to Vegas. They’re getting married there the day after tomorrow before they fly to Fiji for a two-week honeymoon.

“I think I saw him hanging with Harlan a little bit ago, he’s around somewhere. He says referring to Willow’s sister’s husband.

“Oh my God!”

Hearing that in a high-pitched squeal, I turn my head and watch a woman with long dark hair run toward Willow’s cousin, April, who is sitting with her husband, Maxim, at the bar.

As April and the woman hug, I look behind her, and fuck if my gut doesn’t clench when I spot Miranda walking to where the two women are embracing. Hair down, dark jeans that fit her like a second skin, top that is exposing a hint of cleavage, and just enough makeup to accentuate her already beautiful face with lips painted a deep red that has me playing out a million fantasies in about two seconds.

Like she can sense me looking at her, she turns her head my way after hugging April, and the moment our eyes lock, those full red lips curve up into a

genuine smile.

“Who’s that?” Dalton asks, and I glance over at him, finding his eyes locked on Miranda with an appreciative light to his gaze.

“None of your business.” The statement comes out without permission but fuck if I can deny the irrational anger that hits me like a freight train just thinking about him trying to talk to her.

He raises a brow in a question, but I turn back just in time to watch her full hips sway from side to side as she walks toward me.

When I meet her halfway, she rests her hand on my chest and leans up on her tiptoes so she can touch her lips to my cheek. “Hey, Tucker,” she whispers there. When she leans back, her eyes go to my cheek, and she lifts her hand, using her thumb to swipe away the red she probably left behind.

“Miranda.” My fingers twitch at my sides with the urge to touch her.

When she’s got her lipstick off my cheek, her eyes move to mine, and she rubs her lips together before she falls flat to her feet. “Sorry,” she whispers.

“About?” I whisper back, and she lets out a breath, shaking her head.

“Nothing.” She does another head shake, dropping her eyes from mine before looking around. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“Divorce party.” She lifts a bright-pink sash between us, and I glance down, reading it quickly.

“So it’s official?”

“As of a couple of days ago.” She gives me an awkward smile.

“Hey, you can only chat her up if you’re buying her a drink,” the dark-haired woman that was hugging April informs me as she joins us, and I drag my eyes off Miranda to look at her.

“Emma, this is Tucker,” Miranda says softly, and Emma’s eyes widen to the size of saucers.

“Shut the fuck up. *You’re* Tucker?” She looks from me to Miranda. “You didn’t tell me he was h—”

“Emma,” Miranda cuts her off, pink traveling up her cheeks and down her chest.

“Fine. Nice to meet you, Tucker.” Emma holds out her hand, and I take it in mine. “Sorry about… well, you know, the whole douchebag-cheating-ex thing.”

“Kill me now.” Miranda closes her eyes, and I rub my fingers over my mouth to hide my smile.

“No problem.”

“So, are you officially single too?” she asks, and Miranda glares daggers at her. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m just curious.”

“You can’t just ask someone something like that, Emma,” Miranda scolds her. “It’s rude.”

“Do you think it’s rude?” Emma asks me, and I look between the two women, and seeing how uncomfortable Miranda is with the whole thing, I look at her friend.

“It’s rude when you know asking those questions is making your friend uncomfortable.”

“Touché.” She looks at Miranda, not fazed at all. “I’m gonna go out and try to get Eli to join us, since this is our last stop of the night.”

“All right,” Miranda says, and Emma squeezes her hand before she walks off.

Focusing on Miranda, I dip my head toward the bar. “Do you want a drink?”

Her eyes scan my face for a moment like she’s trying to figure out if she should take me up on my offer. When she nods, my muscles relax, and I hover my hand over her lower back but don’t touch her as we walk to the bar.

“How many drinks did you get tonight?” I ask, watching her stuff the sash that says **Just Divorced** back into her bag, and her nose scrunches as she looks at me.

“Since Emma has been wearing it almost the whole night and asked everyone she came in contact with to donate, I’m guessing a lot.”

Laughing, I lean into the bar and watch her smile, then her head tips to the side. “Are you here with friends?”

“My brothers.” I dip my chin toward the opposite end of the bar, where Clay and Dalton are. “The dark-haired one is Clay, the one with the glasses is Dalton, and my brother Miles is around here somewhere.” I point to the dance floor.

“The woman in the white dress is Clay’s fiancée. Tonight is their bachelor/bachelorette party, and the day after tomorrow, we’re all flying to Vegas to watch the two of them get married.”

“What can I get you guys?” the bartender interrupts as Miranda opens her mouth, and we both look at him.

“I’ll have a Vodka soda with lime please.”

He nods, then looks at me.

“Just another beer.”

“You got it.” He pulls out a bottle from the under-counter fridge, popping off the top before walking off to make her drink.

“So, your brother is getting married in Vegas?” She looks up at me.

“He is.”

“I thought that was something you did on accident when you were drunk, then you woke up the next day searching for the nearest lawyer to get an annulment.”

“Are you speaking from experience?”

“No.” She snorts, and I grin at the sound, watching her cheeks get pink.

“They wanted to get married on the West Coast, since they’re flying to Fiji for their honeymoon. The wedding is more for Willow’s parents than them, so they thought, why not Vegas?”

“That makes sense.” She turns to smile at the bartender when he sets her drink in front of her. “Wait,” she calls when he starts to walk off, and he stops. “I need to pay.” She opens her bag, and I cover her hand with mine when she starts to pull out cash.

“He’s adding it to my tab,” I tell her, and her eyes move from my hand to my face.

“You don’t have to pay for my drink.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I remove my hand from hers and jerk up my chin at the bartender, who takes that as his cue to leave us alone once more.

“Does that mean you won’t let me give you the money?”

“That’s exactly what it means.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem,” I look around. “Do you want to go sit somewhere?”
She eyes me for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, sure.”
“Lead the way.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

miranda

My heart pounds against my ribs like a bird stuck in too small of a cage as I take a seat on a very comfortable deep-blue velvet couch, and Tucker sits down next to me. Looking from him to our surroundings, I immediately second-guess my decision to lead him to the back of the club. I should not have chosen a cozy couch hidden in the dark. I should have taken us somewhere with a lot more light, which wouldn't feel so intimate.

Taking a sip of my drink, I watch him get comfortable, placing his arm on the back of the couch behind me. Then he leans back in the way guys do, with their legs spread wide so they can take up as much space as possible. His eyes meet mine, and that cage in my chest opens up, letting that bird free to take flight in my stomach.

As I study him, I'm at a loss for what to say. It's weird there is a history between us when we don't really know each other. I don't even know what to talk to him about, and I definitely don't want to talk to him about Bowie or Naomie, which is the only thing I know we have in common.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks after a long moment.

"That it's weird we have a history when we don't even know each other."

"You wanna explain that?"

"Your ex and mine were having an affair, so I feel like we share a connection," I admit, the alcohol in my system making it easier to be honest. "I just don't know what to talk to you about without bringing them up."

"If I were a guy you didn't know at all, what would you talk to me about?"

“I *wouldn’t* talk to you,” I blurt, and his head jerks back. “You’re very intense, and add on to that how good-looking you are, I would never have the courage to approach you.”

Oh my god did I just say that? My cheeks heat.

“What if I approached you?”

“Yeah, right.” I snort, but he doesn’t smile at the noise like he did earlier, as if he thought it was cute. Instead … actually, he looks annoyed.

“I didn’t ask you to have a drink with me because of our fucked-up connection.” His eyes bore into mine. “I asked you to have a drink with me, because you’re a beautiful woman.”

My lips part on a silent *oh* as he holds me hostage with his gaze.

“Tell me about your ex, and I’ll tell you about mine,” he suggests, resting his beer bottle on his knee.

“What?” My stomach drops, and I lean away from him. “I don’t want to talk about them.”

“Me neither, but they’re obviously here with us.” He tugs on a piece of my hair. “So let’s deal with them and go from there.”

Darn. Maybe he’s right. Maybe we need to talk about them, get it out of the way first, so then we can… I don’t even know. Move on? Get to know each other? Actually, I don’t even know what I want from this. I just know there is something about him that tugs at me. Like an invisible string tethering us to one another.

“How did Bowie react when you told him you wanted a divorce?” he asks, and I let out a breath before telling him what happened, and when I finish, he fills me in on Naomie’s reaction. And then he tells me that the day after I saw him over at my apartment complex, they signed their divorce papers. The more we talk, the less weird it feels, and the more I relax.

“They had dinner with Kingston a few nights ago,” I say quietly, pulling my feet up under me and getting more comfortable.

“Did you okay that?”

“No, but I also don’t really have a say either. I mean, I can’t tell Bowie that I don’t want her around my son. I have no reason to do that. I just have to trust

that he's explaining things to Kingston."

"That's fucked up, babe," he mutters, and I don't bother trying to correct him about the "babe" thing, because I've grown kind of fond of hearing him call me that.

"I know, and believe me, it sucked hearing Kingston tell me about it. The good thing is he's still young, so he doesn't really understand what's happening. He just knows that Mom and Dad aren't living together anymore."

"How's he handled that transition?"

"Better than I thought he would. Then again, Bowie only saw him when he had a day off from work, since he would sleep during the day, and most of the time, Kingston would be ready to call it a night by the time Bowie would be going to work. So I think, in his little head, nothing has really changed. Plus, he started daycare, so he's busy and exhausted by the time he gets home after school."

"That's good."

"It is." I take a sip of my drink that is almost empty.

"How's it been working again?"

Grinning, I shake my head. "The first week was an adjustment, but I'm no longer asking my coworkers and clients if they need to 'go potty,' so I'm improving," I joke, and he laughs. "But really, it's nice being with adults and having actual conversations again."

"Good," he says softly, and darn if I don't want to lean into him.

"I know you're a detective. What's that like?" I ask, and his eyes roam over my face for a long moment.

"I won't say I love my job. I won't even say I like it. But the families who share the worst parts of their lives with me are depending on me, so every day, I show up hoping that at some point I'll be able to give them some closure."

My stomach knots just imagining the kind of pressure that comes with what he does. I don't think I could do it, or I know I couldn't, not without losing a little of who I am in the end. "I hate that for you," I whisper, and his eyes soften.

"Miranda!"

Hearing my name shouted, I peer through the dark and find Nikki, one of my

clients who's become a friend over the years, walking in our direction. Or more accurately, stumbling toward us in her heels.

"I've been looking all over for you," she says.

"I've been here," I tell her as she plops down on the couch, forcing me into Tucker's side. Adjusting myself so I'm not almost sitting on top of him, I look over at her. "Are you okay?"

"I think I'm going to catch a cab and head home." She rests her head on the back of the couch and peeks at me through one eye. "How am I the drunk one at *your* divorce party?"

"Because you drank enough for the both of us."

"True." She giggles, and I smile.

"Come on." I stand and take her hands to pull her up. "I'll tell Emma you're ready to go."

"No, I don't want to ruin everyone's night. They're all still dancing and having a good time. I'll just call a cab," she slurs as she falls against me, almost knocking me over.

"I'm not going to let you go home alone." I look up at Tucker when he takes my glass so I don't drop it as I try to keep her on her feet. "Thanks."

"Who is that?" Nikki breathes, obviously not so drunk she can't appreciate a good-looking man when she sees one.

"That's my friend, Tucker."

"Good for you, bitch." She pats my ass, making me laugh.

"Come on, you." I start leading her across the club, with Tucker following close behind. Like she said, our group is on the dance floor, dancing and having fun—except for Eli and Emma, who are sitting at the bar, him with a beer and her with a full drink.

"Darn," I mutter.

"I'm okay to get a cab," Nikki murmurs, and I roll my eyes.

"I'm just going to let Emma know I'm taking her home," I tell Tucker, and he shakes his head.

"I'll give you guys a ride."

"Oh, I want to ride him," Nikki says, and I sigh.

“I was going to head out earlier, before I saw you,” he continues like he didn’t hear her, even though I know he did.

“What’s going on?” Emma asks, walking over to join us.

“Nikki needs to go home,” I say, and she looks at Nikki, whose head has fallen forward like she’s asleep standing up. “Tucker is going to give us a ride.”

“We can all leave,” Emma says, and I shake my head.

“No, you guys stay. The girls are still having fun, and Eli is having a drink. I should get home anyway since Kingston will be back tomorrow.”

Her gaze moves to Tucker, and her eyes narrow. “Have you been drinking?”

“I’ve had a couple of beers, but I’m good.”

“How good? Can you say the ABCs backward?”

“Can you?” he asks, and she crosses her arms over her chest.

“No, but I’ve been drinking.”

“Right,” he mutters.

“Whatever, fine.” She looks at me. “Call me as soon as you get home.”

“I will.” I give her a one-armed hug, because I’ve still got ahold of Nikki, then glance over at the dance floor. “Tell everyone I said goodnight.”

“Do you want me to help you get her outside?” she asks when Nikki slumps into me further.

“I got her.” Tucker passes Emma the glass and empty beer bottle from his hands, then suddenly Nikki’s weight is lifted off me, and she’s in his arms bride-style. As her head rolls against his shoulder, he looks down at me. “Ready?”

“Do you need to tell anyone you’re leaving?”

“I’ll send them a text.” He starts to walk off with Nikki, so I quickly wave at Emma, then follow him outside.

“I hope you don’t have to carry her too far.” I wrap my arms around my middle to fight off the cold when I shiver.

“I’m just down the block.” His jaw twitches as he eyes me. “Where’s your jacket?”

“At home.”

“Right,” he grumbles, walking faster. Stopping beside a truck a couple of minutes later, he looks down at Nikki, who is now completely passed out. “I

gonna need you to grab my keys out of my pocket, babe." He turns his hip toward me.

Feeling my pulse skyrocket, I bite my lip and tuck my hand into the front pocket of his jeans and grab his key. Then avoiding looking at him I use them to get the doors unlocked before opening the back one for him to put Nikki inside. He slams her door, then opens the front passenger side for me, and I climb up into his truck, which is a feat between the height and my heels.

Looking back at Nikki as he walks around the hood, I lean back and shake her arm. "Nikki, I need to know where you live," she groans at me, and I shake her again. "Nikki."

"I don't want any."

"I need to know your address," I tell her, but she doesn't respond. With a sigh, I find my phone and pull up Emma's number as Tucker gets in behind the wheel.

"Everything okay?" He starts the engine.

"I'm calling Emma to see if she can get me Nikki's address, since I can't get her to tell me," I say, then groan when Emma's phone goes to voicemail. "You know, if I were being kidnapped, you'd be no help," I grumble as my message after it beeps, then hang up. "She didn't pick up."

"I gathered that much."

"I guess I'll just take her to my place," I say, and without a word, he pulls out into traffic, and since he knows where I live, I don't bother giving him directions.

"How long have you lived in Tennessee?" he asks as he drives us across town.

"I think ten years." I frown, trying to remember, because it feels like forever ago. "I grew up in Washington state. Emma and I met in cosmetology school there. I planned on sticking close to home, but when she told me she was moving to Tennessee, I decided I was going with her."

"You two are close?"

"She's more my sister than my friend."

"Do you have siblings?"

“An older brother, Walker. He was ten when my parents had me, so I was the annoying little sister, always trying to follow him around. He’s an underwater welder and travels all the time for work, so I don’t see him often.”

I watch as he turns into the lot for my apartment complex, then whip my head around to look over my shoulder when Nikki whispers, “Oh no.”

“Do not puke,” I beg as she sits up, covering her mouth. “Oh God, stop the truck,” I order Tucker when her eyes widen, and she starts to shake her head.

Fumbling for the handle as he swings into the parking area by the park, I get the door open before he’s even stopped and hop out, almost falling to my knees and ignoring Tucker’s shout at me. Righting myself, I jerk open Nikki’s door, then jump back when she vomits on the ground. As a mom, I’ve gotten used to a lot of grossness, but puke is the one thing I just can’t seem to get over. Between the smell and the sight, my stomach twists, and saliva fills my mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” Nikki whimpers before puking again, while Tucker storms around the back of the truck.

“What the fuck was that Miranda?” he shouts, and I step back from him. I’ve seen him angry, or I thought I had the night of the policemen’s ball, but I was obviously wrong. The rage on his face as he looms over me is terrifying. “You ever fucking hop out of a moving truck like that again, I’m spanking your fucking ass.”

“You did not just say that” I whisper, and he points at me.

“I could have run you over. I wasn’t even stopped when you flung yourself out onto the fucking street. Do you understand how fucking dangerous that was?”

“Stop cursing at me.”

“Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Of course, I heard you. I’m sure everyone heard you since you’re yelling at me!” I shout back, tossing my arms in the air and getting pissed myself.

“Oh God,” Nikki whimpers as he and I glare at each other.

“Fuck,” he mutters, chest heaving.

I draw in a breath to try to calm my tattered nerves, then say calmly, hoping to deescalate the situation, “I didn’t want her to puke in your truck.”

“I’d rather fucking clean up her puke than your blood from under my fucking tires.”

“If you’ve ever tried to clean up puke from inside your vehicle, you’d know that’s a lie.”

“Jesus Christ,” he growls, fisting his hands at his sides.

Glaring at him, I know I should stay quiet, but apparently, I’m a teenager again who can’t let anyone have the last word. “Also, you shouldn’t use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Fuck me,” he bites out, right before his hand is hooking me by the back of my neck and he’s using it to pull me forward. Stumbling, I fall against his warm, hard chest, then whimper when his mouth crashes down on mine.

I might be shocked that he’s kissing me, but I don’t hesitate to kiss him back. Curling my hands up around his neck, my heart pounds as our tongues tangle together, and he holds me hostage with one hand at the back of my neck, the other circling my throat. His thumb under my jaw puts him in charge, and I’ve never been kissed like he’s kissing me—angry, hungry, greedy… like he can’t get enough. Like he’s trying to brand me with his mouth.

“Don’t mind me dying over here,” Nikki says, breaking into the moment, and he rips his mouth from mine, his chest heaving.

The stench of vomit cuts through the lust that had wrapped around me, and I loosen my hold on his shirt that is tangled in my fingers and take a step back, clearing my throat. When I look up and our eyes meet, my heart that is pounding falls into my stomach. His expression is conflicted, like he doesn’t know if he should kiss me again or get in his truck and take off.

Since I know I won’t be able to handle the disappointment of him doing the latter, I move around him and walk toward the truck, avoiding the mess on the pavement. “You’re going to have to get out on the other side,” I tell Nikki, and she lifts her head from the back of the seat where it was resting and looks down at the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, lifting her eyes to mine, and I let out a breath.

“It’s okay. Just meet me on the other side.”

Without another word, she fumbles her way across to the back seat, and I

meet her there, opening the door.

“Where are we?” She looks around, still in a daze, and I sigh.

“I didn’t know your address, so I brought you to my place.”

“You’re such a good friend.” She rests against me after getting out, and I turn, finding Tucker standing at the back of his truck with my bag.

“You got her?” he asks, and I nod. “I’ll wait until you’ve got her inside to take off.” He hands me my purse, then tucks his hands into his pockets. Telling myself that I’m not disappointed and that it’s good he’s going, since we should never have kissed, that our situation is complicated enough without what just happened, I straighten my shoulders.

“Thanks for getting us home.”

He doesn’t respond. He just watches as I walk past him, and I can feel his eyes on me as I let Nikki and me into my apartment. Still, I don’t look back because what’s the point?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

miranda

"I think you should start dating."

At that out-of-the-blue comment from Emma, I look over at her.

It's been two days since my divorce party, two days since I last saw Tucker, and two days since I've sworn off men for good. Thankfully, Nikki didn't remember seeing him and me kiss, so I didn't have to relive it with her the next morning when she finally woke up. But I did have a lot of time to think about what happened. A lot of time to get real with myself.

I *was* disappointed by his reaction, and the whole hot-and-cold thing is annoying at best. I mean, I didn't ask him to have a drink; he asked me. And I sure as heck wasn't the one to initiate that stupid, ridiculously hot kiss. He did that.

"Eli has a friend he wants you to meet. He has a daughter and just got divorced a few months ago," Emma continues, obviously not reading my wayward thoughts.

"I'm not interested," I tell her, grabbing another foil and folding it around the end of my color brush.

"You don't even know who it is. How can you say you're not interested?"

"Does he have a penis?" I ask, and my client, Lizzy, who is twenty-one and only beginning to find out how stupid men are, giggles.

"Yes," Emma snaps.

"Then I'm for-sure not interested."

"Is this about Tucker?" she asks, and I don't look at her, because if I do, she

will know I’m lying, and I don’t want to tell anyone—not even her—about the whole Tucker situation. As far as she knows, he drove Nikki and me to my apartment, dropped us off, then went on his merry way. Heck, he’s probably in Vegas right now, driving some other woman crazy with his mixed signals.

“It’s so not about Tucker.”

“Who’s Tucker?” Polly asks from where she’s curling her client’s hair.

“No one.”

“Imagine,” Emma talks over me, “if Ryan Reynolds and Chris Hemsworth manipulated natural science and created a bouncing baby boy together, then that baby grew up to be a stoic badass. That’s Tucker.”

“Then it’s definitely about Tucker.” Polly glances over at me. “What happened?”

“We’re not talking about him.”

“You two looked pretty cozy on Saturday,” Emma continues. “And I saw the way he was barely holding himself in check, like he wanted to pick you up and run away with you.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, refusing to take the bait, even as my stomach tingles.

“Is it because your ex and his are together?”

“Wait!” Polly hisses. “He’s the guy who was married to the woman Bowie cheated on you with?”

“One and the same,” Emma says unhelpfully.

“Oh shit.”

“So, what happened?” Emma asks, and I glare at her. “You’d probably feel better if you talk about it instead of keeping it all locked up.”

“Fine.” I place the last foil in Lizzy’s hair, then slip off my gloves and shove them in the trash. “I don’t know what happened. Or I do know what happened, because he kissed me, then just like that, it was done, and I could tell he was upset about the fact that he kissed me. So now I’m no longer interested in men, because it’s become glaringly apparent they are all idiots.”

“He kissed you?” Emma’s eyes widen.

“Yes.” I sigh.

“He probably feels weird about it, because your ex and his are together,”

Polly says.

"No." Lizzy shakes her head, and I meet her gaze in the mirror. "You said he was stoic." She glances at Emma, who nods. "I bet you he's one of those guys with a tortured past who has a fear of being hurt or hurting someone else."

"Oh, I like that idea better," Emma says like this is a book and she's trying to figure out a main male character.

"You need to make him jealous," Lizzy adds, and I frown at her. "Trust me, if he's into you, he'll get over whatever is preventing him from making a move the second he sees you with another man."

"Did you miss the part where I'm not interested in him nor the rest of the male species?"

"Lie to yourself if you want, but he's obviously gotten under your skin." She smirks, and if she weren't a client, I would totally tell her off. Heck, I'm half-tempted to leave the bleach on her hair a few minutes longer than I should.

"Well then, this is going to work out perfectly. You can go out with the guy Eli wants you to meet," Emma says happily.

"You do realize that even if I went along with this ridiculous plan, which I'm not going to, Tucker wouldn't have a clue that I was out on a date with someone, so the whole thing is, again, ridiculous."

"Fine. He won't know, but I still think you should start dating again," Emma says, not giving up.

"I just got divorced. I don't need to start dating. Also, I'm pretty sure there is an unwritten rule about not dating too soon after getting out of a long-term relationship."

"I started dating Howard right after I divorced 'he who shall not be named,'" Polly says, then adds, "It was the best decision of my life."

"There's only one Howard, Polly," I say, and everyone, including our clients, nod in agreement, because they all know her husband. He's not always around, but when he does show up, it's to bring in lunch, coffee, flowers, or just to check on Polly during the day and steal a kiss. He's the kindest man I've ever met in my life and better than any man I know.

"This is true," she agrees, "but I also agree with Emma. I think you should

start dating, and I don’t mean sleeping around or even sharing the most important parts of your life with a man. I just mean you should open yourself up to the universe placing your very own Howard in your path.”

Studying her, I think about my life and what I want. I know it’s not hip or cool, because woman power and all that, but I do want a man. Maybe not today, but eventually, I’d like to find someone to spend time with, someone to just hold me at the end of a long day. I miss that, and I know I want to have that again at some point.

Not sure if I’m making the right decision, I look at Emma and let out a long breath. “Okay, I’ll meet Eli’s friend.”

“Really?” she asks, sounding completely surprised.

“It took Polly forty-four years to find Howard, so I might as well start looking now, then maybe by the time Kingston goes off to college, I’ll find Mr. Right.”

“Well, okay then.” She beams at me. “I’ll have Eli set it up.”

“Great.” I don’t beam back at her. Honestly, I can’t even force a smile as I fight the urge to take back my words. Going on a date doesn’t scare me, but the knot in my stomach that is screaming at me that I’m doing something wrong has me second-guessing my decision.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

tucker

Beer in hand, I sit at a table at the edge of a huge outdoor dance floor under the night sky, with the full moon high overhead. I wasn't sure what a wedding in Vegas would look like, but Willow's mom and aunts created magic in the middle of the dessert. Strung lights on tall poles weave back and forth over the dance floor, and each table has a glittering centerpiece with rustic flowers and pompous grass. Even I have to admit it's beautiful.

"If I ever get married, I'm asking Willow's mom and aunts to plan that shit," Dalton says, plopping down in the seat next to mine with a plate piled high with food.

"They did good." I focus on the dance floor when the DJ announces Clay and Willow will be having their first dance.

"Did you ever think you'd see him so happy?"

"No," I say instantly.

"Me neither, but I'm thrilled he fucking found something to focus on that has nothing to do with the past," he says, and I know he's talking about our foster sister Arya, who we had all been close with until she was adopted by a family from another state. Losing her then had been hard, but finding out years later, when we aged out of the system and went looking for her, that she had been trafficked and went down a path that eventually killed her changed all of us.

I think after that we all kind of settled for just being okay. Or I did. I don't even think I know what being *happy* is. If it's what Clay has with Willow, or even if it's what Miles and his daughter Winter share, I know I don't. At one

time, I thought I could build it with Naomie, but I was wrong about that.

"You finally wanna tell me about the woman from the bar?" he asks quietly after a couple of minutes, and fuck if my gut doesn't clench.

"No," I deny promptly, because each time I think about Miranda, about that fucking kiss, about letting her walk away without even attempting to stop her, I want to kick my own ass. I fucked up, and when I saw her face after I reacted like I did, I knew there wasn't going to be any smoothing that shit over. And I shouldn't want to because she deserves a better man than me.

"Who is she?"

"Who's who?" Miles asks, joining us.

"I'm asking him who the woman was he was with at the bar," Dalton answers.

"That's Bowie's wife," Miles mutters, and I take my eyes off Willow and Clay, who are slow dancing, to glare at him. "What? I saw you with her."

"You're fucking with me." Dalton leans past me to look at Miles. "The wife of the dude Naomie was fucking?"

"One and the same." Miles grins, and I pick up my beer, shaking my head at the two of them.

"What the fuck?" Dalton elbows me.

"What the fuck nothing. She's Bowie's ex. We connected over the fact that our exes were having an affair, and that's all," I say low, hoping to end this.

"I saw you with her, bro. Lie to yourself if you want, but that's not why you connected with her," Miles says, then adds, "And if the woman wearing my ring had an affair, the last person I'd be getting cozy with is the wife of the man she cheated on me with."

"She's his *ex*-wife," I bite out. "And you and I aren't the same."

"I know, because I don't lie to myself."

"You sure about that?" I raise a brow. "Since you're so open to talking about shit, let's talk about you and Leah."

"That's different." His jaw twitches.

"Is it?" Dalton asks, sounding doubtful. Then again, we've all seen him and Willow's best friend in the same space.

“She’s a friend, nothing more.” He finishes off his drink, then meets my eye. “And, this isn’t about me. It’s about you pulling your head out of your ass. If you like the woman, then go for it.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It’s only as hard as you make it, brother.” With that, he pats my back, gets up from the table, and walks off.

“He’s not wrong.” Dalton stands. “You like her, go for it. Fuck whatever it is that’s holding you back.”

“Sure,” I mumble, looking at the beer in my hand.

Fuck, I need a stronger drink.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

miranda

Holding Kingston's hand, I shuffle him outside, then maneuver us both around to shut the door, making sure to keep hold of him so he doesn't take off. Not that he's done that again since the whole parking lot fiasco, but I'd rather be safe than sorry.

"Mommy?"

"Yeah, Lovie?" I look down at him as I lock the door to our apartment.

"Why do I haf to go to Daddy's?"

"Remember, Daddy has the day off work tomorrow, so he wants to spend time with you." I adjust his bag and mine on my shoulder, then start walking toward the parking lot.

"I don't want to go to his house. I want to stay wif you at our house." He squeezes my hand, and my heart aches like his tiny fist has wrapped around it.

"I know, but Daddy misses you." I open his door when we get to my car and toss his bag inside before lifting him off the ground.

"I don't want to go." Instead of addressing that comment, because it will likely lead to tears and maybe even a tantrum like earlier, I place him in his car seat. After he's buckled in with no way to escape, I start to tickle and kiss him until he's giggling and shouting at me to stop.

"Okay, okay, I'll stop." I lean back and take in his smiling face. "I love you."

"I wuv you too." With one last kiss to his nose, I step back and shut his door, then open mine.

Before I even get my keys in the ignition, my cell starts to ring, so I dig it out

of my bag, praying it isn't Bowie calling to cancel like he did earlier this week, when he said he had to work overtime and couldn't keep Kingston like planned. Although I would never complain about having the extra time with my baby, it's hard on Kingston, especially at this stage. I know he loves his dad, but right now, he's still very attached to Mom, so I have to get him excited about going to Bowie's when it's his time, then deal with the letdown that comes when those plans change.

Finally pulling it out, I see it's not Bowie but Emma calling, so I press **Ignore**, then send her a quick text that I'll call her back after I drop off Kingston.

I know why she's calling. She wants to make sure I'm still planning on having dinner with Eli's friend Calum tonight. A dinner I've had to cancel a few times, because I've had Kingston and would rather soak up my time with him than have Emma babysit so I can go on a date. One good thing is Calum has been very understanding each time I've basically stood him up, so he has that going for him.

Putting all that out of my head for now—because when I think about my impending date with Calum, I think about Tucker, and I don't want to think about him—I shove my key in the ignition and back out of my parking spot, then head across town.

"Wow." I look at Kingston in the rearview mirror. "It looks like Grandma got a cool new car," I tell him as I pull in behind a fancy red sports car that is parked next to Bowie's truck in the driveway at his house. He doesn't respond. Then again, he's been quiet for most of the drive. The only time I was able to get a little smile out of him was when I pointed out the billboard for a dinosaur exhibit that's happening at the zoo this month. "Ready?" I get his bag, then take him out of his seat, placing him on his feet.

"I want to stay wif you, Mommy."

"Go ring the bell for me," I say, hoping to distract him, and thankfully it works. He runs ahead of me up the sidewalk and climbs the steps. When he presses the bell and the door is opened, the smile on my face falters. I didn't once think about Naomie being here. It never even crossed my mind that I would have to see her in the house where I used to live and that I would be dropping

my son off to spend the night with his dad and possibly her.

Sick to my stomach, I stare at her, and she stares back, looking… triumphant?

“Hey, buddy.” Bowie steps in front of her, blocking her from my view as he bends down to pick up Kingston before his eyes come to me. “Miranda.”

“Hey.” I take two steps toward the door and hold out Kingston’s bag. “He packed some of his toys and a few books.”

“Thanks.” He takes it, and I nod and don’t have a chance to take a step back before Kingston lunges from his dad’s arms and into mine.

“Mommy!”

“Hey,” I whisper against his ear as I hug him tight. “You’re going to have the best time with Daddy.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” he whispers back, and my throat burns. Everything in me wants to run back to my car with him and get as far away from here as I can. But I can’t do that.

“Bud, you’ll see Mom tomorrow,” Bowie says, rubbing Kingston’s back. “And we’re going to have fun. We’re going to the park and to eat ice cream. It’s going to be a great day.”

Forcing a smile, I drag in a breath and move him closer to Bowie. “Go with Daddy, and then call me tonight and tell me everything you did.” After looking at me for a long time, he nods and goes to his dad, tucking his face in his neck.

“He’ll be okay,” Bowie says, and I step back, watching him enter the house without another word, leaving Naomie to shut the door.

Throat tight, I quickly walk to my car, get in, shut the door, and back out of the driveway as I put on my seatbelt. I try—*really* try—to keep my emotions in check, but as soon as I hit the stop sign at the end of the street, a sob filled with helpless anger I can no longer hold back climbs up the back of my throat. I hate Naomie, I hate Bowie, and I hate that I’m so helpless in this situation.

I should be a better woman, the kind of woman to tuck my feelings aside and forge a friendship with the woman who is going to be around my son. And if not a friendship, then at least some kind of relationship that would allow me to get to know her and the kind of person she is.

But I know the kind of person she is, don't I? The kind of woman who would have an affair with a married man and cheat on her husband. She's the worst kind of woman there is, and I have no say in her spending time with my baby.

Jumping when a car behind me honks, I look in the rearview mirror and give an apologetic wave as I press on the gas. By the time I get home, the tears have dried up and my anger has cooled, but my eyes feel swollen, and my face still feels tight from crying. I pull into my parking spot, grab my purse, get out of my car, and rush down the walkway toward my door with my eyes on my feet.

"Miranda."

Lifting my head, my heart plummets into my stomach when I see Tucker standing in front of my door, looking as handsome as ever with his jaw covered in a thick layer of stubble like he hasn't shaved since the last time I saw him.

"Jesus, what the fuck happened?" he asks as rain starts to fall.

"What are you doing here?" I croak, my throat raw from crying, and his expression fills with concern.

"What happened?" he repeats, ignoring my question.

"Nothing."

"Is Kingston okay?"

"He's fine." My chin wobbles. "I just dropped him off to his dad and *Naomie*."

"Shit." He steps toward me, and I take a step back.

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you."

"Why?" I shake my head. I'm a mess, my head is a mess, and seeing him right now is not helping.

"I shouldn't have—"

"I get it," I cut him off before he can say he shouldn't have kissed me. I don't need to hear him say it. Not right now. "That kiss." Tears that had nothing to do with him until this moment fill my eyes. "It shouldn't have happened. You didn't need to come here to tell me that." I start to walk past him, but he grabs my arm, stopping me.

"That's not what I was going to say."

“Then what?” I shake free from his hold.

“Fuck.” He rips his fingers through his hair that is already mussed. “I’ve spent the last five days trying to convince myself to stay away from you, but the minute my plane touched down in Nashville, I found myself getting in my truck and driving to your house.”

I look into his eyes that are still as conflicted as the last time I saw him, but there is also something else there that makes my heart beat funny.

“I fucked up. I shouldn’t have just let you walk away the other night.” He takes a step toward me, and this time I hold my ground.

“Tucker.” I close my eyes and feel his warmth get close.

“You can tell me to fuck off. I’d get it if you did, but I don’t want you to. I want a chance to get to know you, even if I don’t deserve it.”

Opening my eyes, I tip my head back and look up at him. From the moment we met, I’ve felt an odd connection to this man, something I can’t explain, and I know that if I say no now, I’ll never figure out what it is. I’ll never know if it’s just the circumstances that brought us together making me feel the way I do, or if it’s something more.

“Saying no would be the smart thing to do,” I say quietly—to him and myself.

“Maybe.” He takes a step closer, so close his fingertips brush against mine, and the slight touch sends a tingle from my fingers up my arm. “Then again, maybe not.”

Lost in the way he’s looking at me, I let out a breath, then whisper, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes.” My heart begins to pound when he cups my cheek in his warm palm and smooth’s his thumb under my bottom lip.

“Can I take you to dinner tonight?”

Oh God, this is really happening.

“Yes.”

“Are you good with me picking you up at six?” he asks softly, and I nod. “All right.” He looks up when it starts to rain harder. “You should get inside.”

“Okay.” I don’t move, and he doesn’t either. Realizing he’s not going to go

until I do, I take him in for a second more just to confirm I’m not imagining this moment, then book it to my front door and use my key to let myself inside. When the door is closed and locked, I get up on my tiptoes and watch him walk away until he’s out of sight, feeling excited for the first time in a very long time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

miranda

Kicking off my sneakers next to the front door, I head to my bedroom, strip out of my wet clothes, and put on my robe, then grab my cell and dial Emma's number. As it rings, I walk down the hall, picking up toys as I go.

"Hey," she answers. "How was drop-off?"

"Naomie was there."

"I'm sorry. It sounded like you said Naomie was at Bowie's house when you went to drop off your son to his father." she hisses as I dump the handful of toys I'm holding into the toy basket in the living room.

"You didn't mishear me."

"Seriously?"

"Yep."

"God, Bowie is such a dick."

"Agree." I sigh.

"Are you okay?"

"I had a slight breakdown in the car when I left, but I'm better now." I plop down on the couch. "I just wasn't expecting to see her, and it didn't help that Kingston had already had a meltdown about going to his dad's, then he latched on to me, because he didn't want to stay once we got there."

"It's hard on him."

"It is." I lean my head back and close my eyes.

"Did Naomie say anything to you?"

"Not a word, but the look she gave me spoke volumes."

“I hate her.”

“I wish I didn’t.” I let out a breath. “She’s obviously not going anywhere, and I don’t want to hate the woman who could potentially be my son’s stepmom someday.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What? That I wish I didn’t hate her, or that she could be Kingston’s stepmom?”

“Both.”

“It would be easier if I liked her, if I could forge a relationship with her. And you and I both know Bowie could marry her. It’s obvious he cares about her.”

“I guess so, but you have the right to not like her, M. I mean, she did sleep with your husband.”

“I know.” I sigh. “I just wish things were different.”

“Maybe one day they will be.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I agree.

“Enough about Naomie and Bowie. Are you excited about your date tonight?”

“Oh no.” My stomach sinks. I don’t know how I forgot about Calum, but I totally did.

“Oh no, what?” she asks, and I cringe. “Please tell me you’re not going to cancel on him again.”

“I am,” I whisper.

“Miranda.” She sighs.

“Tucker was here waiting for me when I got home.”

“What?” she shrieks. “Why didn’t you lead with that? What did he say? It better be good.”

“He told me that he spent five days convincing himself to stay away, but when he landed in Nashville, he drove straight to my house.”

“Ughhh,” she groans. “I don’t want to like that, but I do.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“So, you’re going out with him?”

“He’s picking me up at six.” My stomach twists just thinking about it. “I’m

so nervous.”

“Don’t be, it’s just a date. If it sucks, you don’t have to see him again, and if it goes well, maybe you’ll get laid.”

“Don’t freak me out!” I cry.

“Why would you be freaked out?”

“What if I’m bad in bed and that’s why Bowie cheated? Plus, my body has changed so much since having Kingston.”

“Shut your mouth. Bowie is an idiot, M, and him cheating had nothing to do with your sex life and everything to do with him being a douchebag. I’m sure if I googled it, even porn stars get cheated on, and they are sex professionals.”

“Sex professionals?” I smile.

“Yes, and even if I don’t know from experience, I’m sure you’re amazing in bed. You’re probably the best.”

“Right.” I laugh.

“And yes, your body has changed, but in the best ways. Your boobs are bigger, and so is your ass, and last I checked, men love both of those things.”

“Whatever.”

“So, what are you wearing?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“I’ll come help you get ready.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I know, but I’m still coming over.”

“Okay,” I give in, because having her here will keep me distracted. Plus, she’s the best hype woman around.

“All right, I’ll see you in a few. I need to run some errands, then I’ll be over.” She hangs up after saying “I love you,” and I stare at my phone for a few minutes before I work up the courage to pull up Calum’s number. As I stare at it, I think about sending him a text, but I don’t want to be that person, so I hit Call. While it rings, I hope he doesn’t answer. I mean, I know it’s messed up, but it would be easier to just leave a message.

“Miranda,” he answers, sounding happy to hear from me, and guilt instantly tightens around my insides.

“Ugh, hey, Calum.”

“Shit.” He laughs. “Are you canceling again?”

“Yes.” I wince. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right. Is your son okay?” Darn, he’s seriously so nice.

“Yes, he’s good. He’s with his dad.” I pick at a thread on my robe. “I… well…” I drag in a breath. “To be honest with you, there’s a guy I connected with recently, and I need to figure out if there is something there before—”

“I get it,” he says softly, cutting me off. “Maybe I’ll see you around sometime.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Good luck, Miranda. I hope it works out for you.”

“Thanks, Calum.”

“Later, babe.”

“Yeah, later.” I hang up, then drop my head back and stare at the ceiling. I know he made that easy for me, but I still feel like a jerk for agreeing to go out with him in the first place, then basically leading him on for a week. Okay, maybe I didn’t lead him on, but I for sure never should have agreed to have dinner with him.

With a groan, I scrub my hands down my face. It’s funny how quickly I forget the most horrible parts about dating. The back and forth, the “does he like me, do I like him, is this going somewhere, and do I even want it to go somewhere?” And then the feeling of just being a crap person when you realize you don’t like someone and have to say that out loud to them.

When my cell starts to ring in my hand, I look at the screen, then frown at the number I don’t recognize, coming in from New York. I debate not answering, but since Kingston is with Bowie, I slide my finger across the screen.

“Hello?”

“What the fuck?” a familiar male voice barks.

“Walker?” I ask, because it sounds like my brother, but there is a lot of background noise.

“Yeah, Miranda, it’s me. What the fuck?”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t understand what answer you’re looking

for, because unfortunately, that's not an actual question."

"You and Bowie got divorced?"

"Yes."

"What the fuck?"

"Again, that's not a question, Walker."

"He cheated on you?"

Darn, I told my parents not to tell him right now.

"He did." I push up off the couch.

"Why didn't you tell me the last time we talked?" he asks as I walk into the kitchen.

"Because I didn't want to worry you. I mean, you have way more important things to think about." *Like staying alive*, I think but don't say, because I know he'll tell me that I worry too much. But how could I not worry? His job is one of the most dangerous jobs you can have, and he has to stay focused when he's working. One slip up could be catastrophic for him, and the men he works with.

"You should have told me."

"I should have." I open the dishwasher so I can start putting everything away. "I just don't want you to worry."

"You're my family. Of course I'm going to worry. How's my nephew?"

"It's been an adjustment, but he's doing okay."

"Fuck," he clips out. "I'm going to kill Bowie."

"How have you been?" I ask, ignoring that comment, because it freaks me out and I know that is something he could probably do without remorse. "Are you dating anyone?"

"I'm seeing someone. She's a flight attendant," he says, and a weight lifts off my shoulders.

"Really?" Honestly, I want to see him settle down, get married, and retire, and I know our parents feel the same. Not that I'm not proud of him for the things he's accomplished; I just worry constantly that something is going to happen, and I'll never hear from him or see him again.

"Yeah, she's from Tennessee actually."

"Small world."

“You’re not wrong.” He lets out a breath. “Now, tell me the truth. How are you?”

“Happy,” I say quietly. “I know I shouldn’t be, given what happened, but I think Bowie and I were over before he started having an affair. I was just too busy to realize it.”

“Do you need anything? I can send you some money.”

My throat gets itchy. I miss my brother. It was hard when he moved away right after high school and left me behind. He was the one solid thing at home, and when he was gone, I didn’t have that anymore. “I’m good. We’re good.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” I say quietly.

“Okay.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to make it home this summer? I’m sure Mom and Dad told you about the RV they bought. They’re going to drive to visit me.”

“They did. I just don’t know right now. Things are up in the air.”

“Well, let me know, and hopefully you can bring the girl.”

“Maybe,” he mutters, sounding distracted by whoever I hear talking to him in the background. “Sorry, kid. I gotta go. Call me soon.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you too.” He ends the call, and I say a silent prayer that he’s safe and that he stays that way.

“ARE YOU SURE THIS IS A TOP?” I ask Emma as I step into my bedroom, where she’s been lounging on my bed while I’ve been getting dressed in my bathroom.

“I’m sure.” She gets up and walks over to stand in front of me, then adjusts the cups of the corset-looking black lace bodysuit she picked up for me when she was running errands this afternoon. The whole thing is molded to me like a second skin with lined cups and sections, then others that are see-through.

“It looks like I’m wearing lingerie.”

“It’s not lingerie. It’s a bodysuit and totally on trend. Plus, you look sexy as

hell in it."

I turn toward the mirror and take myself in. She's right. It is sexy, and I feel sexy wearing it. Still… "I think it's too much for a first date."

"It's not too much, and with your jeans and the blazer you're going to wear over it, it's like a sexy little secret you'll get to reveal at the end of the night."

"I'm not sleeping with Tucker tonight."

"You don't know the future. It could happen." She walks to my closet and opens the door. "Here, put this on."

She hands me a black belt with a gold double-O buckle that is a total knock-off I got of the Gucci belt I saw on one of my clients. After sliding it through the loops of my jeans, I grab my black blazer off my bed and shrug it on, then take the pair of high-heeled booties she hands me.

"Damn, I'm good." She beams at me once I'm fully dressed. Stepping toward the mirror, I pull my hair she helped me curl over my shoulders and take in my reflection. With the blazer, you can barely see my top, but there is a hint of lace and a little bit of cleavage. And with the jeans and booties, I look like I could either be running into Target or going out to a fancy dinner. And since I have no idea where Tucker is taking me tonight, it's the perfect outfit. "What do you think?"

"I love it." I turn toward my best friend and wrap my arms around her. "Thank you."

"You know I've always got your back." She looks at her watch. "I'm going to get out of here, since it's almost time for you to leave."

"I'll call you later." I walk her to the door and let her out, then go back to my bedroom to change out my purse. At five 'til six, there is a knock on my door, and in an instant, my nerves kick in. All day, I've kept myself busy, so I haven't had a chance to overthink things. But when I see Tucker through the peephole, my stomach knots and my palms sweat.

"Hey." I open the door, and my eyes sweep over the stubble still covering his jaw, the thick navy-blue sweater under his jacket, his dark jeans, nice belt, and shoes that match the tan leather. He's the epitome of class, and I wonder if he knows how good-looking he is. I'm sure he does, but at the same time, he

doesn’t seem to be a man who feeds off knowing it, or one who wields it as a weapon against the female species.

“You look gorgeous.” He closes the distance between us as he places a soft kiss on my cheek, the scent of spice and him wrapping around me, making me lightheaded. “These are for you.” A beautiful bouquet of colorful flowers appears between us, and I don’t know how I missed them in his hand.

“Thank you.” I bring them to my nose and meet his gaze over the top of the bouquet. “Do I have time to put these in water?” When he jerks up his chin, I turn into the house and hear him shut the door as I reach the living room.

Heart fluttering, I slip off my blazer, hanging it on the back of a chair so I don’t get it wet, then grab a vase I have under the sink and fill it with water. As I move around the kitchen, I can feel his eyes on me, but I’m too nervous to look at him.

It’s weird; when I’ve been around him before, I’ve felt that flutter of excitement in the pit of my stomach and my pulse race, but this is something more. The heat from his stare and my own nervousness makes me feel almost intoxicated. When I have the flowers trimmed and, in the water, I start to sweep my eyes through him to ask if he’s ready to go, but the question gets stuck in the back of my throat when I catch the almost primal look on his face.

With his jaw tight and eyes hot, I realize my mistake. I also realize I’ve never had a man look at me the way he is right now. Hungry, heated, ravenous.

“It’s not lingerie,” I blurt like an idiot, then ramble, “Emma assured me it’s a top and on trend.”

Clearing his throat, he lifts his chin, acknowledging he heard me, and I quickly go to my blazer and put it on. When I turn back toward him, his hands are balled into fists at his sides like he’s holding himself in check, and I almost wonder what it would take to break him, to make him act out of character.

The kiss we shared was hot, and it was obvious from his reaction after that he didn’t mean for it to happen. Honestly, I’m curious what it would take for him to step out of character again and act on instinct alone. I want that—maybe more than I should.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

tucker

Watching Miranda's ass as she gets into the passenger seat of my truck, I bite back a curse and grip the handle of the door, so I don't fuck this up. I've never been one to lose control, but knowing what she has on under that fucking blazer she's wearing is like holding a match next to a very short fuse. I don't give a fuck what Emma told her about her top; it's without a doubt lingerie and the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life. And if we were at a different place in this thing between us, I would have had her ass on the counter and spread open for me, wearing nothing but black lace.

"Are you okay?"

Coming out of my head, I find her buckled in, her eyes on me.

Shit.

"Yeah." I step back and slam the door shut, then walk around the bed of my truck and get in behind the wheel. "Do you like Mexican?" Starting the engine, I look over at her, watching her unbutton front of her blazer, exposing lace and skin, and I grip the steering wheel. Her eyes ping from my hands, then back to mine again.

When her eyes flare and a subtle smirk forms on her lips, I don't know what comes over me, but I snap. I unhook her belt with a quick flick and drag her toward me by the back of her neck, covering her mouth with mine.

She opens for me and whimpers down my throat as my tongue slips between her lips, and without losing my mouth, she climbs over the console between us and straddles my lap. Gripping her ass in one hand, I circle her throat with the

other and tip her head back, working my tongue and teeth down her neck. She smells good and tastes better.

“Tucker,” she moans, her fingers tugging my hair when I pull the skin at the top of her breast between my lips.

“Fuck, Miranda.” I grab her waist when she rocks against my cock, then slide my hands up to cup her breasts that overflow my palms. She looks down at me, eyes half-mast, lips swollen, and kills me with four words.

“Take me back inside.”

I know I shouldn’t. I know I should place her in her seat and take her out to dinner like I planned. But the hunger in her gaze that matches my own has me taking the key out of the ignition and opening the door. Getting out with her wrapped around me is easier than it should be, and I don’t put her down until we reach her door. “Key,” I order, and she shakily gets it out of her bag, giving it to me.

As soon as I have the door open, I maneuver us both through, then slam it behind us and shove her against the wall. Her hands tug at my sweater, so I strip it off over my head, then rip her blazer off and toss it on the floor. Chest heaving, heart pounding, I take her in, trying to figure out where to start.

Dropping to my knees, I pull off her heels, then unhook her belt and look up at her with my fingers hovering over the button on her jeans. She nods, and I unclasp the button, rip down the zipper, and drag the material down her hips and thighs, tapping one calf, then the other for her to step out of them. Sliding my hands up the smooth skin of her legs that tremble under my touch, I sit back on my heels and pull her forward by the back of her thighs until I’m eye-level with her pussy.

Tipping my head back, I take her in. She looks like a wet dream, shoulders against the wall, her hair down, lace covering her from breasts to pussy. Leaning forward, I breathe her in and hear her gasp when I nudge my nose between her folds through the skimpy material. When she latches onto my hair, I shake my head and pull back.

“Hand on the wall. Don’t touch me.” With a shaky nod, she does as I asked. “Good girl.” I drag the material to the side, my mouth watering. “You’re wet and

swollen here.” I touch her clit with the tips of my fingers, and her hips buck forward.

“And so pretty.”

“Tucker.”

“I’m right here, baby.” I grab her ass and pull her forward, then lift her leg over my shoulder, sinking my tongue into her wetness and spreading her ass to give me more room to work. Adding one finger, then another into the tight, hot wetness of her, I suck her clit and listen to her cry out as her nails try to make purchase on the wall.

My cock throbs. She’s smooth and sweet against my tongue like an expensive whiskey, and before I’m ready to give up the taste of her, I feel her start to pulse around my fingers. When she latches onto my hair to hold me in place as she rides out her orgasm, I let her until her legs stop shaking. Pulling free from her hold, I remove her leg from my shoulder and stand then lift her off her feet. “Bedroom?”

“First door on the right in the hall,” she pants, and I carry her that way, flip on the light, and deposit her on the bed. She watches me with a lust-drunk look as I kick off my shoe and take a condom out of my wallet. When I undo my belt and the button on my jeans, she sits up on her elbows and watches.

My cock springs free when I slide off my jeans, and I wrap my fist around it and squeeze the tip. I’m out of my head with the need to be inside her, and if I don’t do some mental exercises, I’m liable to come before I even get the chance to fully enjoy this moment.

“Tucker,” she whimpers, her thighs rubbing together, and fuck if that isn’t the most erotic sound I have ever heard in my life. Kicking off my jeans, I place one knee on the bed and grab her by the back of her knees, jerking her toward me. She falls to her back with a gasp, then her heels dig into the back of my thighs, and she lifts her head. Kissing her, I move my hand between us, find the clasps of her bodysuit, and unsnap them with a quick tug to the fabric.

I lose her mouth when I kiss down her neck, but when I pull down the cups of her top, exposing her breasts, I have zero regrets. Cupping both, I can’t decide where to start, so I just go for it and pull one into my mouth, then the other.

When I palm her wet pussy, shoving two fingers inside her, I groan and press my erection into the mattress.

Between the sounds she makes and the feel of her nails digging into my back, I'm not going to last much longer, even though I want to enjoy this all night. Letting her nipple go with a pop, I sit back and grab the condom from where I set it and rip it open with my teeth. As I slide it on, she watches, her chest not moving.

"Breathe," I order.

She takes a breath as I settle my weight between her legs, and then she reaches between us, grabbing my dick, sliding her hand up and down and making me groan.

"You can't do that unless you want me to come before I've even gotten inside of you," I hiss, taking my cock from her and rubbing it up and down her cleft before slowly sliding into her inch by inch.

"Oh God, you're so thick." Her hands latch onto my shoulders, her hips shifting back, then up like she can't decide if she wants more or less.

"You can take me." I give up on trying to go slow and slam into her the rest of the way, covering her mouth with mine and swallowing her moan.

Planted deep, I pull back and look into her beautiful eyes when her lashes flutter open, and fuck if I don't have to ignore a feeling starting to swell in the center of my chest. Dragging my eyes off hers, I hook my arm under her knee and slide out of her before going back in for more. She takes every inch, meeting me thrust for thrust, using her hands and feet to pull me back in each time I slide out.

With her heart and mine pounding in tandem and our bodies slick with sweat, I fuck her, biting back my orgasm, and circle her clit until I feel her begin to pulse around my length. Only then do I let go and slow my strokes, wanting to get every second out of this that I can. My balls tighten, my scalp tingles, and I come, planting myself deep inside her, then drop my head to her shoulder and pray I don't pass out.

After a couple of minutes, I somehow find the energy to move us so that I don't crush her. I roll to my back with her sprawled out on top of me, and my

cock is still half-hard inside her.

“Are you okay?” I smooth my hand over her hair.

“Mmhmm,” she hums sleepily, and I grin at the ceiling. “I hope I didn’t just miss you smiling,” she mumbles, and I laugh while her arms tighten around me. “I like that sound.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She lifts her head off my chest and looks down at me, touching the tips of her fingers to the edge of my lip. “You should do it more often.”

“Laugh?”

“Yes, that and smile. You have a great smile.”

Shit, what the fuck kind of spell does this woman have me under? Because being with her like this feels deeper than it should.

“I can’t believe we just did that.” She laughs resting her head on my chest, which is a relief, because it means she’s not looking at me anymore like she can see into my fucking soul. “If Emma ever finds out, she’s going to be so smug.”

“Is she?”

“Yes, which means she can never find out,” she mutters, and I laugh again. “Darn, I keep missing it.”

“The night’s not over.”

“I guess you’re right.” She sighs, then asks quietly, “Do you want to order in food?”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not right this second, but I will be once the euphoria wears off. I haven’t eaten today.”

“We’ll order when you’re ready.”

“All right.” She lets out a breath and snuggles deeper into my chest like she belongs there, and I wrap my arms around her, because fuck me—it feels like she does.

CHAPTER TWENTY

miranda

Sitting on the counter where Tucker planted me five minutes ago when the Chinese food we ordered arrived, I watch him unload the bag wearing nothing but his jeans that are still unbuttoned. Even knowing it happened, because I was there, I can't wrap my mind around the fact that I had sex with him.

No, I didn't just have sex with him. I had mind-blowing, change-your-world sex with him. I've had sex a lot. I mean, maybe not with a lot of partners or even recently, but being married, I did have sex a lot. Okay, again, not recently, but still. And although I thought I knew what good sex was, I was obviously wrong.

The way he spoke to me, the way he just took control and basically used me to get off, is something I've never experienced in my life. If you'd asked me before if I would enjoy something like that, I would have likely had said no. And Lord would I have been wrong. It was amazing… spectacular, actually… and—

"You keep looking at me like that, you're not going to get the chance to eat, because I will be eating you." The roughly spoken statement drags me from my thoughts, and I squeeze my thighs together as I meet his heated gaze.

"Sorry," I whisper, and he wraps his hand around my throat, using his thumb to tip my head back, and kisses me softly. When he pulls back, his eyes search mine for a moment, like he's looking for something. What it is, I have no idea, but his expression gets soft, and he shakes his head before he lets me go, passing me a container of fried rice and orange chicken.

"What time does Kingston get back tomorrow?" He leans against the counter next to me, holding his own container of food.

“In the early afternoon.”

“You picking him up, or is Bowie dropping him off?”

“He’s dropping him before he goes to work.” I take a bite of my food, then look toward where my phone is in my bag when it starts to ring. Glancing at the clock, I see it’s almost eight, around the time Kingston normally goes to bed. “It’s probably Kingston calling to tell me goodnight.”

I hop off the counter and go to my purse. When I pull it out, it’s Bowie calling like I assumed, so I slide my finger across the screen, and before I even get it to my ear, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when I hear Kingston screaming for me in the background.

“What happened?”

“We’re on the way to emergency,” Bowie says, and my vision dims. “Can you meet us there?”

“What happened?” I repeat as I run to my bedroom, feeling Tucker right behind me as I go into my dresser and pull out a pair of sweats.

“He fell in the bathtub. He’s all right, but I think he’s going to need stitches.”

“What hospital?” I turn the phone on speaker and place it on top of the dresser as I put on my sweats and strip off my top so I can put on a bra.

“The children’s emergency at Vanderbilt.”

“Let me talk to him.” I grab a shirt after I have my bra on.

“Bud, Mommy wants to talk to you,” Bowie says, and Kingston stops screaming and whimpers.

“Mommy, I hurt.”

Oh God, I feel like I’m going to have a heart attack or throw up.

“I know, baby, but you’re so brave. Mommy is on the way, okay?”

“I want you.”

“I know, lovie. I’ll see you in just a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” he sobs, and I close my eyes.

“I’ll see you at the hospital,” Bowie says, and I hang up, slip on a pair of Birkenstocks after I put on a hoodie, and spin for the door, almost running face-first into Tucker.

“Do you need your purse?” he asks, and I realize he’s gotten dressed and has

his keys in his hand.

“Yeah, probably.” My hands shake.

“Grab it, baby.”

With a nod, I run to the kitchen and grab my purse, then meet him at the front door. Without a word, we both go to his truck, and once I’m locked in, he jogs around the hood to the driver side.

“It’s going to be okay.” He takes my hand in his, pulling it over to his lap.

“I’ve never heard him scream like that,” I whisper through the ache in my throat.

“He’s probably more scared than anything.”

I know he’s right. Still, all I can think about is my tiny baby with a cut so deep it needs stitches.

The drive to the hospital feels like it takes hours when in reality it’s less than ten minutes, and as soon as he pulls up out front of the emergency room doors, I hop out and jog inside.

“I’m looking for my son,” I tell the receptionist at the desk, and after giving his name and share my ID, she gives me the room number and tells me to head on back. When I push open the door, I find Kingston on the bed with Bowie, and Naomie standing in the corner with her arms crossed over her chest, looking at the two of them. Ignoring the fact that she’s here, I walk toward the bed, where Bowie is holding a towel stained with red against Kingston’s forehead.

“Hey, lovie,” I whisper, and he opens his red-rimmed eyes.

“Mommy,” he croaks, trying to sit up, his voice obviously strained from crying.

“I’m here.” I take a seat next to him, and tears fill my eyes as I take over holding the towel so he can crawl onto my lap. “Has the doctor been in?” I look at Bowie over the top of his head.

“She just left. She went to get the stuff she needs.”

I nod, then look at the door when it’s opened, and my heart tumbles all over itself when Tucker steps into the room.

“What are you doing here?” Naomie asks, and Bowie stands.

“He’s with me,” I say quietly.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Naomie hisses.

“What the fuck, Miranda?” Bowie glares, then snaps, “Are you seeing him?”

“Yes,” Tucker answers as I’m about to tell him it’s none of his business.

“For how long?” Bowie growls, and I hold Kingston’s head against my chest, covering his ear.

“It’s none of your business.”

“You’re my wife.”

“Ex-wife,” Tucker says calmly as he walks over to stand next to me, and I feel anger roll off Bowie.

“You…” Bowie starts but snaps his mouth shut when the door is opened and a very pretty woman around my age wearing scrubs and a white coat walks in, pushing a cart.

The moment she spots Tucker standing over me, she gives him a smile of familiarity, and jealousy instantly curls around my insides. “Tucker.”

“Leah,” he says as his hand wraps around the back of my neck. “You working over here tonight?”

“Yeah, they’re short-staffed.” Her eyes move from his to his hold on me, and she grins. “You must be Miranda.”

“Umm…” I look up at Tucker when his fingers tighten.

“Leah is Willow’s best friend.”

Willow, his brother’s new wife.

My muscles relax, and I look at her. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” She moves her gaze to Kingston and steps toward the bed. “Hey, little man. Are you ready to get your owie fixed up?” she asks, and he shakes his head no. “How about if Mommy holds you?”

His eyes come to mine.

“Can you be extra brave for Mommy, just for a few minutes?”

He nods after a moment, and I get more comfortable on the bed while Leah pushes the cart around, then drags over a rolling stool. When she sits, I watch her, holding my breath as she takes the towel away from the cut that is just above his brow. It’s not very big, maybe half an inch, but it is deep, and seeing it makes me sick to my stomach.

“You okay, Mama?” Leah asks, and I meet her gaze.

“Yes,” I lie, and she nods while Tucker smooths his thumb up and down the side of my neck. His constant touch and steadiness helping me relax as much as I can in this situation.

“So how did this happen?” Leah asks casually as she begins to clean up the wound with a dark liquid that smells horrible. I look at Bowie, who is standing near but not next to Naomie. That’s a good question, one that I would like the answer to.

“He was in the bath,” Bowie says, crossing his arms over his chest. “He must have fallen.”

“You weren’t in there with him?” I breathe in disbelief because that’s a rule we’ve *always* had. We never leave him in the tub unsupervised. Yes, he would probably be okay, but he’s still little, and one slip could have disastrous consequences. Obviously.

“I stepped out for a second.”

“Mommy,” Kingston whimpers, and I focus on him instead of the fact that I want to kill his dad.

“It’s okay, lovie,” I assure him softly, holding him tighter, and keep my eyes on his as Leah works. When she begins the stitches, time slows, and tears fill my eyes as I listen to him cry. It’s torture seeing him in pain, and I wish more than anything I could take the hurt for him.

“Done,” Leah finally whispers, and I look at the row of tiny sutures above his eye and then down at his face. He looks exhausted. “You did so good,” she tells him, smoothing her hand over his hair. “Do you want a super-special sticker?”

He nods, and she reaches into her pocket, pulling out one with superheroes on it. He holds it against his chest, and I drag in a deep breath before I look at Leah.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She looks at me, then Bowie. “You can give him some Tylenol when you get home and put some ice on it to help with swelling. On Monday, you should call his doctor and update him about what happened, and he

or she should be able to remove the stitches without much of a hassle when it's time." I nod. "It was nice meeting you." She looks at Tucker. "I'm sure I'll see you around."

"Yeah," he says softly, and I realize he's still holding me, that he's never let me go, not even for a second.

Her eyes come back to me. "They'll check you out in the front, and if you need anything, Tucker has my cell. You can give me a call anytime."

"Thank you."

"No problem." She looks at Bowie and Naomie and says a quiet goodbye to the two of them before she leaves the room.

As soon as she's gone, the tension that was in the room before she walked in comes back with a vengeance, and I look down at Kingston, who's got his eyes closed.

"Do you mind if I take him home with me?" I ask Bowie softly, and he looks between Tucker and me with his jaw tight.

"I want to stay with Mommy," Kingston whispers, wrapping his tiny arms around my middle as tightly as he can, and I glance down at his sleepy face.

"Is he staying with you?" Bowie jerks his chin toward Tucker, and I wish I had something I could throw at his stupid head.

"I want to stay with Mommy," Kingston repeats, and my chest gets tight, because even if Bowie says no right now, there is no way I'm leaving this hospital or going home without my son.

"Fine," Bowie gives in after a long moment, and my muscles relax.

I carefully get up off the bed, holding Kingston against my chest, and Tucker opens the door for us. It takes a few minutes for us to get checked out, because even with insurance, we have to pay a fee for the emergency room visit, so by the time we are done, Kingston is asleep in my arms.

"I'll drive you guys home," Bowie says when we get outside, and I feel Tucker's body, which is up against mine, grow rigid, and I catch Naomie glare at him for the suggestion.

"Tucker will drive us. I just need to borrow your car seat because Tucker drove me here," I say calmly, and he looks like he wants to argue with me, but

then he glances at Kingston.

“I’ll bring it over to you,” he mutters, walking away, and I look up at Tucker.

“So, this has been a great first date, wouldn’t you say?” I whisper, and he steps further into my space, meaning he presses his body up against my side, careful of Kingston.

“Without a doubt, this is the best first date I’ve ever had.”

“Liar,” I whisper, and he grins a real genuine grin, and even though my baby who had to get stitches is passed out in my arms and my ex-husband and the woman he cheated on me with are just a few feet away, that feeling of happiness and excitement I felt earlier is still there as I look into his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

tucker

Parked outside the high school Kristen attended before her death and where Carrie still goes, I glance down at my cell when it pings with a text from Miranda.

Ice cream makes everything better.

Clicking on the picture that's attached, I smile at the photo of her with Kingston sitting on her lap, him holding an ice cream cone, the two of them grinning at the camera. The stitches above his brow are so delicate they wouldn't be noticeable if it weren't for the bruise that accompanies them.

"Shit, she's got you smiling at your phone," Miles mutters, and I click the side of my cell, turning the screen dark.

"Don't be a dick." I send a glare his direction.

"Just saying it's nice to see you happy." He grins, and my chest gets tight, because fuck me, I am happy, and that scares the shit out of me. "Is Kingston feeling better?"

"He and Miranda are out getting ice cream."

"Ice cream makes everything better," he mutters, and I shake my head.

"Heads up." He nods past me, and I glance out the window as kids begin to flood out through the doors of the school.

It takes a while for Carrie to appear, and when she does, she's alone, head down, baggy jeans dragging on the sidewalk, and backpack so heavy she's hunched over from the weight. When she begins to walk toward the road, my

hand goes to the key in the ignition but hovers there when I see two girls in cheer outfits approach her.

Dr. Marvin Harvey, the principal at the high school, gave us a list of students a month ago when we asked him about anyone who had regular contact with Kristen, and both Livy and Isabel were on it. Unfortunately, he didn't know that Kristen had a falling out with both girls last school year when Kristen started, wearing darker makeup, dressing differently, and hanging with Carrie.

When we spoke to the girls, they were visibly shaken by the recent news that Kristen had been murdered and immediately jumped to the conclusion that Carrie had something to do with it. When we asked them why they thought that they told us Carrie was into witchcraft and worshiped the devil because she wore a pentagram necklace.

"Shit," I mumble when I see Livy push Carrie, who visibly pales as the girls say something we can't hear.

"I'll go." Miles hops out of the truck and looks both ways before he jogs across the street toward the school.

As I watch him approach the girls, Carrie looks surprised to see him, but Livy and Isabel almost appear… gleeful? Hitting the button for my window, it rolls down, and I listen but can't hear shit between the traffic and the sound of kids messing around after being set free after a day of having to keep quiet. When Miles places his hand on Carrie's arm as he talks to Livy and Isabel, their shoulders slump, and a couple of seconds later, they turn and walk off, their ponytails bouncing behind them. Turning toward Carrie when the girls are out of earshot, I see him jerk his chin my way, and she looks in my direction before nodding and dropping her eyes to her feet.

"Fuck," I mutter to myself when the two of them start across the street toward my truck. Opening the back door for her, he waits until she's inside, and I look at her in the rearview mirror when she's seated, but she keeps her eyes on her lap.

"We're gonna take her home," Miles says, getting in, and it's on the tip of my tongue to say something sarcastic, but I bite it back.

"Everything okay, Carrie?" I ask as I pull out into traffic.

“Yeah,” she murmurs, and I glance over at Miles, and he shakes his head.

Our plan today was to follow her on her walk home, keep out of sight, and see if she stopped to visit anyone on the way. With that plan now gone to shit and her now going to be on the lookout for us in the future, we are fucked.

“Are you going straight home?”

“Yes,” she answers quietly, and I head in the direction of her apartment, which is only a couple of blocks from the school. When we arrive, I scan the lot for Miranda’s car, and its nowhere in sight, so she’s probably still out with Kingston.

Parking, I look over at Miles when he starts to speak.

“So, what happened with those girls today?” he asks her, and I look at her in the rearview mirror.

“I didn’t tell Isabel I was going to kill her, if that’s what you’re asking,” she says, her voice tight like she’s trying not to cry. “They are…” She snaps her mouth shut and looks out the window.

“They’re what?” I ask gently.

“Mean. Everyone thinks they’re so nice, but they’re not.”

“Why did Kristen and they fall out?” Miles asks, and she drags in a breath before she looks his way.

“I don’t know. She never told me. They were all friends, then Kristen started having lunch with me, and….” Her chin wobbles. “At first, I thought she was playing a game, you know? Trying to be nice to me, only to be mean, but she wasn’t.”

“I’m sorry.” I turn to look at her over my shoulder.

“Can I go?” she mumbles, and when I nod, she pushes open the door, hops down, and slams it shut before she rushes toward her doorway.

“I don’t know about you, but I’d like to know what happened between Kristen and her old friends.”

“We’re on the same page. What did they say when you approached?”

“That they were just confronting Carrie, because Livy heard she was going to kill Isabel, and since Carrie killed Kristen, Livy took that as a serious threat.”

“Mean girls.”

“That’d be my guess,” he says, then smiles huge, looking past me. I turn and watch Miranda get out of her car, a smile curving her full lips when her eyes land on mine.

Unhooking my belt, I push open my door as she opens her back door. “Fancy seeing you here,” she says as I walk around to meet her, my hands clenched into fists at my sides when I’m standing close enough to touch her. Dropping her eyes to my hands, she rubs her lips together, then takes a step toward me and rests her palm on my chest before leaning up on her tiptoes to touch her lips to the edge of my mouth. When she leans back, her eyes wander over my face, and she smiles before asking softly, “Are you here for work?”

“Yeah.” She nods, and I look into the car at Kingston, who’s unbuckling himself. “How was your ice cream?”

“Good.” He gets out of his seat and jumps into my arms, catching me off guard.

“Did you bring me some?” I move him away from the firearm strapped to my side.

“Nope.” He shakes his head, then looks around me. “Who’s that?”

Glancing at Miles, I then focus back on him. “My brother, Miles.”

“What’s up, little dude?” Miles holds up his hand for a high-five, then he turns his attention to Miranda and reaches his hand out toward her. “Since he’s not going to introduce us, I’m Miles.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” She laughs.

“You too. He talks about you all the time.” He pats my shoulder, and she looks at me, pressing her lips together like she’s trying not to laugh.

“Are you coming to noodles?” Kingston asks, touching my cheek, and I tip my chin down toward him.

“Noodles?”

“I was going to call you,” Miranda says, taking him when he reaches for her. “He wants to go out for noodles tonight and wanted me to ask you to join us.”

“There’s a noodle place?” Miles asks.

“Noodles and Company downtown. They have every kind of pasta you could think of.”

“I’ll have to take my daughter Winter there.” His face gets soft. “Pasta is her favorite food group.”

“Kingston’s too,” Miranda says softly, and I want to punch my brother in the face, because I’m the only one I want her soft and sweet for. Well, besides her son obviously.

“I should be able to get back here by five thirty or six, if that works?” I say and her attention comes back to me.

“That’s perfect.” She smiles then looks down at Kingston when he touches her face.

“I have to potty.” He tells her.

“Alight.” She glances at Miles. “I’m going to get him inside, but it was nice meeting you.”

“You too.” He jerks up his chin.

“I’ll see you tonight.” she looks at me, and her face gets soft before she puts Kingston on his feet and takes his hand.

“See you babe.”

“Say ‘later,’ lovie.” She says to Kingston turning him away from us.

“Later.” He waves, and I watch the two of them get inside safely before I hop back into my truck.

“She’s pretty and seems sweet,” Miles says casually as I back out of my parking space.

“She is.”

“And her kid is cute.”

“Why are you telling me shit I know?”

“Because I wanna make sure you *know*,” he says, and I look over at him. “Sometimes, we don’t realize what is right in front of us, and I’m telling you, brother, that you could have something beautiful if you don’t fuck it up.”

“I’m not going to fuck it up, and we just started seeing each other.”

“That might be, but it’s obvious she’s opening the door and allowing you into her life, and her kid’s life. That’s huge, bigger than you probably realize.”

“I do realize how big it is.” And I do. I knew that when I flashed my badge last night so I could get into the room with her and her son. I knew doing that

would put her and me in front of her ex and likely create drama for not just her but for both of us. But I wanted him to know she wasn't alone. I wanted him to know I was there. I also did it, because there was a ball of jealousy sitting in my gut, since I couldn't stand the idea of her being around him.

They have a connection that she and I don't have, something that will link the two of them together for at least the next fourteen years, if not longer. Maybe with time, I'll get over it, but right now, I'm in a place I've never been before. Of course, I cared about Naomie when we got together, but I never got jealous. Not even when I found out she had gone on a couple of dates with Clay before we met did I feel a need to piss all over her. With Miranda, it's different, and I know I'm fucked, because if I feel like this now, who knows what's going to happen if this goes the way I think it might.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

miranda

"Mommy, I'm hungry." Kingston wraps his arms around my thigh, and I stop applying mascara to my lashes and look down at his adorable, upturned face.

"We have about thirty minutes before we will be able to go. Do you want a snack?"

"Cookies?" He pops out his bottom lip, and I laugh.

"One cookie and some apple slices."

"Deal." He grins.

"Okay, give Mommy a couple of minutes to finish her makeup, and I'll get you a snack."

"Okay." He sighs, and I turn back to the mirror and finish with my mascara, then add some blush and bronzer.

When I'm done, I step into my bedroom, where he is sitting on the bed running over his dinosaur with his truck while one of his shows plays on his iPad that he's not paying any attention to. Today, he's been his normal, happy, rambunctious self, only complaining once about being in any kind of pain. And that came after he bumped his head into the couch while playing. Though the promise of ice cream quickly fixed the meltdown he was having after that took place.

"Ready?"

"Yes." He scampers over the side of the mattress, landing easily on the floor at the edge of the bed, then runs out of the room ahead of me.

As I'm passing by the front door, there is a knock that makes me frown. I

checked the time not long ago, and although Tucker was a couple of minutes early last night for our date, him coming this early would be odd without a phone call. Going to the door, I look through the peephole, and when I see Bowie standing outside wearing his uniform, I draw in a calming breath.

This morning, he called to check on Kingston—or that's the excuse he used when I first answered. Within about thirty seconds, the call turned into him grilling me about Tucker.

"Hey." I swing the door open, and his eyes sweep over my hair, face, and the lounge set I'm wearing, since I haven't gotten dressed yet.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Kingston and I are going out to dinner." I turn my back on him and start down the short hall. "Kingston, your dad is here to see you."

"With Tucker?" Bowie asks.

"Yes." I sigh, walking into the living room, where I spot Kingston hiding under a blanket on the couch.

"I can't believe you're seeing him, Miranda. Do you know how fucked up that is? Are you trying to get back at me?" he whispers at my back.

Ignoring him, I go to the couch and pull back the blanket. "Hey, did you hear me say Daddy is here?"

"I want to stay wif you."

"Lovie, you're not going with Daddy. He just wanted to check on you," I say quietly, and he looks to where Bowie is standing behind me.

"I just wanted to give you a hug, bud," Bowie adds, and after studying his dad for a few seconds, he gets up and goes to him.

As the two of them talk quietly, I go to the kitchen and get Kingston his snack, then grab my cell when a text comes in. When I see it's from Tucker letting me know he's on his way, my stomach twists. My biggest worry is that Bowie is going to do or say something that will cause Tucker to realize the stress of dating a single newly divorced mom is not worth the hassle. And since that would seriously suck and hurt more than it should this early on, I hate the idea of them in the same space.

Wanting to be honest, I text him back that Bowie is here visiting with

Kingston but that he should still knock when he arrives instead of waiting in his truck. After pressing Send, I take the cookie and apple slices to the table. “Here you go, lovie.” I point out his snack, and he wiggles out of his dad’s arms. When he is sitting at the table, I wander back into the kitchen and put one of his sippy cups in my bag for tonight, and Bowie comes over to join me.

“Are you not going to tell me anything? Like when you two started seeing each other? Was it while we were married?” he asks, and I glare at him. “I’m just asking.”

“No, it was not while we were married.” I leave out the “not technically,” since Tucker and I did meet before either of us was divorced.

“So when? Are you doing this to get back at me?”

Gah! How many times is he going to ask me that stupid question?

“The world doesn’t revolve around you, Bowie.” I sigh, then add, “Me and Tucker seeing each other has nothing to do with you or Naomie.”

“You know she’s still sleeping with him, right?” he prompts, and although I do not believe him, not even a little bit, just the thought of him with her makes my skin crawl. “You don’t have to believe me, but it’s true.”

“If you think that’s true, then why are *you* still seeing her?” I raise a brow.

“I told you before that it’s not serious between her and me.”

“You have her around our son,” I point out, because if I didn’t think what Tucker and I have could possibly go somewhere, there is no way I would have him around Kingston. And if he were a guy I was just banging, I would *never* bring him near my son.

“All right, then it’s complicated,” he says, and I shake my head at how ridiculous he sounds.

“How long are you staying?” I ask.

“Why?” His jaw clenches. “Do you want me to leave before he shows up?”

“I don’t care if you’re here or not when Tucker gets here. But if you’re sticking around for a few minutes, I’m going to finish getting dressed.”

“You want me to watch our son while you go get dressed to go on a date with another man?”

“Never mind. I’ll wait.” I walk past him and take a seat next to Kingston at

the table, hoping he at least has it in him to keep quiet while our son is around.

“Go get dressed. I’ll sit with him,” he grumbles, coming to stand over me, and with another deep breath that does nothing to help with how annoyed I am, I get up without looking at him and walk to my room.

It doesn’t take me long to get dressed, since I’m just wearing jeans and a sweater, so when I’m done, I actually think about just hiding in my room and waiting for Tucker to arrive. That way, I don’t have to deal with Bowie. The constant questions are irritating, and even if I can understand why he’s curious, it bothers me that he expects me to answer them. Especially when he’s the one who set the rules for how we will address each other’s relationships going forward. And yeah, it might say something not so nice about me that I’m doing to him what I hated him doing to me, but I don’t care.

When I get back into the living room, Kingston is done eating, so I take his plate to the kitchen and put it in the dishwasher, busying myself in the kitchen while he and his dad hang out on the couch. Before long, there is a knock at the door, and I see Bowie look at me, then down the hall with his jaw tight.

I don’t bother checking the peephole when I reach the door. I open it, and in an instant, the tension in my body is released when my eyes connect with Tucker’s.

“Hi.” I step back to let him inside and drop my eyes to his hands. Like earlier today, they are clenched tight, like he’s holding himself back from touching me, and there is something about him doing that that makes me want his touch even more. “We’re ready. I just need to get my purse.”

I lead him into the living room, and when Kingston sees him, his face lights up, and he runs to Tucker and grabs his hand. With my breath held in the back of my throat, I watch my baby introduce Tucker to his dad, not knowing they have met. And although I can feel the air in the room get thick with tension, both men play it off for Kingston’s sake.

I grab my bag from the counter along with my cell, then usher Kingston to the front door to get on his shoes while both men follow us. After we get outside and I lock up, Kingston walks ahead with Bowie, and Tucker takes my hand.

“I’ll see you tomorrow after school,” Bowie tells Kingston, giving him a hug

when we reach the end of the sidewalk, and I hate the reminder that he won't be with me tomorrow. "Later." His gaze comes to Tucker and me and pings back and forth between us.

"Later." I hold out my free hand to Kingston, and he runs toward me and grabs it as I look up at Tucker. "We can take my car, since I have a car seat."

"Do you have your keys?" I nod, getting them out of my bag, and he takes them from me. I don't even ask if he's going to drive. I'm pretty sure he would be offended if I told him he was sitting in the passenger seat. Actually, he might get physically ill just from the suggestion alone. Opening the back door for Kingston, I watch him buckle in, then I make sure he's strapped in properly before I close it.

As I start to walk around the truck, Tucker grasps my wrist, using his hold to spin me around to face him. My breath catches as his hand wraps around my throat, and he walks me backward until I'm pressed up against the trunk of my car. Heart thundering against my ribcage, my eyes slide closed when his mouth lands on mine, and I whimper at the taste of him when his tongue slips past my lips. The kiss doesn't last long, but it's wet and deep, and by the time he pulls back, I'm desperate for more and starved for oxygen.

"I needed that," he mutters, rolling his thumb over my bottom lip, and my lashes flutter open, finding his gaze roaming over my face.

I swallow as I watch him. I've never had someone seem so determined to keep their hands off me yet so desperate to touch me within the same breath. It's as unnerving as it is exhilarating that I have that kind of power over him.

"What are you thinking?" he asks softly, and I rest my hands on his chest.

"That I like it when you break your cover."

"Pardon?"

"You do this thing where it's like you fight to keep from touching me, but you can only last for so long before you give in to the urge."

"That's accurate." He slides his hand back down to my neck, and his fingers press into where my pulse is thumping.

"Is it?"

"I'm trying to be a gentleman."

“Is that it?” I look into his eyes, and memories of him being the complete opposite of a gentleman flash through my mind. Even the mere thought has my thighs trembling.

“It’s that look right there that makes it difficult.” He takes a step back, holding his hands at his sides. “Let’s go feed your boy.”

“Yeah.” I take a shaky breath and let him lead me around to my door. Once I’m seated, he closes me inside and walks around the hood. Reaching for my seatbelt, my eyes connect with Bowie’s disgust-filled ones. I had no idea he was still parked in his cruiser a few empty spaces over.

If I had…

I drag in a breath.

I wouldn’t have done anything differently, because I’m not doing anything wrong, and I refuse to feel bad for being happy or for kissing a guy I like, who seems to feel the same about me.

Finishing with my belt, Tucker gets in behind the wheel, and I look back at Kingston, who’s distracted by the game he keeps in his cup holder, one where you press the button and try to get a round hoop on the nose of a dolphin in the water.

“Are you ready to go eat, lovie?”

“I’ve been weady,” he says without looking at me, and I press my lips together, hearing Tucker make a noise in the back of his throat that sounds like he’s trying not to laugh.

Looking at him, I shake my head, saying quietly, “You know he’s only going to be four. The sarcasm is slightly concerning, given I have years before he’s an actual teenager.”

“He’s a kid.” He looks over at me as he backs out of my parking space. “He knows he can be himself with you. It’s not a bad thing.” He puts the engine in drive.

With a sigh, I face the windshield. “You’re probably right, but I still think I need to be worried,” I mumble and catch him smile out the corner of my eye as his hand wraps around mine so he can drag it across the console to his thigh.

Keeping it there securely with his palm over it, he drives us the short

distance to the restaurant, the conversation light, mostly about what Kingston and I did today and a little about Miles and his daughter Winter.

When we arrive at the restaurant, he carries Kingston inside because he refuses to walk, and the three of us place our orders. We find a booth and get settled, with Kingston and me on one side and Tucker across from us.

Like most of the times when we are out to eat, Kingston asks for his iPad and headphones as soon as we are seated, and I give them to him. I'm sure some parenting guru would probably tell me I shouldn't—it's also something I said I would never do if I had a kid, before I actually knew what having a kid was like. But one thing I learned quickly when Kingston was old enough to walk and talk is I would rather have him distracted by a show during a meal than creating havoc and climbing all over the place.

Hearing the ping of a text, I look across the table at Tucker and watch his mouth flatten into a hard line as he checks the screen.

"Everything okay?" He glances at Kingston, whose ears are covered, then his gaze comes back to mine.

"Naomie is on a mission to create drama," he says softly, and my stomach twists. "I hadn't heard from her since we finalized our divorce, but she's sent me about a dozen text messages today, asking if she can come over so we can talk."

I press my lips together. "It seems like your ex and mine are reading the same book. Bowie told me today that you and Naomie are still…" I glace down at Kingston quickly before focusing back across the table. "You know."

"We're not." His jaw gets hard.

"I know," I say quietly, then add, "I didn't believe him."

"Good."

"It seems like all is not perfect in paradise."

"That's on them."

"Yeah," I whisper because he's right. That is on them, and they deserve each other.

"Do you want to play a game wif me?" Kingston asks, looking at Tucker as he takes off his headphones and sets them aside.

"Sure, bud." Instead of Kingston asking for me to move so he can go around

to the other side of the table, he disappears under it and appears a second later next to Tucker.

I watch the two of them as they play something on the iPad, then when our food arrives, Tucker sets it aside and helps Kingston stay focused on eating. It's sweet and obvious that he's had experience, most likely with his niece. By the time we are done and get home, it's time for Kingston to bathe and go to bed, so Tucker doesn't stick around long, but he does kiss me at the door before he leaves and promises to see me the next evening when he gets off work.

So, all in all, it's a flipping great *real* first date.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

miranda

"M, your phone's ringing!" Emma shouts, and I glance at her over my shoulder.

"I'll call them back." I finish rinsing out my client's hair, then soak it with the toner I've already prepared. When I have it completely covered, I touch her shoulder, and she opens her eyes. "Fifteen minutes."

"Okay." She smiles before closing her eyes once more.

I go to the next sink and wash my hands, then set a timer before I wander back to my station. I check the screen of my phone, and my heart drops into my stomach when I see the call I missed is from Bowie, who would have picked up Kingston about an hour ago from daycare.

Dialing him back, I put my phone to my ear and wrap my arm around my middle as I listen to the phone ring.

"Hey," Bowie answers, sounding totally normal, and with Kingston not crying or screaming in the background, my muscles relax.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Kingston and I were talking about what to do for dinner, and I think we're going to go to that Mexican place you love downtown. I wanted to see if you'd like to join us when you get off work?"

"Umm, sorry, I can't." I look over at Emma, who I can feel staring at me from where she's sitting in her chair between clients.

"Why not?" Bowie asks, and Emma raises a brow.

"I have plans," I say slowly.

“With Tucker?” The question makes me want to throw my cell across the salon, and the only reason I don’t do that is because, right now, I can’t afford a new one.

“I’m with a client right now. Can you tell Kingston I’ll call him at bedtime?” I ask because it’s obvious I need to change the subject. It’s also obvious that Bowie is set to play a game I have zero interest in.

“Yeah, sure.” He hangs up without even saying goodbye, and I glare at my phone.

“Let me guess,” Emma says, and I look up at her. “That was Bowie, and he wanted to invite you to go out to dinner with him and Kingston?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Because Bowie is a jealous idiot who doesn’t want anyone to have what he considers his, even if he wasn’t taking care of it.”

“It’s so annoying.” I sigh as I begin to clean up my station and get ready to cut and blow out my client’s hair.

“I bet it is.”

“Tucker told me last night that Naomie has been messaging him too.”

“She and Bowie deserve each other.” Her eyes wander over my face, and she sighs. “I hate to tell you this, but they won’t stop. If the two of them are unhappy with each other, they are going to despise the fact that you and Tucker *are* happy together.”

“I know. I just don’t know how worried I should be.”

“Why would you be worried?”

“Tucker and I are just beginning to get to know each other. Things are fragile right now, and—”

“And nothing,” she cuts me off. “If Tucker has staying power, he’s going to take care of what Bowie should have been taking care of all along, and neither your ex nor his is going to be able to stop him from doing that.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I know I am, and I can see you’re happy, M. *Really* freaking happy. So let Bowie bask in the glory of knowing he might have hurt you, but in the end, you are still winning. Screw him and his too-late regrets.”

“Do you know how much I love you?”

“As much as I love you.” She gets up when her client walks in and waves before stopping at the receptionist. “So, what are you doing tonight?”

“I don’t know. He’s working and isn’t sure what time he will be off, but he sent me a text this afternoon and told me that he would call as soon as he’s free.”

“We’ll have to do a double date one night.”

“That would be fun. I’ll talk to Tucker,” I say as I start to walk across the salon when the timer I set goes off.

It takes me another hour to finish with my client, and as soon as she leaves, a walk-in comes in for a trim and blow-out, and with Kingston not home, I take it. And I’m happy I do when she leaves me a fifty-dollar tip. Every extra dollar is a win right now, because life is expensive, and even if Bowie is giving me child support, the amount is a joke compared to the actual cost of taking care of a growing boy.

I leave the salon at a little after five, and since I haven’t heard from Tucker, I send him a message letting him know I’m off and heading home. By the time I reach my complex, there is a message from him waiting for me.

> It’s going to be another hour for me. How do you feel about coming to my place and me cooking us dinner?

That sounds good.

I jump at the idea. First, because I’ve never had a man cook for me before, unless you count macaroni and cheese or scrambled eggs, which might be exactly what he plans on cooking. And second, I’m curious about where he lives. You can tell a lot about a person by their home, and I want to find out anything I can about him, and maybe being in his space will give that to me.

When I reach the alcove to my apartment, Carrie is sitting on the step that leads to the apartments above us. When she sees me, she ducks her head, but she’s not fast enough for me to miss the fact that she’s upset.

“Hey.” I approach her slowly, and she wipes her cheeks as she looks up at me. “Is everything okay?”

A couple of days ago, I met her dad, an older man with a bulky frame and

exhaustion etched into his features. He was very kind when introducing himself and told me that he works nights, normally leaving around six and sleeping during the day when he's home, so I probably wouldn't see him much. He also told me Carrie is home alone a lot, because her mom isn't really in her life. I had assumed as much because I have never seen a woman around, but the confirmation made me sad for Carrie, especially at her age. Not that dads aren't great, but when you're a teenage girl, you need that attention, love, and advice only a mom or a woman can give.

"Yes." She drops her eyes from mine, and I take my bag off my shoulder and take a seat on the steps next to her.

"Did you get locked out again?"

"No." She fiddles with her hands in her lap, and I want to reach for her, give her a hug, and tell her things will be okay. But I don't think she would accept that from me. I also don't think it's my place.

"Did you have school today?" I ask after a couple of minutes.

"Yes."

I nod, then ask, "What grade are you in?"

"Eleventh."

"You graduate next year." I smile.

"I … I actually graduate this year."

This information shocks me. And I feel guilty for judging her by her appearance, like I'm sure a lot of people do.

"You must be really smart," I say softly, and she shrugs. "What are you going to do when you graduate?"

"Find a job, I guess."

"What about college, or is there something else you love doing?"

"My dad can't afford to pay for me to go to college."

"There are scholarships and lots of other ways to pay for school, especially with your grades, if you're already able to graduate. Have you talked to the counselor at school?"

"No." She shakes her head.

"Okay, so what is your favorite subject, and if money weren't an issue, what

would you want to be?”

“A computer scientist.”

“I have no idea what that is,” I say, and she giggles, the sound seeming so young and innocent, the complete opposite of her appearance.

“You like … make apps and games and stuff.”

“That’s cool. So that’s something you’re into?”

“I like it.” She looks over at me.

“I have a friend who works at one of the local colleges. I could see if she’d be willing to talk to you about enrollment and point you in the direction of scholarships or financial aid.” I mean, Nikki does owe me. Plus, she’d do it just because it’s something she loves.

“Why would you do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you don’t know me.”

“You’re right.” I drop my eyes from hers, then say quietly, “When I was in high school, my grades were horrible. Not just a little bad, I mean I barely passed my classes. Especially math. I sucked at math, and because of my grades, college wasn’t even an option for me.”

I smile sadly, remembering that time like it was yesterday. It’s not that I was dumb, but with things going on at home and my parents caught up in their own drama, I didn’t get the support I needed. Even with the two of them working in the school system.

“While everyone else had all these grand plans for after high school, I was wondering what I would do with myself. I thought about going into the military, but you have to pass a test for that, so I knew even that wouldn’t be a possibility, so my best bet was just getting a job.” I look over at her and find her eyes on me. “I started working at a hair salon after school, sweeping the floors and answering the phone. When the owner saw I had an interest and a talent for helping clients choose colors and cuts, she told me about a cosmetology school I could go to, and she helped me get enrolled.” I meet her gaze. “She didn’t really know me, but she saw something in me, and I guess I see that same thing in you.” I nudge my shoulder into hers. “So, if you want to talk to my friend, you just let me

know, and I'll make it happen."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, and if you ever want me to do your hair or anything, I'm right next door. All you have to do is knock."

"Really?"

"Absolutely." I take her in. She really is a very pretty girl, but her dark hair and makeup hide that from the world. I'm sure it's a defense mechanism she uses so people avoid her. I'm also sure it works, which sucks, especially right now, when she needs all the support she can get.

"Okay." She eyes me for a moment, then stands. "I should go in. Dad is going to be up soon for work, and I need to make dinner."

"All right. It was nice talking to you, Carrie."

"You too." She disappears around the corner, and I hear the door to her apartment open and shut. With a deep breath, I push up off the stairs and head into my place, hoping she takes me up on my offer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

miranda

With a mass of tangled-up butterflies in the pit of my stomach, I drive down a dimly lit street with train tracks that are blocked off by a tall metal fence on one side, and on the other is a somewhat sketchy-looking industrial building that seems to be under construction.

Pulling over to the curb between cars, I click on the text that Tucker sent me to make sure I didn't mess it up when I was putting his address into my GPS app. I didn't. I bite my lip and glance around, wondering if Tucker isn't who I thought he was. Or if maybe he's a detective by day and a serial killer by night, who lures the unsuspecting women he's charmed to abandoned buildings, where he kills them.

I start to put the engine in drive so I can pull away from the curb with a plan to call Tucker, but I end up screaming at the top of my lungs like I'm being murdered when suddenly there is a knock on my window.

"It's just me," Tucker says through the glass, and with my heart pounding, I focus on his face. "I didn't mean to scare you." He opens my door, and I look at the building, then back at him.

"This is where you live?"

"Mostly."

"Are you homeless?" I frown at him, and his lips curve up into a smile.

"No."

"So you live in an abandoned building, and you're not homeless?"

"It's not abandoned. The outside electric work is being done while Clay and

Willow are out of town. That's why it's dark out here." He reaches across me and unhooks my belt. "I have dinner on the stove."

"I…" I start to say I'm getting serious serial-killer vibes from this situation, but instead, I gasp when he drags me out of the car by my hand, then reaches in for my bag and to shut off the engine.

"Ready?"

"Tucker—"

"I didn't have a chance to go to the store." He slams the door to my car, cutting me off, and places his hand on my lower back, steering me toward the building. "But I had the shit to make lemon chicken in the fridge."

"You made lemon chicken?" I get distracted, which is stupid, especially when he leads me out of the light from the setting sun and into the dark interior of the building.

"Put this on." He passes me a plastic hard hat, and I do as asked, now understanding why so many women die in horror movies. Especially when I look around and see plastic sheeting hanging down, and walls are being framed and plastered.

"Tucker—," I try again, but once more, he cuts me off.

"The elevator is just over here." He keeps a tight hold on my hand as he leads me across the space, and when we reach the metal doors, he holds up his phone to a pad on the side, and they slide open immediately. The inside of it is the total opposite of the dusty, dirty building, with red carpet and gold-outlined mirrors that surround the interior.

I step on when he urges me in, then watch as he holds up his cell to a screen inside and a **4** appears. When the doors open again, we're in a long hallway with the same red carpet as the elevator, and a door on each end, one with a kid's bike, scooter, and shoes outside of it.

He leads us to the opposite door, and as soon as it's open, the scent of something delicious greets me, along with the sound of quiet music playing. While I stand at the door and look around, he rushes over to the stove, cursing.

I lift off the hat on my head, then slide my bag off my shoulder and take in the windows that are obviously original to the building and fill up most of the far

wall, the exposed brick and vents above, and the open floor plan between the kitchen, dining room, and the living room. Stepping down into the room onto the concrete floors, my eyes run over the leather couch, metal coffee table, with a huge black chandelier over it and accessories that look professionally purchased from a very high-end store.

“Sorry about that,” he says, and I turn to face him, then gasp when he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and uses it to pull me forward so he can kiss me. Melting against him, my mouth opens when he nips my bottom lip, and my hands grab hold of his shirt at his sides to stay upright. I love kissing him, but I love more the way he takes control and kisses me. “You’re here. He pulls back, running his eyes over my face.

“And you’re not a serial killer.” I laugh at the confused look on his handsome face. “Sorry but there were definite serial-killer vibes outside of this apartment.”

“And you still came into the building with me.”

“Apparently, I’d be the first to die in a horror movie.”

He laughs, letting his head fall back on his shoulders, and I watch with apt attention, soaking in the sound.

“This place is very cool,” I say when his eyes are back on me.

“This was supposed to be Dalton’s place, but he’s not sure when he’s going to be ready to move here, so when I moved out of the house Naomie and I owned, I moved in here. He’s going to wait for a place on the second floor.”

“So who lives across the hall from you?”

“Miles and Winter.” He smooths his thumb up and down the side of my neck. “Clay owns the building. He and Willow live on the top floor. His plan is to rent out the rest of the apartments when the building is finished.”

“You and Naomie didn’t live here?” I ask as he takes my hand so he can walk with me to the kitchen.

“No, we had a house about ten minutes away.” He stops us at the stove, where the delicious smell from earlier is coming from. I look into the pan and see that it’s not just lemon chicken but lemon chicken with orzo—one of my favorites. “She’s still living there, but if she can’t come up with the cash to buy

me out, it’s going on the market in the next few months.”

“It’s cool that you live here with your brothers so close.”

“One day, you’ll have to bring Kingston over. Upstairs in Clay’s place, he has an entire playroom with shit for kids to do. Kingston would love it.”

“Do Clay and Willow have kids?”

“Not yet. I’m sure it will happen, but he built the room for Winter, he normally picks her up from school and hangs with her until her dad is home.”

“Where is her mom?”

“She lives in Colorado. You’ll meet her at some point.”

I’ll meet her? That shouldn’t make me so happy, but it does, because that means he plans on me being around awhile.

“So they’re not together?”

“No, they tried to make it work; it just never did. They’re still close, and Winter’s happiness is their priority.”

“I want that,” I say softly, and his face goes gentle.

“Hopefully, you’ll get there.”

“I hope so. I really hate the way things are right now,” I whisper, leaning against the counter as he walks to a cabinet and pulls down two plates. “He called me today, asking if I wanted to go out to dinner with him and Kingston tonight.”

“What did you say?” No anger or worry in his tone, just curiosity.

“No, obviously. But if things were different, I’d like to think I could say yes and have that for Kingston. I want him to see his parents getting along because he matters more than our feelings. I just don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

“It’s going to take time.”

“You’re right.”

“You want wine, beer, water or tea?” He opens the fridge and takes out a beer.

“Wine please.” With a nod, he pulls a bottle of white wine from the fridge and then grabs a glass. “Do you want help doing anything?”

“I got it covered.” He hands me a half-full glass while stealing a kiss, then goes back to the stove.

“Do you cook often?” I ask, watching him place flood on each plate.

“Not often. I normally don’t have the time.” He looks over at me when he has both plates filled. “Are you good with eating in the living room?”

“Sure.”

“Grab my beer, baby.”

I do, then I follow him to the couch and take a seat, and he places our plates down and turns on the TV. When he gets comfortable, I follow suit, and the two of us dig in.

“Who taught you how to cook?” I ask after a few bites. Everything is delicious and definitely more than I could pull off for a quick meal.

“I taught myself.” He looks over at me. “When I was in college, I got sick of ramen and takeout, so as soon as I got a kitchen in the apartment Miles and I rented our second year, I started looking up recipes and found that if you actually followed the directions, things didn’t turn out bad most of the time.”

I smile at that. He seems like the type of person who would be a direction reader and a rule follower.

“Your mom didn’t teach you?”

“I don’t have a mom or a dad,” he says softly, and I feel my heart constrict behind my ribcage.

“What happened to them?”

“Drugs, alcohol, you name it. I was two the first time I was put into the system, and after that, my life consisted of them getting me back only to have me taken away again. Eventually, they were found unfit, but by that time, I was at an age where most families don’t want to take you in. Especially when you’re about to be a teenage boy, and especially when you’re coming from the background I had.”

God, my stomach churns.

“At fourteen, the Patricks took me in. They were already fostering Arya, Miles, and Dalton. Clay came about a month after I moved in with them.

“Arya?” I know the other names, but he’s never mentioned her.

“That’s a story for another night,” he says gently, but there is still an edge to his tone that lets me know even if I ask about her, he’s not going to tell me until

he’s ready.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s life.”

“It shouldn’t be.” I pick up my wine and ask softly, “You weren’t close with the Patricks?”

“They were tight with their own kids, and there wasn’t much room for us inside that bubble.” His eyes wander over my face, and he gives me a soft smile. “They were good people, and in the end, they *did* give me a family of my own.”

Not them, but Miles, Clay, and Dalton. “Your brothers?” I confirm.

“My brothers,” he agrees gently, and I let out a breath, not sure how to feel. Listening to him talk so casually about his past would make you believe he doesn’t have any leftover emotions from his childhood, but how could he not? That’s a lot for one person to go through. Unless he really is just thankful for what he ended up with, so he’s put all the stuff before it out of his mind.

Hearing a knock on the door behind us, he turns his head that way and calls out, “Come in!” Which is worrisome, since the building downstairs is sketchy and it could be anyone.

A second later, the door is opened, and a cute little girl around six or seven with dark hair steps inside with a large dog. “Uncle Tuck—” She cuts herself off when she sees me, and her eyes widen. “Who are you?”

“Miranda.” I smile, and she looks at her uncle.

“What’s up, bug?” he prompts.

“You have a girlfriend?”

“Winter.” There’s a warning in his tone.

“It’s just a question.” She looks down at the dog and mutters, “I swear, no one tells me anything.” The dog’s tail wags in response, while I press my lips together to keep from laughing.

“Did you need something?” Tucker asks, and she steps down into the living room, keeping her eyes on me.

“Dad is on a call, but Skye needs to go out.”

“Does Skye need to go out, or do you want to go upstairs to play?”

She looks at Tucker and notches up her chin an inch. “Dad said I could play

for a few minutes while Skye goes outside, if you say it's okay."

He looks over at me, and I feel her do the same. Apparently, I'm going to be the deciding factor here.

"I'm done eating."

"Go get your shoes," he orders, and with a happy grin, she bounces toward the door, shouting over her shoulder, "I'll be right back!"

"She's adorable," I whisper when she's gone.

"Her future husband is going to have his work cut out for him," he grunts, and I grin.

I bet her future husband is, but it's not going to be for the reasons he's thinking. A girl who grows up with a dad and uncles who all show her love and give her her every heart's desire is not going to settle for less than that from any man.

"Are you sure you're done eating?" He looks down at my plate.

"Yeah, it was delicious. Thank you."

His face gets soft, and he gets up, taking my plate from me. I follow him into the kitchen with his beer and my glass of wine.

"Ready!" Winter bounces back through the door, with Skye right at her side. "I told Dad you said I could play."

"All right, bug. Let's go." Tucker takes my hand as he walks around the island, and she doesn't miss it. She also doesn't say anything, even though I can see she wants to.

"Your dog is very cool," I say as we walk out of Tucker's apartment into the hall.

"She's Uncle Clay's dog," she informs me, then adds, "I want a dog, but Dad says I have to be older to get one."

"That makes sense. Having a dog is a lot of responsibility." I rub Skye's head when she presses her nose into my fingers.

"I'm responsible," she assures. "I've had the same fish since I was like three. I even *resatated* it!" The word resuscitated is pronounced adorably wrong.

"How did you do that?" We step into the elevator, and Tucker holds his phone to the screen that lights up.

“Larry was floating in his bowl and not moving, so I gave him chicken soup like my dad gives me when I’m sick, and when I came home from school, he was all better.”

I look at Tucker, who has his lips pressed tightly together.

“Wow, so you’re like a fish doctor.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She shrugs happily before skipping out of the elevator when the doors open, Skye right on her heels.

Stepping out into a long hallway, we go to the door, and the moment Tucker has it open and the lights on, Skye and Winter both run to a set of double doors across the expansive space and disappear through them.

I don’t know what I expect, but the moment Tucker and I walk through the double doors, I stop in my tracks. I assumed when Tucker said that Clay had a playroom for Winter that he meant a typical playroom—blocks, maybe a plastic kids slide or similar, and lots of toys. I didn’t know he meant he had an entire kids zone, like you pay money to visit, inside his apartment.

“Is that a tree house?” I whisper in disbelief as Winter appears through the branches before squealing and slipping down a long slide.

“It is.”

“Wow.” I look around, spotting a full bar that’s stocked, a huge TV, and three couches.

“Miles and Winter used to live with Clay before their place was finished, so he had all this built for her.”

“Kingston would lose his mind if he ever saw this.” I walk across the giant room toward a play set with full-size swings, monkey bars, and a slide.

“When do you have him back?”

“The day after tomorrow. Then he’s with me for a few days.”

“We’ll bring him over this weekend. Winter would love having someone to play with and boss around.” I laugh, leaning into his side, and his hand lets mine go so he can wrap his arm around my waist, his fingers sliding up my sweater so he can have contact with my skin.

“Uncle Tucker’s girlfriend, do you want to come play with me?” Winter shouts from the top of the tree house.

“Her name is Miranda, bug.”

“Okay! Miranda, do you want to come play with me?” she shouts again.

“Absolutely!” I laugh, then look up at Tucker when he doesn’t let me go. “Yeah?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything.

“Nothing.” He kisses me softly, and there is something about him doing that and *that* kiss that feels significant. I just wish I knew why.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

tucker

With the TV on low and Miranda tucked against me on the couch, her thigh over my hip and arm around my middle, I dip my chin to look at her and find her eyes closed and her breathing shallow. I should have walked her out to her car an hour ago when I noticed she was getting drowsy, but it turns out I'm a selfish dick who wants as much time with her as I can get. Even if that time is spent with her asleep after she ate my food, entertained my niece, called her son, and then made out with me on my couch before I tucked her face into my neck before we got carried away.

Things between us the first time moved quickly, and as hot as it was and as much as I want to do that again, I also want her to know it's just as important for me to get to know her.

Focusing back on the TV, not even seeing it, my mind wanders over what I found out today about Livy and Isabel from Kristen's mom. Apparently, the girls and Kristen had been tight since junior high. All three of them tried out for cheer and volleyball, and they spent a lot of time at each other's homes and at the church youth group together. Then at the end of sophomore year, something changed, and Kristen started to pull away from them and dressing differently. When Barbara would ask Kristen about this at the time, she would change the subject or shut down, and not long after that, she began hanging with Carrie, who Barbara thought was a nice-enough girl but odd.

Like Livy and Isabel, Barbara has convinced herself that Carrie had something to do with Kristen's death or that she at least has information about

what happened.

I'm not so sure.

It's easy to assume shit based on a person's appearance, but I've put away pastors, politicians, and men and women who are a considered bright lights within their communities for child molestation, rape, and even murder. None of those people wore what would be considered "gothic" clothing or pentagram necklaces, yet they were all evil in one way or another.

Now, with Barbara hyper-focused on Carrie and no new viable leads, even with Kristen's story being aired on the news and on social media, Miles and I decided today to start the case from the ground up and go back to the beginning, to before the murder even took place.

We both believe something happened to Kristen to make her change so drastically from the girl she was when she was friends with Livy and Isabel, and my gut is telling me that change had something to do with why she was murdered.

And I wouldn't be surprised if they know more than they are saying.

It's just up to Miles and me to figure out how to get them to open up.

My cell ringing on the coffee table drags me from my thoughts, and Miranda stirs, lifting her head off my chest as I reach over and grab it.

Not recognizing the number, I slide my finger across the screen and put it to my ear. "Beckett."

"Detective Beckett, this is Officer Sanders down at the central police precinct. I have you wife here. She was brought in for driving intoxicated."

Jesus.

"She's my ex-wife," I say, and the phone gets quiet.

"I see," Officer Sanders mutters, sounding annoyed. Then again, I'd be annoyed too. I'm sure Naomie told him who I was because there is a long-standing history amongst police officers that allows you and your family to get off the hook for shit, even when you shouldn't. And she thought she'd use my name to get out of a ticket or staying the night in jail. "I'll send her to booking, unless—"

"Do what you gotta do," I cut him off.

“Right.” He chuckles, hanging up.

“Is everything okay?” Miranda asks, and I toss my phone on the coffee table.

“Naomie was driving drunk, and she dropped my name, either not knowing they’d call me or thinking I’d feel sorry for her and bail her out.”

Her nose scrunches. “Is that something she’s done in the past?”

“She’s never driven drunk that I know of, but she has a group of women here that she likes to party with pretty often.” I drag her on top of me, then wrap my arms around her waist once we are chest-to-chest.

“Should I mention it to Bowie?” she asks softly, looking concerned. “I don’t want her driving Kingston anywhere, even if that’s not normal for her.”

“I’d bring it up to him. I’d also talk to your lawyer, since legally you only have so much control when Kingston is with his dad.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll call her tomorrow.” Her eyes search mine, and she takes a breath, dropping her chin to my chest. “I can’t believe I fell asleep. I must have been more tired than I realized.”

“All that running around with Winter wore you out.”

“That girl would give Kingston a run for his money, and if I spent one day a week with the two of them, I wouldn’t need to start going to body bootcamp.” She laughs.

“You don’t need to change anything; I like all of this.” I slide my hands down to her full ass and squeeze.

“Do you?” Her legs falls to my sides, and she sits up, straddling my waist, with her hands on my chest.

“Fuck yes.” I capture her hips in my hands when my cock begins to harden behind my zipper, then warn, “Miranda,” when she rocks against me.

“Tucker?”

“Jesus, you’re trouble,” I groan when a sly smile forms on her lips.

“I’m not doing anything,” she whispers the lie.

“You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“I was trying to be on my best behavior tonight.”

“Okay, you continue to do that.” She slides down my body, and fuck if my

balls don’t start to ache when her face hovers over my crotch. When she unsnaps the button to my jeans, I bite back a curse. There is no point in fighting the inevitable, and I couldn’t even if I wanted to. Not with her.

“All right, baby. I’m gonna give you what you want, but we’re doing this my way.” I sit up, and she leans back, looking confused.

Once I’m standing, I look down at where she’s now sitting on the edge of the couch and drag off my shirt, tossing it to the floor, and her gaze wanders over my torso. Moving my hands to the zipper of my jeans, she watches as I slide it down and licks her lips. My cock springs free, and I wrap my hand around the base, then slide it up and squeeze the tip. She lifts her eyes to mine, trust and hunger shining bright. I gather her hair in my fist and lead her mouth to my cock.

She doesn’t hesitate to wrap her lips around the tip, and I feed her every inch, going as deep as I can before using her hair to pull her off, and she swirls her tongue around the tip before I pull her forward again.

My fist tightens as she grabs my hip, her nails biting into my flesh, her other hand covering mine on my cock. Letting me fall from her mouth, I groan as she licks the head, and the harsh sound of my breathing fills the air around us as I watch her take me in so deep, I feel the back of her throat.

So lost in what she’s doing, I release the hold I have on my dick and capture her hair in both my hands. If someone saw us, they might think I’m in control here, but I’m just holding on for the ride as she kills me with her mouth, the noises she’s making, and the way she keeps pressing her thighs together.

On the verge of losing it and coming long before I’m ready, I pull free from her mouth and ignore her mewl of displeasure from losing me.

“I wasn’t done.”

“The only way that was ending was me coming down your throat. You were fucking done.” I grab her hand, tug her up from the couch, then bend and shove my shoulder in her belly. Carrying her over my shoulder to the bedroom laughing, I flip on the light, then walk to the bed, drop her there, and kick off my jeans and boxers.

“Lose the clothes,” I grit out, chest heaving, body on edge, eyes on her as I grab a condom from the nightstand and toss it onto the comforter.

Swallowing, she gets to her knees and strips off the sweater she's wearing, and then she unhooks her bra and lets it fall forward. My hands itch to touch her, but I keep them locked at my sides until she's naked and sitting on her hip.

"Do you have any idea how fucking beautiful you are right now?" I step forward and slide her hair that is a mess from my hands over her shoulder, smooth my thumb across her lips swollen from sucking my cock, then skim it down her neck and over one pink nipple, listening to her short inhale of breath.

Putting one knee in the bed, then the other, I tower over her small frame. Even as a woman with lots of curves, she's still delicate, and I've never been more aware of that than I am when she's naked and completely at my mercy. Hooking her around the back of her neck, I kiss her while pressing her back into the bed and cover her body with mine.

My hands find her breasts, and she wraps her leg around my hip, letting me feel the wet heat of her pussy on my thigh. Moving my hand down her side and over her hip, I feel her breathing stops as I get closer to the junction of her thighs, then she whimpers against my tongue when my fingers spread her open and brush her clit. I press my hips forward for the friction. She's soft and wet, and as I slide two fingers inside her, I'm reminded of just how hot, tight, and smooth she is.

"Oh God, Tucker!" she cries, pressing her head back into the bed as I fuck her with my fingers and roll over that tight, swollen nub. Moving my mouth down her neck, I adjust us so that I'm between her legs, then pause over her breasts to pull one into my mouth, then the other, before moving on and kissing down her stomach.

She latches onto my hair when my face is above her pussy, and I almost smile when she lifts her hips off the bed. Removing my fingers from her tight pussy, I spread her open.

"You're so swollen and wet, baby." I slide a pinky over her clit.

"Tucker," she whimpers.

"Yeah?" I slide my finger over it again.

"Please." She lifts her hips higher, and I look up her body. Jesus, she's stunning.

“Please what?” I ask softly, and she tips her chin down to meet my gaze.

“Touch me.” Her cheeks darken.

“I am touching you.” I kiss above her pubic bone, and she makes a sound of distress in the back of her throat.

“You’re teasing me.”

“All you have to do is tell me what you want, Miranda, and I’ll give it to you.”

It takes more than three breaths for her to whisper the words, but as soon as “Make me come with your mouth,” leaves her pretty swollen lips, I duck my head and pull her clit into my mouth, sucking hard while sliding two fingers inside her and curling them up.

She comes almost instantly, so worked up from sucking me off and having my fingers earlier that it doesn’t take any kind of finesse for her thighs to tighten around my head and her legs to start shaking.

When her pussy stops pulsing, I kiss the inside of her thigh, then move to my knees and reach for the condom. As I kneel between her legs, her lashes flutter open, and she watches as I rip open the condom and slide it on. When she reaches for me, I shake my head.

“On your belly, baby.” In an instant, she’s face-down in front of me with her ass in the air, and I smooth my hand over one round cheek. Lining myself up, I wrap my hand around her hip and slide deep in one thrust, hearing her gasp.

“Oh God, Tucker.” She rears back on me, meeting me thrust for thrust.

I thought I’d be able to keep from coming in this position, but it’s obvious I’m not going to be able to hold off for very long. Sliding my hand around her stomach, I pull her up until she’s on her knees in front of me and cup her breast with one hand and slide the other between her legs.

She covers my hands with hers and hisses, “Tucker,” and she turns her head my way, burying her face into my neck as she begins to tighten around me.

My balls draw tight, my spine tingles, and my thrusts become erratic as she comes, dragging me over the edge with her. With one final thrust, I plant myself as deep as I can be while my mind goes blank of anything except her, her scent, and the feel of her in my arms and wrapped around me.

Her shivering drags me back to reality, and I slowly pull out and get to my feet as she falls to her belly on the bed. Smiling at the sleepy look she gives me; I pull back the covers.

“Get under, baby.” It takes a second, but once she’s under the blankets with her head on the pillow, I leave her there to go take care of the condom. When I’m back in the bedroom, I turn off the light, then get into bed, and like she’s done it a million times, she curls up against me with her head on my chest and her arm slung across my waist. “What time do you gotta be up for work?”

“Seven, so I can go home and get ready,” she says sleepily.

“All right.” I kiss the top of her head, and she cuddles deeper into my side.

Normally, it takes hours for my mind to shut down, especially after a day like today. But as I listen to her breathing even out, I fall asleep with her in my arms, and none of the demons that normally haunt my dreams are able to break through the spell she’s cast over me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

miranda

Sitting at the counter in Tucker's kitchen, I watch him flip over vegetarian hamburger patties on the stove while home fries cook in the air frier on the counter. He had the diced potatoes soaking in water when I arrived, and then he drained them, dried them off with paper towels, and spiced them before putting them in the machine. I've never even attempted to make homemade french fries in my life, so to say I'm impressed by his cooking skills is an understatement, especially when everything smells so good.

As I watch him move around the kitchen, I listen to my phone ring as I press it against my ear. Patty left me a voicemail this afternoon asking me to call her when I had a minute. Only I couldn't find a minute until now since I had client after client all day. And when I did have a couple of minutes to make a call, I used it to talk to my lawyer to see if there was any way to ensure Naomie wouldn't be allowed to drive Kingston anywhere. That phone call sucked, because she basically told me no, that there's no way to guarantee it would never happen, but she would talk to Bowie's lawyer and voice my concerns.

Then as soon as I left work at six, I had to rush home to pack an overnight bag, because this morning, Tucker… didn't ask, he *told* me to bring one with me before I came back to his place tonight. All day, I thought about the fact that I would be sleeping with him again.

Not the sex—I mean, yes, that's still awesome, the best I've ever had, actually—but the sleeping in his arms thing, topped that by a zillion. Bowie was not a cuddler. None of the men I've dated have been, and I didn't know what I

was missing out on until last night.

I felt physically recharged when I woke up this morning, like his body that stayed in constant contact with mine all night somehow manipulated my cells as I slept, energizing them. Plus, the whole waking up with him, showering together, and then having a cup of coffee with him before I left for my place thing just started the day off on a very good note.

"Miranda," Patty finally answers, dragging me from my thoughts, and I frown, because she sounds relieved, and that is such an odd reaction for her to have to me calling her back.

"Hey, Patty, how's it going?"

"Not great," she grumbles, then mutters, "Hold on a second and let me get a glass of wine."

My eyes widen. My ex-mother-in-law is not a drinker unless there is drama, so something must be going on.

"Okay." She lets out a breath as I hear glass clinking together. "Now, you know me, and you know I get along with everyone."

"Yeah," I agree, thinking that's a strange way to start this conversation.

"Well then, can you explain to me why my son told me this morning that I'm no longer allowed to be around when that woman he's dating is there at his house?"

"What?" I whisper, sure I heard her wrong. While Bowie and I were together, if I ever had an issue with Patty—which wasn't often but did happen on occasion, especially when Kingston was a baby, and she would overstep—Bowie would tell me to get over it. He would never talk to his mom on my behalf, and he sure as heck *never* would've told her that she wasn't allowed at the house.

"You didn't mishear me. Apparently, that woman feels like I've been around too much. And get this." She pauses, and I can picture her taking a drink. "I make her 'uncomfortable.'"

"Oh, goodness." I look up at Tucker, who I can feel watching me, and he raises a brow as Patty shouts.

"And he informed me that if I want to continue having a relationship with my grandbaby, I need to find a way to build a relationship with *her*!"

“Oh, goodness,” I repeat.

“That woman is…. She’s…. Ugh! I hate to say this, because it’s not very Christian of me, but she’s a vile, evil *whore*.”

“Patty!” I gasp. I’ve never heard her use language like that in all the years I’ve known her.

“It’s true!” she cries. “I just don’t know how he can go from someone like you, to someone like *her*.” The last word is spit out with such disgust that I flinch. “I just do not understand it, Miranda.”

“Patty…,” I start, having no idea what I’m going to say to calm her down, but she cuts in before I can say anything, so it doesn’t matter.

“I have done nothing but be kind to her. I never mentioned to her that I know how she and my son met or got together. I didn’t treat her poorly or judge her. I met her with an open heart, trusting that my son knew what he was doing. Even…,” she whispers, sounding like she might start to cry, “Even when Bowie told me that she would be at his house right after you moved out, I didn’t say a word, not a single word about how wrong I thought that was. I have just stayed in my place and kept my feelings and opinions to myself.” She drags in a shaky breath. “A lot of good that did me.”

“I hate that you’re this upset, Patty. I really do, but I don’t know if I can help with this.” I drag my eyes off Tucker and drop them to the counter.

“I don’t want to lose my grandbaby.”

“You’ll never lose Kingston, Patty. You’re *always* welcome at my place anytime you want to visit with him.”

“Thank you, Miranda. I just…” She lets out a long breath. “I just wish I knew what’s gotten into my son.”

“I don’t know,” I say softly, because I honestly don’t know what is going on in Bowie’s head right now. I’ve never known him to act so irrationally. Then again, I wonder if I even knew him at all.

“Maybe he’s going through a midlife crisis.” She laughs, but the sound is hollow.

“Maybe.” I watch a plate slide across the counter toward me piled high with a stack of crisp-looking fries and a burger that could grace the cover of a

magazine. “Thank you.” I look up at Tucker, and he smiles at me—something he’s been doing a lot more often.

“Oh good grief. Listen to me complaining, and you’re busy,” Patty says, and I drag my eyes off Tucker as he walks to the fridge.

“I’m just getting ready to eat dinner. You’re fine.”

“No, I won’t take up any more of your time. Thank you for listening, and please kiss Kingston for me.”

“I will.”

“Bye, Miranda.”

“Bye.” I start to hang up, but call out, “Patty?”

“Yeah.”

“I love you, and I know—even if Bowie is being an idiot right now—he loves you too,” I say softly, and the phone goes quiet for a minute before I hear her take a shaky breath.

“I love you, honey.” She hangs up, and I set my phone down next to my plate, then look over at Tucker when he takes a seat next to me.

“You okay?” he asks gently, his gaze roaming over my face.

“Yeah.” I chew the inside of my cheek, then shake my head. “Or… I don’t know. Bowie told his mom she’s not allowed around when Naomie is there at the house, and then he told her she needs to work on her relationship with Naomie if she wants to be a part of Kingston’s life.”

“What does Naomie have to do with Kingston having a relationship with his grandmother?”

“I don’t know. Then again, I don’t know what is going on in Bowie’s head right now.”

“I hate to tell you this, baby, but that problem is not yours to take on.” He smooths my hair away from my face and tucks it behind my ear.

“I guess you’re right. I just…. I feel like I should talk to him.”

“And say what?”

“Why are you being such an idiot?” I shrug.

His lips curl up. “I’m not sure that’s gonna help.”

“Me neither, but maybe someone needs to say something to him before he

looks around and wonders what happened to his life."

"Sorry, baby, but that someone is not going to be you," he says gently but firmly. "He's not going to be open to anything you say to him, and it's not your job to try to show him the light. He needs to figure out shit on his own."

"You sound like Emma." I sigh, then whisper, "I just feel bad for Patty. She and Bowie have always been really close."

"Then they'll work things out."

"I guess you're right." I say quietly.

"Eat." He orders, giving me a swift kiss. "The fries suck when they aren't hot."

Picking up a fry, I dip it into the barbecue-mayo concoction I watched him mix up, then pop it into my mouth and chew before I take a bite of my burger that he loaded with tomatoes, lettuce, and cheese, then slathered the same sauce on. Once more, I'm blown away. The fries are spicy, but the dip adds the perfect amount of sweetness, and the burger is so delicious I don't think I will ever eat another regular hamburger as long as I live, because the vegetarian ones are obviously so much better.

As I swallow, I glance over at him, and he meets my gaze. "You know, if it wouldn't be weird, I'd totally ask you to marry me right now," I joke, but there is nothing funny about the look he gives me right before he leans in and kisses me breathless.

"I'll take a rain check," he whispers, pulling back, and I dig back into my food, hiding my smile.

As the two of us are finishing up, his cell phone rings, and he pulls it out, checking the screen. "I gotta take this, baby." He wraps his hand around the side of my neck as he stands. Using his thumb, he tips my head back to kiss me before walking off, putting his phone to his ear as he answers with a clipped, "Beckett."

I watch him as he walks toward his bedroom and then disappear through the door. I slide off my stool and grab both our plates, carrying both around to the sink. When he appears a few minutes later wearing a plaid flannel with a thick vest over it and his gun holstered to his hip, I bite my lip. Bowie is not a

detective; he's always been a patrol officer, so it wasn't often he got called into work. But there were times over the years when something was going on and he'd suddenly appear wearing his uniform.

"You have to leave," I say quietly before he even opens his mouth, and his jaw hardens as he nods. "I'll get my stuff."

"I want you to stay." He curls his hands into fists at his sides.

"I want that too," I reply softly, taking a step toward him and wrapping my hand around his fist. "But I doubt you know when you'll be home, and I don't have the fancy thing on my phone to use the elevator if you're not here in the morning when I need to leave for work." I reach up and touch his cheek, and he curves his hand around my waist. "You can come to me when you're done." When he jerks up his chin, I lean up on my tiptoes and touch my mouth to his. "I'll be right back."

It doesn't take me long to gather my stuff since I never unpacked and meet him at the door, where he takes my bag from me and grabs my hand. When we get outside, the sun has already set, and there is a chill in the air that wasn't present when I arrived earlier.

After putting my bag into my trunk for me, he opens my door and towers over me. "I'll call when I know what time we're looking at or send a text if it's late."

"Just call me. I don't care what time it is," I say, and his expression gentles before he captures my face in his hands and presses his lips against mine.

"Let me know you made it home okay."

"I will." I slide in behind the steering wheel when he lets me go, then start the engine after he shuts the door. As I pull away from the curb, I look up in the rearview mirror, finding him standing in the middle of the street, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes on my car. And my gaze stays locked on where he's standing until I turn the corner at the end of the block and lose sight of him.

A heavy weight of worry settles in the pit of my stomach. The worry isn't anything I ever experienced over the years when I was with Bowie. Because in my head, I know that chances are Tucker will be okay physically, but by

morning, he’ll likely have another weight on his shoulders and, a family somewhere will be grieving the loss of someone they love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

miranda

Wrapped in my robe with my hair still damp from my shower, I rush to the door when there's a knock and swing it open.

The moment my eyes lock on Tucker's exhausted ones, I walk into his arms and let out a breath when he engulfs me in a hug and walks me backward so he can shut the door. Last night, I slept like garbage. No matter what I did, sleep eluded me as my mind kept wandering off to what he was doing and if he was okay.

"I can't stay long," he mumbles against my neck where his face is tucked, and I lean back so I can look at him.

"Do you want coffee?"

"Maybe in a minute. Right now, I just want to hold you."

"Okay." I lead him down the hall to my bedroom and climb onto the bed. I pull him down with me and cuddle against his chest. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"A young mom of two boys was murdered last night by her ex after he tracked her down at her grandmother's house." His hand slides up my back, then his fingers tangle in my hair at the back of my head.

"Tucker," I whisper, squeezing my eyes closed, not wanting to but still picturing two young boys who are now going to be without their mom.

"This world is fucked up, baby."

My throat gets tight, and I curl my body around his, hating that he's right.

His phone rings, and he sighs. "It's probably Miles." He says, sounding tired,

and I sit up as he takes out his phone so he can check the screen.

“I’ll get you some coffee,” I reply as he answers the call, and he gives me a soft look as I get off the bed.

Going to the kitchen, I grab the pot I made earlier off the heater, then I pour a cup for him and one for myself as I check the time. I have about an hour and a half before my first client should arrive at the salon, which means I need to start getting ready for work pretty soon. Just when I’m about to carry both cups of coffee back to the room, he walks into the kitchen, stopping at the high counter that divides the space from the living room.

I take him in. “Everything okay?”

“I have to take off and meet Miles at the station.”

“Oh,” I whisper, unsure of what to say in this moment. Really, the only thing I want to do is wrap my arms around him and hold on until the haunted look in his eyes is gone.

“What time do you get Kingston today?”

“I’ll pick him up from daycare around five,” I reply, and he nods and tucks his hands into the pockets of his vest. “Do you… Do you wanna have dinner with us tonight?”

His chest deflates and his shoulders slump forward, like he’s relieved by my offer.

“I should be able to be here by six, if that works for you guys?”

“Of course.” I smile. “And I’m cooking, so I expect you to at least pretend to be wowed.”

He grins, and seeing it fills me with my own sense of relief.

“Come here, Miranda,” he orders, and I close the short distance between us, then press my face against his chest when his arms wrap around me. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“Yeah,” I say softly, then tip my head back to meet his gaze, and he drops his mouth down to meet mine. When he pulls back, I keep my hands where they are, grasping the soft flannel of his shirt. “Do you want me to put your coffee in a travel mug for you?”

His eyes gentle even more than they already are. “Yeah, babe.”

Letting him go, I take a step back, go to the cabinet above my coffee pot, and pull down one of the least girly mugs I have with a lid, transferring his coffee into it. When I'm done, I carry it to where he's standing and hold it out toward him. He doesn't take it right away. Instead, his eyes wander over my hair, my face, and my ratty old robe before he looks at the mug in my hand, his lips quirking as he reads.

"At least it's not pink," I whisper, because it *does* say **One Hot Mama** in pretty, curly lettering.

He grins, taking the cup. "See you tonight, babe."

"See you tonight." My eyes fall closed as he presses his mouth to mine, and it feels like by the time they are open again, he's gone, and I can hear the door close behind him.

WITH MY FINGERS working through the loose curls of my client's hair, I stare at the clock across the shop. It's after ten. Emma should have been here forty-five minutes ago, and her client left fifteen minutes ago, because she couldn't wait any longer. It's so not like Emma to flake on a client or miss out on money, so I'm worried—more than worried.

I've called her, not just from the salon phone but from my cell as well, and I haven't gotten an answer. I glance at the clock again. If she doesn't show in the next fifteen minutes, I'm heading to her place. When the door to the shop opens, I glance over my shoulder, my stomach dropping to the salon floor as I take in my best friend. Even if she looks put together on the outside, with her dark hair up in a not-messy bun—instead, a sophisticated one—and her makeup as perfect as usual, there is no hiding the fact that her eyes look swollen from crying and are red-rimmed.

"You're all set." I grasp Tina's… or Tiffany's shoulder—I can't remember the walk-in's name—and she takes her eyes off her phone to look up at me. Then her attention moves to the mirror, and she smiles at her reflection. When she gets up and leans closer to inspect herself, with her smile growing, I'm relieved to

know that even as distracted as I've been, she's still happy with the new color and cut of her hair. "Do you like it?

"I love it." She spins to face me. "Thank you."

"Any time. And if you want, the next time you come in, we can play around with the red highlights and add a few more."

"Oh, I'd love that."

"Awesome. Just have Sammy put you down for six weeks from now when you check out."

"I'll do that." She grabs her bag and heads to the front of the shop while I turn to my friend, who's now busying herself at her station.

"You and I need to talk." I walk to Emma and grab her arm.

"M—"

"Don't," I bite out, dragging her with me toward Polly's office, which is empty because she isn't here yet today. As soon as the door closes, I turn to face her. "Now, tell me what happened."

"Nothing."

"Emma," I warn, and her chin wobbles.

"Eli told me last night that he's not sure he ever wants to get married, but he's sure he never wants to have kids."

"What?" I take a seat next to her when she falls backward onto the couch tucked against the wall and covers her face with her hands.

"I just don't understand. We talked about this before we got serious, then again before we decided to move in together. He *knew*." Her watery eyes meet mine. "He knew that was a deal-breaker for me."

"God, Emma, I'm so sorry," I whisper, gathering her into my arms as she cries.

"I don't know what to do, M," she sobs, and I close my eyes, resting my head on top of hers. "I've always wanted to be a mom."

"I know you have." I hug her tighter as her tears soak through the thin material of my shirt.

"I just don't think I'm willing to give that up."

"And you shouldn't have to."

“But I love him,” she whimpers, and tears fill my eyes. I know she loves him, yet I also know she’s *always* wanted to be a mom, and she’ll be an amazing one. “I would never ask him to give up something as big as having a family.”

“Emma.”

“I just don’t know what I’m going to do, M.”

“You don’t have to decide that right now,” I tell her gently, and she pulls away from me and sits up, wiping her cheeks.

“I told him I was moving out.” She shakes her head.

“You can stay with me and Kingston,” I assure her instantly, and more tears fill her eyes. “Whatever you decide, you’ll be okay. You know I’m here for you.” I reach out and wipe the wetness from her cheeks, and she takes my hand in hers.

“I… I just need to figure things out. I need to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“And you will.” I squeeze her fingers wrapped around mine, then say gently, “You already have a key to my place. You should go there and take the day off.”

“I need to work.”

“You don’t. Your clients can all be called and rescheduled, and if Polly sees you crying while you’re washing someone’s hair, she’s going to send you home anyway.”

“You’re right,” she concedes after a moment, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I thought it would be harder to convince her to leave for the day. “Eli isn’t home, so I’ll stop by our place.” Her chin wobbles, and her eyes fill with a fresh wave of tears. “And get some clothes to hold me over for a couple of days.”

“I can drive you,” I offer as we both stand, and she drags in a breath, letting it out slowly.

“No, I’ll be okay. I’ll go next door and grab a coffee before I get in my car.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” She steps toward me, and I wrap my arms around her, hugging her as tight as I can. “I’ll see you tonight when you get home.” She lets me go and takes a step back, and I watch as she gathers herself together before turning toward the door.

I step out of the office behind her and walk with her to the front desk,

ushering her on before going to Sammy and telling her to reschedule all her appointments for the day. Feeling at a loss for how to help my best friend, because it feels like she’s always the one helping me, I take my next client wondering how much time I would get for murder.

Because Eli, for sure, has just been added to my hit list.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

tucker

Stepping out of the interrogation room, with Miles on my heels, my gaze connects with the officer leaning against the wall outside.

"You can take him to booking," I say quietly, and he jerks up his chin before walking past us into the interrogation room, where we just left a crying Paul Lane. The tears are not for Amara—his long-time girlfriend—or for his two boys, who will now be forced to grow up without their mom and dad. But instead, they're for the freedom he just lost.

Two weeks ago, Amara found the courage to run from him after years of abuse, and last night, right before I got the call while lying on the couch with Miranda, Paul finally tracked his ex down at her grandmother's house. Unlike all the times before, when he would show up with gifts and apologies, he showed up with gun and shot her as soon as she opened the door, while her boys—four and six—slept inside.

It took us three hours and about a dozen officers to track him down at his new girlfriend's house across town, and four hours for Miles and me to get a confession out of him. We already knew he committed the murder of Amara. Her grandmother witnessed him driving off in his car after she heard the gun shot and found her granddaughter dead in her doorway. But we needed the confession and the location of the gun to avoid complications down the road when he's in front of a jury.

Walking to my desk, I take a seat in my chair and scrub my hands down my face. I'm fucking exhausted.

“I’ll call Amara’s grandma,” Miles says quietly from his desk, and I pull my hands away to look at him. “She’ll want to know he’s confessed.”

“Yeah,” I agree, but in the end, the confession isn’t going to help her sleep better tonight. “Make sure you give her the information for Holly, and let her know that if she needs anything, she’ll be able to help.”

Holly is a woman who works for Clay’s non-profit organization that helps women in the process of leaving their abusers or pimps, and also those who have been trafficked. They set them up with housing and help them find jobs or offer assistance in instances like this one, where a family is left to pick up the pieces.

“You don’t have to tell me how to do my job,” he snaps. I don’t take offense; he’s just as tired as I am, not just from being up all night, but also from having to deal with the mental exhaustion of another woman being murdered by the man who claimed to love her.

You always hear there’s a thin line between love and hate, and that is never more apparent than when you witness firsthand the true cruelty of a relationship between an abuser and their victim.

It takes me another hour to file what paperwork I have to complete to pass the case on to the district attorney, and just as I’m about to close down my computer for the evening, I open up my inbox. When I see an email from the tip line for Kristen’s case, I click on it and scan over the message.

An anonymous source sent a text to it, which includes the text number for the tip line and the date and time the message was sent.

You need to talk to Pastor Jonathan Green from the World Church. He knows something about Kristen’s death.

When I look over at Miles, he turns his head my way. “An anonymous tip came in through the tip line for Kristen. It says we need to speak to a Pastor Green from World Church.”

“That mega church outside of town?” He raises a brow. “Is that the one Kristen went to when she was friends with Isabel and Livy?”

“Not sure. I’ll confirm with Barbara.” I glance at the clock on the wall across the room. It’s already after five, but I still call Barbara, and she confirms it was the church Kristen attended. So, I dig up the number for the church and put my

phone to my ear after dialing it. As it rings, Miles keeps his eyes locked on me.

“World Church, this is Rebecca speaking. How can I help you?” an older woman answers.

“Hi, Rebecca. This is Detective Beckett with Nashville PD. I need to get ahold of Pastor Green.”

“Oh,” she whispers. “Well, he’s out for the day, but I can leave a message for him to call you back.”

“I’d really like to speak with him in person. Is he going to be around tomorrow?”

“Well…” She pauses for a moment, then says quietly, “I can put you through to his secretary, and she should be able to get you on his calendar.”

“Do that please,” I reply, and the phone goes quiet for a few minutes.

“Lauren speaking,” a younger-sounding woman answers.

“Hi, Lauren. This is Detective Beckett with Nashville PD. I need to set up a meeting with Pastor Green.”

“In regard to?” she asks, and my jaw gets tight.

“The murder of a girl who was a part of your congregation,” I say, and the phone goes quiet for a long moment.

“Umm…” I hear the click of a keyboard as she types. “Pastor Green is scheduled for a massage tomorrow, but he should be back in his office by one.”

“One works.”

“Okay, I’ve got you down. When you get here, please park in the back of the building, and come in through the door that’s marked for staff.”

“You’ve got it. Thank you, Lauren.”

“You’re welcome. Have a blessed day.” She hangs up, and I draw in a breath.

“Meeting with the pastor is tomorrow at one, after Pastor Green gets done with his massage.”

“Massage?” Miles shakes his head. “I knew I should have chosen a different fucking career path.”

“You and me both.” I roll back my chair, and Miles does the same with his. “Are you heading home?”

“Yeah, I need to give Karen a break,” he says, and I nod. Karen is Winter’s

nanny, a woman in her late fifties who comes to stay on nights like last night, when Miles gets called out. She's also been picking Winter up from school while Clay and Willow are still out of town. "Are you going home?"

"Just to shower and change. I'm having dinner with Miranda and Kingston." I pick up my cell I haven't looked at all day and check the screen, finding a couple of texts from Miranda waiting for me. The first is asking how much time someone might get for premeditated murder. The next lets me know that Emma will be joining us for dinner, then explains why.

Shit. So much for a relaxing night with Miranda and Kingston.

SITTING in Pastor Jonathan Green's office the next afternoon, I look around and try to hold back my disgust.

Growing up with the Patricks, we were required to attend church every Sunday with them, and it was during that time my belief in organized religion became skewed. I could not understand how the pastor could stand in front of the congregation, asking them to give more, while most of the families sitting in the pews were barely making it to the end of the month with a couple of dollars in their account. Meanwhile, the pastor was trading out his car every year for a new one, living in the best part of town, and sending his kids to private school.

I did not, and still do not, believe that if God were amongst us today, he would approve of the way humankind has continued to use his name to profit off people who are looking for something to believe in that is bigger than themselves.

And sitting here, it's obvious Pastor Green is cut from the same cloth as the Patricks pastor. Between his very-expensive desk, the art on the walls, photos of Pastor Green and his family vacationing all around the world with iconic landmarks behind them, and the Mercedes Benz SUV that's parked in a designated spot for him behind the church, it's obvious the tithe his congregation hands over each week is affording him a very nice lifestyle.

Oh, I'm sure that World Church and its attendees donate money and hold

fundraisers during the holidays, but I'd bet my own money that the cash each person hands over weekly is tucked away in the pastor's personal bank account so he can show people that if your belief in God is big enough, you might just be able to drive a two hundred thousand dollar car too.

"I'm sorry to keep you guys waiting." Pastor Green steps into the office carrying a cup of coffee and wearing a pair of jeans with a rock 'n' roll T-shirt and a belt around his waist that probably cost a grand.

"No problem." Miles and I both stand to shake his hand and introduce ourselves, then we watch him take a seat behind his desk that is almost comically too big for him.

"So how can I help you today?"

"We spoke with Barbara Stable, and she confirmed Kristen Stable used to attend youth group here and that she worked at the daycare on site during Sunday service." I pull up the photo of Kristen I have on my phone and pass it over to him. I watch him as he looks at her picture, and the slight flare in his eye and the way his fingers curl around my cell tells me he remembers Kristen.

"She did." He passes my phone back to me. "But it's been a while since she attended. I…. We all heard about her passing and were saddened by the news."

"Can you tell us a little about her time here and who she spent it with?"

"Well…" He sits forward, setting down his coffee cup. "I wish I could tell you that I remember her well, but there are over two thousand people who attend service most Sundays, and the youth group has well over a hundred kids. I don't run that; my nephew, Steven, does. I'm sure he would be happy to talk with you."

"Is he here today?"

"Let me check." He picks up the phone on his desk, and we listen to him ask Steven if he's around and then to tell him to come to the office after explaining two detectives would like to speak to him. "He'll be here in just a few minutes. He's on the other side of the building." He looks between the two of us. "Would you like a coffee or water while we wait?"

"I'm good," I reply, and Miles says the same.

He nods. "Do either of you attend church?" he asks, sitting back with his cup

of coffee.

“No,” we say in unison, and he must read that we’re not open to discussing more on that topic with him, because he doesn’t say anything further. But he does look relieved when there is a knock on the door a few minutes later.

“Come in,” he calls out, and Steven steps into the office.

The first thing I notice is he’s a good-looking guy in his early twenties with longer hair and boy-band features. Like his uncle, he’s dressed in fashion that would be considered cool—jeans and a hoodie, with expensive shoes on his feet. If he’s in charge of the youth group, the girls are more than likely all crushing on him, and the boys probably wish they were him.

“Steven, this is Detective Beckett and Detective Thatcher.” He swings his hand out toward us.

“Nice to meet you both.” Steven shakes our hands, and I notice his palms are damp.

“They’re here to talk about Kristen Stable,” Pastor Green says, and once more I pull up the photo on my cell for him to look at—though I know I don’t need to. He recognized her name, and if the loss of color in his features is anything to go by, he knows something.

“I knew her.” He clears his throat. “How can I help?”

“Your uncle mentioned she attended your youth group.”

“She did, every Wednesday evening and Sunday after church.” He moves to stand next to his uncle, putting the desk between us. “She would come with Livy and Isabel. The three of them were close.”

I nod. “Was there anyone she had an issue with?”

“No,” he says instantly. “Everyone gets along.”

“Do you know why the girls stopped spending time together or why she stopped attending youth group and church?” Miles asks.

“She never told me, but Livy and Isabel said Kristen started hanging around a girl at school who was.” He rubs his lips together. “Troubled.”

“Sometimes, the sheep wander away from the flock,” Pastor Green inserts with a disappointed shake of his head.

“Isn’t it your job to lead them back?” Miles asks, and Pastor Green’s jaw

tenses.

“Can we get a list of all the kids who attend youth group?” I ask, breaking into the stare-down between the two men, and Pastor Green focuses on me before looking up at his nephew.

“Of course, do you have an e-mail address?” Steven asks, and I hand him over my card as I stand, and Miles pushes up from his chair.

“If you can think of anything having to do with Kristen that was odd during her time under your care, please reach out to us,” I say, taking one man’s hand, then the other, after Miles does.

“We will, and if you’d like to attend Sunday service, there is always a pew open for you. There are a few officers who attend.”

“Thanks,” Miles mutters under his breath as we start to walk out the door, but he stops and turns around to ask, “Where does youth group meet every week?”

“We have a building on site at the back of the property.”

“Thanks,” I reply and then walk out the door.

When we get outside and into my SUV, I look over at my brother, who I know is thinking exactly what I am.

“How do you feel about taking a field trip Wednesday?” He asks and I grin.

"I love field trips.” I start the engine and back out of my spot, trying not to get my hopes up, but fuck.

I think we might just have a lead.

Finally.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

miranda

"She seems better," Tucker says quietly, and I take my eyes off of Emma, who has been chasing Winter and Kingston around the playroom in Clay and Willow's place for the last forty-five minutes. Like me, she was amazed as soon as we walked through the door, and within seconds, she was off and running after both kids, with Skye not far behind her.

"There hasn't been as many tears today, so I think she's doing better." I look up at him, and he turns me in his arms, so we are chest-to-chest. "Eli said he's going to move out and stay with a friend while she decides what she wants to do, so I think she's a little less stressed."

"Does he think she's going to change her mind?"

"Probably." I shrug. "And she might for a while because she loves him. But …," I whisper and shake my head, "you can't just turn that off, not when being a mom is something you've always wanted. And if that's not something he really wants it wouldn't be fair to force that on him." I say quietly and his hands slide down to the top of my ass.

"Do you want more kids?" he asks me, and my stomach flutters. That question is so very intimate and one you only ask when the answer matters.

"Yes." I slide my hands up his chest, and his face gets soft. "Do you want kids?"

His hold on me tightens. "Yeah."

"How many?"

"A few."

“A few?” I smile, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

“More than two, less than five.” He ducks his head like he’s going to kiss me, and I start to press up on my tiptoes while my eyes slide closed.

“Pizza’s here!” Miles breaks into the moment, and we both look his way. “I left it downstairs in your place,” he tells Tucker, looking between the two of us with a grin on his handsome face.

Falling flat to my feet, I try to ignore the disappointment I feel at the lost opportunity.

“I guess we should try to wrangle the kids.” I look up at Tucker. I’ve missed him the last few days. Even though I’ve seen him when he’s come for dinner, then hung out until Kingston’s bedtime, I’ve missed the physical contact we had the days prior.

“Yeah.” His gaze drops to my mouth one last time before he lets me go. The only thing making me feel a little better is he looks just as disappointed as I feel.

“Hey.” I walk farther into the room, where Emma is standing at the bottom of the slide, and she looks back over her shoulder at me. “The pizza’s here.”

“Thank god, I’m starving.” She grins before calling up toward the tree house. “Guys, I’m calling a truce since it’s dinnertime. You can come out of hiding.”

“Are you wying?” Kingston asks, and Winter giggles.

“I’d never lie,” she tells him, and he peeks out through the railing at the top of the tree house. After looking her over and confirming she’s telling the truth, both he and Winter slip down the slide one after the other.

“Mom, I want to stay here forever,” Kingston says, running to Emma for her to pick him up as Winter skips to her dad.

“It’s so cool, right?” I ask, and he nods, wrapping his arms around Emma’s neck and kissing her cheek. I catch Emma’s eyes starting to water before she ducks her head.

This afternoon when Tucker asked if we wanted to have dinner at his place with Miles and Winter, I wasn’t sure about taking him up on his offer. Not because I didn’t want to spend time with him or take Kingston to his house—I just couldn’t stand the idea of leaving Emma behind at my place alone.

This situation with Eli has been hard on her, and although today has been

better, I could see the turmoil in her eyes every time she watched Kingston and I interact. I think it's been difficult for her to see firsthand the kinds of things she'd be missing out on if she were to place Eli's happiness above her own. But I also think it's a good thing because I know if she gives in to Eli right now that her happiness will only be temporary. And I want her to have everything she want's in life.

Sure, she might be okay for a while, but I don't want her to end up resenting Eli and hating herself for not fighting for what she wants or finding it with someone else. And again I don't think it would be fair to Eli to force him into parenthood. So that's why when Tucker told me that of course Emma was invited as well, I *told* her that we were having dinner at his place, not even giving her the option to stay home.

"Emma, can I show you my dolls?" Winter asks when we get into the elevator, and Emma looks down at her with a smile on her pretty face while Miles watches the two of them interact.

"I'd love to see them, but first, we have to eat. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

"You can't eat a horse." Kingston scrunches up his face.

"You're right. I can't eat a horse. Horses are too big." She grins, then lifts him higher in her arms. "But I might be able to eat a little boy." She nibbles his neck, and he giggles as the doors to the elevator open up. When we step out, I freeze in place, causing Emma to bump into me.

Because Naomie is standing at the end of the hall, in front of Tucker's door.

"I thought Clay changed the code for the elevator," Miles mutters as Tucker steps in front of Emma, Winter, Kingston, and me.

"What are you doing here?" Tucker asks, and Naomie takes us all in before her face falls.

"We need to talk."

"About what?" Tucker asks, sounding like I've never heard him sound before.

"I'm pregnant." My stomach drops at the confession, and I hear Miles curse under his breath.

“That’s not my problem, Naomie,” Tucker says, reaching back for me, and I don’t hesitate to place my hand in his.

“That’s Naomie?” Emma whispers, and I nod.

“It might be yours,” Naomie adds, and Tucker’s fingers around mine tighten like he’s afraid I might bolt. But that is honestly the furthest thought from my mind right now.

“Is this chick for real?” Emma asks loudly, and I press my lips together but hear Miles chuckle.

“We need to talk,” Naomie repeats, taking a tentative step toward Tucker as she keeps her eyes locked on him.

“We haven’t been together in months, Naomie,” Tucker bites out.

“Jesus, this is not happening.” Emma passes me Kingston, and he latches onto me, tucking his face into my neck. I start to tell her it’s okay and to leave it be, but she walks forward, getting in Naomie’s space before I can even get my mouth open. “Since there are children here, I’m going to be nice. But I’m letting you know right now that if you don’t find yourself on the elevator, you and I are going to find ourselves in handcuffs.”

“This has nothing to do with you.” Naomie takes a step back from Emma, obviously registering the threat, but of course my best friend doesn’t back down.

“Did you hear what I just said about you leaving?”

“I’m pregnant,” Naomie whispers, shooting a pleading look to Tucker, who does nothing but step even closer to me.

“Congratulations. We’ll all be sure to send a gift from your shower list when we get the email. Now, move away from the door. The kids are hungry, and it’s going to be bedtime soon,” Emma says calmly, but there is no hiding the threat in her tone.

Naomie’s gaze moves from her to Tucker and then to Miles before it lands on me and fills with spite.

She doesn’t say a word as she steps aside, and Tucker doesn’t hesitate to pull Kingston and me along with him, keeping himself between Naomie and us as he ushers us through the door and into his apartment. When the door closes behind us, I only then realize Emma and Tucker are both out there with Naomie alone.

“Come on,” Miles orders quietly but firmly, placing his hand against my lower back and using it to urge me down the single step into the apartment before walking ahead of me into the kitchen. Like he’s dealt with this kind of situation a million times, he turns on the TV to play a kids show and tells both Kingston and Winter to hang in the living room. Almost instantly, the two of them start laughing like they have already forgotten what just happened outside.

“You know she’s full of shit, right?” Miles asks me quietly as we put pizza on plates for our kids.

“I know.”

“Good,” he says softly, and I meet his gaze, the soft look in his eyes reminding me of one Tucker would give me.

When the door opens and Tucker and Emma step inside, relief washes through me. The two of them look exactly the same as they did minutes ago which is good.

“I’m seriously so damn hungry,” Emma says, walking to where I’m standing with her expression blank, and I look to Tucker, who has the same exact look on his face as my best friend. “You okay?” she asks me when she’s close.

“Yeah.” My eyes find Tucker’s, and I bite my bottom lip before looking at Emma. “I’ll be right back.” She glances back at Tucker before giving me a nod, and I take Kingston his plate and kiss the top of his head, then walk to Tucker and take his hand.

When we get into his bedroom, I close the door behind us and look up at him. He’s on guard, every inch of him pulled tight like a rubber band ready to snap. I step toward him slowly, then wrap my arms around his waist, and he doesn’t hesitate to encircle me with his arms.

“Are you okay?” I whisper.

His muscles relax, and his chin comes to rest on the top of my head. “If she’s pregnant, which I highly doubt, it’s not mine.”

“Okay.” I tip my head back to look at him, and his gaze roams over my face. “But you didn’t answer my question.” His brow furrows, so I repeat, “Are you okay?”

“I’m over the fucking drama.”

“Yeah, me too.” I rest the side of my head against his chest.

I don’t know how long we stand like that, but too soon, he loses his hold on me and grabs my face in his hands. “You need to eat, then get Kingston home.” I want to pout about it, because the last thing I want to do is leave him here and go to sleep alone, but I know he’s right. “If Emma is back at her place tomorrow night, I’ll come over after I get done with work and stay the night.” His fingers dig into the flesh of my cheeks. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Yes, I want that,” I say, and he drops his mouth down to mine. The kiss starts off sweet, then his tongue swipes across my bottom lip, and I forget where we are and the fact that I need air to survive as I kiss him back.

When he pulls back, I’m breathless and clinging to his shirt with both my hands at his waist.

“Let’s go eat.” He drops one more kiss to my lips, then opens the door for me to step out before him. Seeing Emma and Miles talking at the counter while they eat and the kids sit in front of the coffee table, I walk to the kitchen, wrap my arm around my best friend’s shoulders, and kiss the side of her head.

“What’s that for?”

“Nothing. I just love you.” I take a seat next to her, and Tucker passes me a plate with pizza on it before making a plate for himself and standing next to Miles across from me.

As the four of us eat and chat while the kids hang out, I look across the island to Tucker when my scalp prickles and find his gaze on me with his eyes soft. He doesn’t say a word, but he doesn’t have to. We’ve made it through another dramatic event and came out on the other side together.

And if Naomie and Bowie’s plan is to tear us apart, all they are actually doing is adding mortar and stone to the solid foundation we are building our relationship on.

CHAPTER THIRTY

tucker

As I sit on the bench in the locker room at the station after working out and showering, I glance at the door when I hear it open and watch Bowie step inside with his duffle bag over his shoulder. The moment he spots me, his jaw gets tight, but he doesn't say a word as he walks to his locker that's just a little way down from mine.

Ignoring him and the weight of the tension that has filled the room, I stand and start to get dressed.

"Naomie told me that she's pregnant," he says after a few minutes, and I look in his direction, his face blocked by his locker door that is open. Our eyes meet when he slams it closed. "Have you told Miranda yet?"

"Miranda was with me when Naomie showed up at my place to share the news, and since I haven't been with Naomie since she miscarried and that was almost eight months ago, I find it hard to believe the kid could be mine."

"I know you two were still sleeping together until recently," he bites out while buckling his police-issued slacks.

"And who told you that?"

"She did."

"Right," I mutter, tugging my shirt down over my head as Miles walks into the locker room through the open doorway that leads to the gym. He doesn't say a word, just leans back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest as he looks between Bowie and me.

"Why would she lie?"

“Why does Naomie do half the shit she does?” I put on my boots and start to tie them as I lock my eyes on his. “Regardless of whatever bullshit she’s feeding you, I’m telling you straight out that I do not want her. She’s all yours.”

“The kid’s not mine. I never went without a condom when I was with her.” At least he isn’t a complete idiot. “What are you doing with my wife?”

“Your *ex*-wife,” I clip, and his jaw tics once again. “And it’s none of your fucking business.”

“We have a kid together, so it *is* my business,” he argues as I finish tying my boots and grab my holster.

“When you started fucking someone else while you were married to her, you lost the privilege of asking questions.”

“If you hurt her—”

“Man, what the fuck are you doing?” I grab my gun from my locker and holster it on my hip, then rest my hands on my waist as my eyes lock on his. “You need to choose a fucking side. Are you trying to win back Miranda, or are you trying to build something with Naomie? Because the way your mom put it to Miranda the other night, you’ve made it clear where your loyalty stands.”

“You think I want my mother around this drama?” He shakes his head. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I said what I said to her to keep her away. I might have fucked up by cheating on my wife—”

“*Ex*-wife,” I correct, and he glares at me.

“I might have fucked up by cheating on Miranda, but I still love her. Naomie is—” He shakes his head. “—relentless.”

That’s one way to put it.

“Sorry to tell you this, but that’s *your* problem.” I slam my locker door closed before I grab my duffle off the bench and look at Miles. “See you outside.” He jerks up his chin as I walk past him.

“I’m still in love with my wife, and I’m going to figure out how to fix things between us,” Bowie calls to my back, and I look at him over my shoulder, my muscles getting tight. I don’t consider him a threat to what Miranda and I have, but every fucking time he refers to her as his wife, the urge to beat the shit out of him becomes a little more difficult to ignore.

“Then I feel sorry for you because you’re fighting a battle you’re never going to win. Miranda is mine, and I’m not giving her up.” I shake my head before walking out the door.

WITH THE SUN already set and the canopy of the forest above me, the chill in the air is amplified, making me wish I brought a thicker jacket with me tonight.

This afternoon, Miles and I went over the plot of land the church purchased seven years ago along with all the building permits they’ve pulled since then and aerial shots of the property. It took us some time to narrow down what building the youth group is held in, because the fifty acres houses three buildings besides the church and Pastor Green’s home. Although I wouldn’t call it a home. It’s more like a mansion at over ten thousand square feet with a pool and a pool house.

When we reach the tree line, I scan the land below me. Pastor Green’s house can be seen from up here, tucked back behind an outcropping of trees and out of sight, with the church on the main road lit up like a beacon and two other buildings behind it on either side but a good distance away. One of them is registered with the city as a gathering place. The other is still under construction but will eventually have an indoor pool and a gym for members of the congregation. As I walk the inner edge of the tree line toward the building that has light shining through its windows, cars begin to pull in and park, and kids start making their way into the building.

“They probably wouldn’t even have noticed if we parked in the lot,” Miles mutters from my side, and I glance over at his shadowy figure.

He’s been quiet and didn’t even mention what went down with Bowie in the locker rooms. Then again, what is there to say? We both know he’s an idiot for tossing away a woman like Miranda for someone like Naomie.

“Probably not,” I agree, crossing my arms over my chest as we wait so no one will see us coming down the hill behind the building.

When there hasn’t been another car for a few minutes, the two of us start to

leave the tree line but stop when the back door to the building opens. We duck back into the shadows as light streams out onto the concrete slab where there are chairs and a fire pit set up, and the kids begin to flood outside. Steven is the last to step out the door, and he walks over to the fire pit, lighting it while the boys and girls in the group mess around like kids do. Taking out my binoculars, I scan the crowd of about fifty kids and find Livy sitting on a boy's lap and Isabel chatting with another girl.

It doesn't take long for the gathering to go from just some teens hanging out to them passing around what my guess is a joint, while Steven holds court among a group of guys who, like him, are all tall and good-looking. When Isabel approaches Steven, he tosses his arm around her shoulders and says something against her ear that makes her laugh loud enough for us to hear from our vantage point.

"How much do you want to bet that none of their parents know what's really going on at youth group?" I pass the binoculars to Miles.

"I'm not taking that bet," he mutters, scanning the kids. "I think I found a weak link." He passes them back to me, and I follow his finger as I lift them to my eyes. I spot who he's talking about instantly. A young guy, probably fourteen or fifteen, sitting alone while watching the group, looking uncomfortable.

As the group hangs out, Isabel and Steven start to make out, and no one seems to find it surprising when the two of them disappear inside for about twenty minutes. Though they aren't the only couple who goes into the building for more than a few minutes before coming back out to join everyone again. It's obvious from watching that this is all normal for them, and it's not just a night of kids being kids and pushing boundaries.

"Did Steven send over the list of names for the teens who attend youth group?" Miles asks as we watch them start to head back inside after about an hour longer.

"He sent it over this afternoon," I tell him, as the kids leaving through the front door and getting in their cars.

"I'll start checking social media tonight and put some names to faces."

"We'll split it in half." I look over at him. "There were almost two hundred

kids on the list he sent, and only about fifty were here tonight."

"They aren't hiding what they're doing." We watch the lights in the building go out, then a few minutes later, Steven and Isabel appear together, and the two of them get into his black BMW. "Even if most of the kids here tonight didn't seem to have an issue with smoking weed and partying, I'd bet there are a whole lot of kids who've signed up for youth group and felt uncomfortable when they've walked into an evening like that one." He mumbles.

"You don't think any of them have told their parents?"

"Maybe they did." He pulls out his flashlight. "And they didn't believe them, or it could be that those kids are all popular, and I know you remember how it was back in school. If you were popular you could get away with anything, no one wanted to be on your bad side. It might be why Kristen stopped attending and separated herself from Isabel and Livy," We turn toward the woods and make our way back to where we both parked.

"Carrie said Kristen didn't like any of the guys who liked her and that they never hung out with boys. I didn't believe her at the time, but maybe something happened to Kristen while she was with this group." I mutter.

"It would make sense." He agrees. "And could be why she changed so drastically and started hanging out with Carrie, who is the opposite of Livy and Isabel in every way." We step out of the woods and walk across the grass to the parking lot where we're parked.

"When I get to Miranda's, I'll forward the email to you. Hopefully we can track down the kid who sat alone all evening and have a chat with him tomorrow."

"Sounds good." He gives my back a brotherly slap and starts walking off to his truck, calling over his shoulder, "Tell Miranda I said, 'what's up.'"

"Will do." I swing up behind the wheel of my SUV, then send Miranda a message to let her know I'm on my way before I back out of my spot. Two minutes later she texts me back a single heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

miranda

"Oh my God," I breathe against Tucker's mouth as he uses his hold on my hips to rock me down onto him as he rolls his hips up into mine. I might be the one on top, but it's obvious that even in this position, he's still the one in charge.

"Fuck, Miranda," he groans quietly, moving his mouth down my neck to my breast. My core tightens as he pulls the tip of my right breast into his mouth and cups the left with his large hand, tugging my nipple.

Letting my head fall back on my shoulders, I soak in the feel of his powerful body under mine, his hard cock inside me, and his hands roaming over my body as I rock my hips forward and back. When he suddenly rolls us, I want to cry out in disappointment, but then his mouth captures mine, and he begins to slowly slide in and out of me. His hips circle on each downward thrust, rubbing against my clit. Encircling him with my legs, I look up at his gorgeous face that's outlined by the early-morning sun peeking in from the edge of my curtains, and my breath catches in the back of my throat. Every time we've been together, it's been hurried, frenzied, almost desperate. But not this morning. His thrusts are slow and lazy as his hands grasp mine, locking our fingers together, dragging them above my head so his body is flush against mine while his lips pepper kisses on my face.

I don't want to cry, but tears begin to blur my vision as my emotions overwhelm me. I tighten my legs on his waist and my fingers around his, tucking my face into his neck.

"Look at me, Miranda," he demands softly, and I shake my head. "Please,

baby, look at me." At his whispered plea, I let my head fall back to the pillow. His gaze roams over my face, and he curses under his breath, dropping his forehead to mine. "I've got you."

He releases my hands and cups my face, smoothing away my tears as he makes love to me. As I start to lose myself to the onslaught of emotions and pleasure each gentle thrust brings, I know he's falling right over the edge with me. Our mouths fuse together, and I dig my fingers into his sides, whimpering against his lips as I come.

The orgasm isn't like anything I've ever experienced before. It's slow-moving, like lava consuming me from my head to my toes, ripping away any of the last defenses I had up and allowing him access to every single part of me.

I would never have thought I could fall for another man so easily, but Tucker isn't just any other man. He's kind, honest, and as strong and sure as General Sherman—a mighty tree that's been around for thousands of years. His body is slick against mine, and his heart is pounding against my chest as I come back to myself, locking my arms and legs around him tighter.

Rolling us, he never loses our connection as I fall against his chest.

"I work for the FBI," he says quietly when our breathing has returned to normal, and our heartbeats have steadied. My muscles bunch in response to his confession. I don't know what I expected him to say after experiencing something like that moment with him, but it definitely wasn't that. "Miles and I were assigned after concerns about corruption were brought to the FBI's attention. I … Fuck, I should have told you sooner."

Lifting my head with my heart thundering against my ribcage, I look into his eyes. Even if his expression is guarded, his walls are down, and he's just as vulnerable as I am in this moment. "So, you're not a detective?" I whisper.

"No, I am a Special Agent, but my job is a lot more complicated than that. For this job I am assigned the title of detective." It would have to be, and I'm not even hurt he kept it from me until now. Until he knew he could trust me.

"How long have you worked for the FBI?"

"I was twenty-six the first time Miles and I applied. He was accepted, but I was denied. I waited a year and applied again. I turned thirty-four back in

December, so just about eight years."

"You're thirty-four?" This information surprises me more than the news that he's an FBI agent. I can totally picture him in that navy-blue jacket with bold yellow writing on it.

His head jerks back. "Yeah."

"You're seven years older than me."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, you just don't look thirty-four." I sit up and put my hands against his chest, and his arms tighten around me. "I'm not going anywhere." I shake my head. "Well, I am, but that's just to the bathroom, because Kingston will be up soon and I need to shower." His hand slides up my back and wraps around the nape of my neck under my hair.

"You're not pissed?"

"No. I understand why you'd wait to tell me something as big as that," I say quietly, then tip my head to the side. "Do you have any other secrets?"

"You've got all of me."

I've got all of him?

My stomach melts as his eyes scan over my face.

"Jesus, what the fuck am I going to do with you?" he asks, and my heart screams, *Love me!* He leans up to capture my mouth with his, and when he pulls back, his eyes are soft. "Let's go get cleaned up."

Biting my lip, I maneuver myself off him and the bed and walk into the bathroom. He follows me inside, getting rid of the condom while I turn on the shower. As I tie up my hair, I lock my eyes on his in the mirror when he steps behind me, then his eyes wander over my face, chest, and stomach as his hands roam over each part before covering my belly.

"What are you thinking?" I ask, covering his hands with mine and feeling a twinge of unease for the first time. I know that feeling is ridiculous; he's seen every inch of me before. But where he's got about zero percent body fat, I have rolls and dimples.

"Just trying to figure out how Bowie could be so fucking stupid." He drops his lips to my shoulder. "You were too good for him, Miranda." His eyes meet

mine in the mirror once more. “Hell, you’re too good for me, but I’m too selfish to let you go.”

“I’m not too good for you.”

“You are, but I’m gonna let you continue to think you aren’t, because that works in my favor,” he smiles, and what Lizzy said all those weeks ago comes back to me as my heart twists.

“I graduated high school by sheer luck.” I whisper watching his smile fade away. “I didn’t go to college, I’m a single mom and not to mention the fact that I should probably lose some weight.” I shake my head. “If anything you’re too good for me.”

“Don’t do that.” He turns me around to face him then crowds me back against the counter. “You graduated when you could have dropped out, you got your license to do hair and yeah you’re a single mom, but that shit wasn’t by choice.” He lifts me onto the counter and places himself between my spread thighs. “You’re so fucking beautiful that just looking at you gets me hard. Every fucking inch of you fills my hands perfect, and honestly, I’ll be pissed if you lose weight.” He grabs my face. “You’re a great fucking mom to Kingston and I’m a luck fucking bastard.” His eyes roam mine. “Tell me that you understand that, that you believe me.”

With my heart going haywire I search his eyes for a lie but don’t see one. “I believe you. But you believe me too right?” I whisper and his jaw clenches as his gaze roams over my face.

“Yes.” He clips then drops his head back to his shoulders and mutters “Fuck, now I’m pissed because I can’t fuck you like I want to right now.” I rub my lips together to keep from smiling and he looks me, his eyes narrowing. “That shits not funny, I don’t have another condom and I’m not ready to answer the ten million questions Kingston would have about what I’m doing to his mom if he wakes up.”

“Sorry.” I giggle and he shakes his head before kissing me and lifting me off the counter.

“Get your ass in the shower.” He grumbles ushering me in under the warm spray and I fight the urge to laugh.

Neither of us takes long to wash up, and when we are done, we both dry off and I put on a thin lounge set—matching shorts and a tank top—while he steps into a pair of boxers and loose shorts that hang low on his hips.

“What time do you have to leave?” I ask him quietly when we’re both dressed.

“I need to be to the station by nine, so I’ll leave about eight thirty.”

I glance at the clock on the microwave when we get into the kitchen and start the pot of coffee I set up last night.

It’s seven now, so I have an hour and a half with him. Not long, but I’ll take what I can get. The same as last night, when he showed up at close to nine, and after eating some of the leftover dinner I made, he told me he had some work to do. Try as I might, I couldn’t stay awake. I ended up falling asleep curled against him while he worked on his laptop in my bed, and I felt bad for passing out on him, but waking up with him wrapped around me made it obvious that he didn’t care.

“Mommy!” Kingston calls out, and I walk to the edge of the kitchen and look around the corner just in time to see him sleepily stumble out of his room, dragging his blanket behind him.

“Morning, lovie.” I meet him halfway and pick him up. “Did you sleep okay?” He nods, pressing his face into my neck. I swear there is nothing better than him when he’s warm and cuddly after just waking up.

Carrying him down the hall, I know the instant he sees Tucker. He wiggles in a silent demand to be put down, and the moment his feet touch the floor, he runs to where Tucker is and holds his hands in the air.

“You’re here,” he says happily, and Tucker lifts him off his feet.

“I came to have breakfast with you,” he tells him, and Kingston wraps his arms around his neck, giving him a hug that makes my heart melt.

“Can we have pancakes?” Kingston looks at me. “Wif chocolate chips?”

“You can have pancakes.” I take the cup of coffee Tucker passes me. “But I’m not sure we have any chocolate chips left. Remember when I caught you eating them like they were candy?”

“They *are* candy.” He grins at me like he still thinks it’s funny.

“He’s not wrong,” Tucker says, and I glare at him, which makes Kingston giggle. “Just saying, babe.”

“Whatever.” I set down my coffee and go to the pantry to grab the box of pancake mix and what’s left of the chocolate chips, which isn’t much at all.

“Can we go back to your house?” Kingston asks Tucker as I start to get everything ready to make breakfast.

“Any time you want, you can come over.” Tucker places my boy’s bottom on the counter next to where I put my mixing bowl.

“Really?” His eyes widen. “Can we wiv there with you?”

My stomach bottoms out, and I start to say something. What that something is, I have no idea, because Kingston is just a kid and doesn’t really understand that living with someone is a huge deal. Heck, just staying the night with someone is a huge deal, especially when you have a child.

“We can get a bed for the other room, and you and Mom can stay the night whenever you like,” Tucker tells him before I get my mouth to work, and my heart starts to gallop inside my chest when he looks over at me and continues talking. “I think Winter still has her twin-size bed in storage. I’ll ask Miles about it today.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say quietly. I don’t want him to think just because Kingston wants something that he has to make it happen. Him staying here is one thing, but us in his space is something totally different—or at least in my head it is. I don’t want us to intrude on his space or to overwhelm him.

“I like the idea of you and him staying with me,” he says firmly but sweetly.

“Okay,” I agree, and his face gets soft before he reaches over to wrap his hand around the side of my neck, using it to pull me over so he can kiss the side of my head.

“So, tell me what you’re learning in school,” Tucker prompts, and Kingston’s shoulders slump forward. “It’s not real school. All we do is pway.”

“Don’t you guys work on your ABCs and counting?” I raise a brow.

“I alweady know those; I knew dose since I was two.”

Okay, he’s not wrong. We’ve been practicing ABCs, counting, colors, and shapes since he was old enough to sit up. I’m pretty sure I have a million videos

on my phone of him singing his ABCs and numbers.

“What do you want them to teach you?” I ask.

“Science.”

“What kind of science?” Tucker asks him, leaning back against the counter with his cup of coffee.

“Volcanoes and wockets, things dat expwode!” He swings his tiny arms wide, knocking the bowl off the counter, but Tucker catches it.

“I think you’re a little young for things that explode, lovie.” I take the bowl from Tucker and put it back where it was.

“No, I not. I’m going to be four.”

“Yes, you’re going to be four, not fourteen,” I say, and he rolls his eyes. Lord, this kid is going to be trouble when he’s a teenager. “Okay, what kind of birthday party do you want this year?” I change the subject. My mama heart cannot handle him talking about explosives already.

“Wockets and volcanoes,” he replies, and I roll my eyes as Tucker tosses his head back and laughs.

All I can do is sigh. *Boys….*

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

tucker

With Miranda and Kingston under the umbrella I have my hand wrapped around, I attempt to keep the two of them dry as we walk across the parking lot. An almost impossible task with Kingston stopping to jump in each and every puddle that is more than half an inch deep. Then again, Miranda put a pair of rain boots on him that look like dinosaurs, so he's on a mission to test the durability and make sure they are fully waterproof. When I finally get them to where Miranda's car is parked, I open the back door first to get Kingston out of the rain that is falling harder than it was a moment ago.

"Get in the car, babe. I got him." I meet Miranda's gaze over the top of the door, and with a nod, she opens hers and gets in behind the steering wheel.

"Get in your seat, bud," I tell Kingston as he pulls his game out of the cup holder.

"Watch me." He starts pressing the buttons on the game, sending rings floating through the water and trying to get them onto the dolphins' noses.

"You can show me when you're buckled in."

"When do I get to see Winter again?" he asks, sitting on the edge of his car seat.

"You'll see her soon."

"Are you comin' for dinner tonight?" he asks as I maneuver his bottom into his car seat, and I laugh.

"Yeah, I'm coming to dinner tonight."

"Can we have pizza?"

“Sure,” I reply, and I hear Miranda giggle.

“Will you come wif Mom to pick me up from school?” he questions, buckling himself in.

“I’ll try.”

“Pwomise?”

“Yeah, bud. I promise.” I ruffle his hair, then stand back and shut the door.

“Are you rethinking things yet?” Miranda asks quietly, and I look down at her through her open window, then glance at Kingston in the back seat, with his eyes on me and a smile on his face.

This morning, whatever walls were left standing between us came down. And now more than ever before, I know I want chaotic mornings like this one and to be able to watch Kingston run wild at the end of the day. I don’t just feel content when I’m with them; I feel happy and at peace, something I’ve never fully experienced before in my thirty-four years.

I didn’t lie. She’s too fucking good for me, but I’m not giving her up, and I’ll fight for us every single day.

“Not even a little bit.” I watch her face get soft, “What time do you pick him up from daycare?” I close the umbrella and pass it through the window. She places it on the passenger seat.

“Normally around five.”

“I’ll see if I can meet you there.”

“You don’t have to do that. I know you’re working.”

“Send me a text with the address,” I order, ignoring her statement, and her face flushes a pretty pink as she nods. Christ, she’s fucking beautiful. I lean down and press my mouth to hers. “I’ll see you this evening.”

“See you tonight,” she says, and I back up a step, then watch her roll up her window and back out of her parking spot. As Kingston waves I wave back.

With the rain beating down on me, I watch the two of them drive off, then head for my truck and get in behind the wheel. As I’m heading out of the complex with Miranda a little ways ahead of me, my brows drag together when her brake lights come on as she pulls over to the sidewalk next to a figure cloaked in black with a hoodie up, covering their hair. It takes a moment to

realize who it is, but when I see Carrie get into her car, my gut clenches tight. I no longer suspect Carrie of being a part of Kristen's death, but that doesn't mean I trust her. Especially with Miranda and Kingston.

"Shit." It looks like I do have something else I need to come clean to Miranda about. I didn't even fucking think about her making contact with Carrie at some point, even with them being neighbors.

Grabbing my cell, my finger hovers over her number, but I drop it into the cup holder instead. The conversation I need to have with her is one that should happen when we are face-to-face and not while Carrie is in the car with her.

When I get to the station, Miles is already at his desk, and the second he sees me, he pushes back his chair and walks toward me.

"You're not going to believe what I'm about to say," he begins quietly, and given that it's obvious he doesn't want anyone to overhear it, we head out the back door where I used to smoke. Jesus when was the last time I even thought about having a cigarette?

"What's up?" I ask after glancing around to make sure no one else is outside with us.

"Jay is Officer Thompson's son." I raise a brow, having no idea who Jay is. "The kid from last night, the one who sat alone the whole time."

"Shit."

"And about seven of the other kids who were there are kids of police officers."

My head jerks back. "How did you find that out?"

"Jay's profile picture is his dad and him, and it made me curious about the other kids." He shakes his head. "Shit just got a whole lot more complicated for us, brother."

"Regardless of who their parents are, we've got a job to do."

"I'm not disagreeing with you on that, but you know going to Jay without talking to his dad first could lead to issues for us down the road."

"And if he says he doesn't want us talking to his son?" I prompt, and his jaw gets tight. Like me, he knows that is a possibility, and if that happens, whatever 'in' we thought we had is going to be dead in the water. "I say we pretend we

have no idea Jay is Thompson's kid and move forward like we normally would with questioning a potential lead in a murder investigation."

"And when he goes to his dad?"

"If he goes to his dad, we deal with the fallout then. I'd rather have the lead and apologize after, then be cut off before we even get the chance to ask Jay some questions."

He eyes me for a minute before pushing his fingers through his hair. "Yeah. Okay, fuck it. Let's talk to him today. I'll call and find out what time he has lunch."

"Does he go to the same high school as Carrie?"

"They all go to the same high school."

"That's convenient." We head back into the building, and I take a seat at my desk as he does the same. Taking out my cell, I check my messages and see one from Miranda with Kingston's daycare address. I look over at Miles. "Do you still have Winter's twin bed in storage?"

"Yeah, you want it?"

"I'm gonna put it in my guest room for Kingston."

"I'll pull it out this evening. Winter's been asking when she'll see him again."

"Kingston was asking the same thing this morning. Maybe they can hang this weekend."

"Hazel is flying in Friday to spend a few days." Hazel is Winter's mom and the big sister none of us asked for. Which is probably why shit did not work out between Miles and her. No man wants to date a woman who is more like a sibling than a lover.

"I thought she wasn't coming for another couple of weeks."

"She wasn't, but she heard about Miranda and wants to come check her out," he explains, and I press my lips together. "You had to know it was coming."

"I do *not* need Hazel to approve Miranda."

"If you had listened to her about Naomie, you might not be where you are right now."

"I also might not have met Miranda."

“True,” he mutters, shaking his head before turning on his computer.

STANDING in the office at the high school, I wait next to Miles with my arms crossed over my chest, ignoring the hoard of women behind the counter who keep shooting looks in our direction. What had originally been just two women turned into a group of seven within five minutes of our arrival, and all of them have done a shit job of pretending to work as they check us out.

When the principal walks in with Jay at his side, my eyes scan over the kid. Last night, between the distance and the darkness, I missed the acne on his face and just how lanky he is compared to the other kids who were there last night, if their stature next to Steven was anything to go by. And if things haven’t changed since I was a kid, I’m sure he feels like an outcast amongst his peers.

“Jay, this is Detective Thatcher and Detective Beckett, who I told you about.” Principal Dr. Marvin Harvey clasps Jay’s shoulder.

“Jay.” I reach for his hand, and he nervously takes mine before shaking Miles’s. “We just have a few questions for you. We know it’s your lunch break, so we won’t take up much of your time,” my brother says in a friendly tone, and Jay nods, looking between Miles and me and seeming unsure.

“You can use our conference room,” Dr. Harvey offers, motioning for us to follow him. When we reach the small inner room with a single round table and a few chairs I take a seat not wanting Jay to be more intimidated than he already is and Miles does the same as Dr. Marvin closes the door leaving us alone.

“We came in today to talk to you about Kristen Stable,” I explain, and his face instantly loses some of its color. “We know she used to attend the youth group at World Church, the same one you attend now.”

“She did.” He rubs his lips together. “But she stopped going like forever ago though.”

“Were you two friends?” I ask him.

“Yes, but not after she stopped coming to church. She didn’t talk to anyone after that.”

“Do you know why she stopped attending?” Miles asks, and the boy sits back, putting distance between us.

“No, I…. She just totally changed, and started hanging out with a girl named Carrie.”

“Do you want to tell us a little about what you guys do at youth group?” Miles asks, leaning back in his chair and making himself seem like less of a threat.

“We pray and talk about the Bible.”

“And smoke weed,” I put in, and his eyes widen. The reaction is the one I was looking for. I want him to know we know exactly what it is they’re doing while they’re all there hanging out together.

“I… I don’t do that.”

“But everyone else does?”

“Not everyone.” He looks around like he’s trying to figure out how to escape.

“Did Kristen smoke weed?”

“No.”

“Did she have a boyfriend?”

“She—” He cuts himself off. “I don’t think so.”

“Did anything ever happen to Kristen at youth group that upset her or made her uncomfortable?”

“No,” he says a little too quickly. “N-Not that I know of.”

“Did anyone hurt her?” I ask, and his face that is already pale loses even more color.

“We’re really just trying to figure out what happened to her,” Miles adds softly.

“I… I don’t know anything. I swear I don’t know anything.”

“Okay.” I take out my wallet and pass him one of my cards. “If you can think of anything or if you know anyone who might know something, I want you to call me.”

“Yeah, sure, okay.” He nods frantically, glancing at the door. “Can I go now?”

“Yeah, you can go,” Miles replies, and he’s up and out of his seat within seconds and bolting from the room, leaving the door wide open.

“He knows something,” I say quietly.

“Yeah, he’s also more afraid of whoever he’s keeping the secret for than he is of us.”

“I think we should call Steven and ask him if he can come down to the station, and we can have a conversation with him there.” We leave the conference room and walk through the office.

“Have a good day, ladies,” Miles calls out as we pass the group of women, which has grown to ten since we went in there less than ten minutes ago.

“Have a good day, Detectives, and if you ever need anything at all, just stop by!” the eldest-looking of the women calls back, and I chuckle as we walk out the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

miranda

Hearing the chime for the front door of the salon go off, I walk out of the break room and smile when I see Carrie standing near the front desk, looking absolutely freaked out as Sammy talks to her. The other morning on my way to drop Kingston at daycare, I saw her walking in the rain, so I pulled over and asked if she wanted a ride. On the way, she told me that she spoke with her dad, and he thought it would be a good idea if she talked to my friend.

I honestly couldn't hide my excitement, so I called Nikki while she was in the car with me and asked when we could set up a meeting. Nikki said she'd check her schedule and send me some dates and times. And after I went over them with Carrie, she agreed on today because she got out of school at one. Figuring it was easier for everyone I told her to meet me here at the salon, and we would talk to Nikki at the coffee shop next door at four when she was off work.

"She's with me, Sammy," I say as I walk toward the front desk, and Sammy nods as Carrie's eyes fill with relief. "Hey, honey."

"Hey." She looks around. "This is where you work?"

"It is." I glance around the salon. A couple of years ago, Polly totally remodeled the entire space, painting the concrete floors a cool black and adding accent walls here and there with a floral one near the front door featuring a neon sign that clients love to take photos in front of.

"It's so cool."

"Thanks." I smile as I check the time. "I don't have a client right now, and

we have a few hours before Nikki is supposed to meet us. I could do something with your hair?"

"Really?" she whispers, and I have to laugh.

"Totally. Come on." I lead her over to my chair and look over at Emma. "This is my friend Carrie. Carrie, my best friend Emma."

"Hi," Carrie greets softly, and Emma grins at her as I spin the chair around for her to sit. "I guess I should ask if your dad will be okay with it."

"He doesn't care what I do with my hair."

"Awesome. Is there any style you've seen that you like or any color you think is cool?" I pull the elastic out of her hair, which is seriously long, but it's obvious she does her own color, because there are spots near the top that were missed.

"There *is* an artist I love." She takes out her cell phone and shows me a picture of a girl probably a little older than her with an edgy cut and dark hair with purple highlights.

"I love that, and I think that cut would look cute on you."

"Let me see," Emma says, walking over, and I show her the photo. "Oh, that's *super* cute!"

I pass Carrie back her phone. "Let me go mix up some color. I'll be right back." I give her a reassuring smile, then head to the back of the salon, where we have our mixing station.

It takes a few minutes to get everything set up, and when I walk back to my chair, Emma is sitting in her seat, talking to Carrie, and making her smile. Of course she's able to put her at ease. I don't think there has ever been a person on this planet Emma isn't able to befriend.

"Ready?" I ask Carrie, and she nods, so I get to work doing what I do best.

"Seriously?" I hear Emma growl quietly a little over an hour later when the door to the salon dings, letting us know someone has arrived. I look over my shoulder, expecting to see Eli, who Emma has surprisingly cut off, but it's not him.

It's Bowie.

Holding a cup of coffee and a bouquet of flowers.

When his eyes meet mine, he smiles.

Letting out a breath, I look at Emma. “Can you take over for me for a few minutes?” I ask, and she looks at Bowie, sending him a dirty look before turning her attention back to me.

“For sure.”

“Thanks.” I slip off my gloves that are stained with purple dye and toss them in the trash. “I’ll be back,” I tell Carrie, and she nods, looking back at Bowie.

“Come on, girl. I got you.” Emma grabs a pair of gloves as I walk across the salon to my ex-husband.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I ask him, and he holds out the coffee and flowers toward me, and out of instinct, I take them from him.

“I don’t start work for a couple of hours, and I was running some errands. I thought I’d stop by to see you.”

“Bowie.” Dammit, I don’t want there to be a rift between us, but as much I want us to be at a place where we are okay with each other, I’m not there yet. And him showing up with flowers and coffee is absolutely *not* all right. “You can’t just show up at my job.”

“I want to talk to you, and since you haven’t given me a chance to do that over the phone when I’ve called Kingston—”

“Because besides Kingston, we have *nothing* to talk about,” I cut him off while setting down the flowers and coffee. “I hope one day we can be in a place in our lives where we can have some kind of friendship, but after everything that’s happened, I’m not there right now.”

“I love you, Miranda,” he says quietly, and I grit my teeth to keep from calling him a liar. “I know I messed up, and I hate that I—”

“Stop,” I interrupt. “This is not happening, not at my job and not when you’re only doing this because you know I’m happy—that I’ve found someone who makes me happy.”

“Tucker is—”

“A good man,” I state before he can get another word out. “He’s kind to me and our son, and I care about him.” Dammit, now it feels like I’m lying, because my feelings for Tucker are so much bigger than just caring about him.

“You don’t even know him.”

“Well, I thought I knew *you*, but I was wrong about that. So, I guess I’ll take my chances on him.” I look past him when the door to the salon opens, and watch Polly walk in with her husband. The two of them glance between Bowie and me.

“Is everything okay?” Howard asks, stepping forward, and I glance up at Bowie quickly before focusing back on him.

“Yeah, Bowie was just leaving.”

“Miranda—” Bowie starts, but I cut him off once more with a shake of my head.

“I’ll have Kingston call you tonight before bed,” I say, and he eyes me for a long moment before he lets out a breath.

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah,” I agree, even though he won’t. He’ll talk to our son. That’s it.

Wrapping my arms around my middle, I watch him turn and walk out the door, and the moment he’s gone, Polly comes over and wraps her arms around me.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m great,” I assure her, and she leans back so she can see my face. “Promise.”

“I see that.” She pats my cheek, then looks at the coffee and flowers on the counter. “He’s pulling out the big guns.”

“He’s wasting his time and his money.” I pick up the flowers and hand them over to Sammy. “You can take those to Becky.”

“Thanks! She’ll love them.” She grins.

“Do you want the coffee?” I ask her, and she drops her eyes to it before she shrugs.

“Sure, if you’re not going to drink it.”

“I’m not.” I pass her the warm cup, and she takes a sip. “Yummy, hazelnut my favorite.”

I can’t help but laugh. Bowie loves hazelnut, and I hate it. Tucker also likes hazelnut, but the last time I was at his house, I saw a container of vanilla creamer

in his fridge that wasn't there before I mentioned I only like vanilla. I mean, sure, it could be that it was on sale or that he bought it for when one of his brothers is over, but in my gut I know he bought it because of me. Because I told him something, he heard me, and he wanted me to have something I like when I'm at his house.

And that is the difference between a man who wants you and a man who wants you to be happy.

Walking back across the salon, I smile when Emma's eyes lock on mine, and she grins, knowing without me even saying a word that I'm all right. Bowie has zero effect on my happiness right now. And darn if that doesn't feel really fricking good.

"Are you okay?" Carrie asks as I put on a fresh pair of gloves, and I give her a soft smile.

"Absolutely."

"Good," she whispers, and it takes everything in me not to hug her. But since we are not there yet, I do what I can to make her feel as beautiful on the outside as she obviously is on the inside.

STANDING in my bathroom with my toothbrush hanging out of my mouth, I watch Tucker walk in behind me, wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers that mold to him like they were designed just to show off how spectacular his body is. And seriously, it is spectacular to look at, and to touch, and now that Kingston is asleep, I get to do bo—

"If you keep looking at me like that, we're not going to be able to have the conversation we need to have," he rumbles, and my eyes swing up to his. The look on his face isn't one I'm familiar with. It's serious and honestly a little scary. Spitting, I rinse my mouth with water and grab my hand towel to dry my face.

"What happened?"

"We need to talk about Carrie."

I should have known.

I should have known, because when he met me at Kingston's daycare to pick him up a few days ago, he took one look at Carrie in my car and instantly got a look on his face that screamed he wasn't happy about her being there.

And Carrie… after she saw him, she closed down completely. She wasn't animated or excited like she had been after meeting with Nikki and filling out some paperwork. The spark that started to burn inside her went out like it never existed. And when I asked if she was okay, she just said yes and left it at that, only giving me a quick thank-you once we got to our complex before she hopped out of the car. And I hadn't seen her since then, until this evening when I ran next door to give her some more information that Nikki gave me. She was happy to see me and once again excited, but when I got back into my apartment I could tell that Tucker had something on his mind.

"What about her?" I ask as he crowds me against the counter, then grabs my waist and lifts me up to sit next to the sink.

"A friend of hers was murdered not long ago."

"What?" My heart drops into my stomach and sinks to the bottom, causing bile to slide up the back of my throat. Poor Carrie.

"She has never been a suspect, but we also haven't completely ruled her out as someone who might know something."

"That's why you were here. That's the case you've been working on?"

"Yeah."

"She didn't do it," I deny instantly. "I mean, I don't really know her well, but I can't see her killing anyone or being okay with anyone killing someone she considered a friend."

"Miranda—"

"She's sweet, Tucker." I rest my hands against his chest. "I know she looks like she's hard, but she's not. She's just a kid who is trying to figure out where she belongs." My throat starts to get tight.

"I don't want you or Kingston around her." The demand is spoken gently, but there is no ignoring it's a demand and not a request.

"I'm sorry, but no," I whisper as my eyes fill with tears. "You told me this

world is fucked up, and it is, but I don’t want to be part of the reason she has to find out just how fucked up it is.” I squeeze my eyes closed and rest my forehead against his chest. “She’s smart—so smart she’s graduating early. And even though her dad works nights, she’s not out partying or hanging out with friends. She’s always home.” I open my eyes and tip my head back to look at him. “She was so happy when I did her hair and so thankful after I took her to meet with Nikki to talk about college.”

“Baby.” He cups my cheeks and wipes the tears from under my eyes.

“She’s sweet, Tucker, and I never want to be the reason she loses that.” My voice breaks. “Not when she’s held onto it for so long in spite of all the fucked-up things that have happened to her.”

“Okay,” he whispers after a long moment of his eyes searching mine.

“Okay,” I whisper back, and he cups the back of my head, pressing my face against his chest. Wrapping my arms around him, I cry for the girl next door who’s had to endure more than she should’ve at her age.

And as I cry, I silently make a promise that I’ll find a way to show that young woman her worth and that everything will be okay, like so many people have done for me. Because no one should ever feel like they’re floating in the middle of the ocean all alone, not when they have the sun overhead during the day and the moon and the stars to keep them company at night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

tucker

With Miranda sleeping next to me, her body wrapped around mine, I watch the lights traveling across the dark ceiling in her room like a physical representation of the good and evil fighting for supremacy in this world.

Until last night, I've never questioned a decision I've made, and I've never been more torn than I am right now. The need to make sure Miranda and Kingston are both safe at all costs is something that has become paramount to my personal wellbeing.

I close my eyes. If I were listening to someone else talk about these emotions after knowing someone for such a short time, I would question their sanity. But there is no denying the way I feel about the woman in my arms and the boy asleep in the room next door. And after witnessing Miranda break down over a girl she hardly knows, I understand this urge, I have to give her what she wants while still protecting her is going to come at a cost.

And that cost is *my own* sanity.

Until I know for certain Carrie had absolutely nothing to do with Kristen's death and that she hasn't lied to protect herself or anyone else, there is no way I will ever fully trust her around the two people who have come to mean more to me than the world in such a short time than should be possible.

I look down at Miranda when she moves and let out a breath. The only thing that is bringing me any kind of peace right now is knowing Steven is hiding something and that Carrie has no relationship with him. Or at least not one I have been able to find.

As soon as we said we wanted to talk to him at the station, he told us that he needed to speak with his lawyer. And about ten minutes later, his lawyer called us and let us know he would not be in. And that any questions we had for him or anyone at World Church would need to be addressed through him directly. After years of doing this job, I know that unless you have something to hide, your first thought isn't going to be that you need a lawyer. And if he's a man of faith like he claims to be, he should want to know what happened to a girl who was at one point under his care.

Hearing the door to the bedroom open, I lift my head and watch Kingston come in, his face soft with sleep, but the tears in his eyes have me instantly on alert.

"Hey, bud." I sit up, and Miranda starts to wake. "What happened?"

"I had a scary dream." He crawls onto the bed from the end, walks toward me, and falls into my arms.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Miranda asks, and I look down at her as she reaches over to rub his back.

He rolls his face across my chest to look at his mom. "No."

"Okay, lovie," she replies quietly. "Do you want to have a cuddle?" He nods, and she tosses back the covers so he can climb in between us.

"You stayed the night?" He looks up at me once his head is on the pillow.

"Is that okay with you?" Miranda asks him.

He gives a shrug before curling his tiny body into hers, looking at me over his shoulder. "Can we haf a sleepover at your house ?"

"Yeah, we can do that." I settle back against the headboard and watch the two of them. The moment is so fucking simple, but my chest fucking aches just experiencing it. I wish my sister, Arya, had been able to have this. If she had, maybe she wouldn't have gone down the path she did, and maybe she'd still be around today.

"What are you thinking about?" Miranda asks quietly, and I focus on her before looking at Kingston, who's fallen back asleep and is now lightly snoring.

"My foster sister, Arya." I smooth my fingers across her forehead, and her face gets soft.

‘Tell me about her.”

“She was already living with the Patricks when I moved in with them, and even though she was younger than us, I think we all kind of felt like she was the mom we never had.” I let out a breath. “She was funny and always breaking up fights between Miles, Dalton, Clay, and me.” She smiles at that. “She was also bossy. She made us do our homework every night and would tell us that we had to get good grades, because without graduating from school, we wouldn’t amount to shit. And those were her exact words.” I laugh.

“Where is she now?”

“She died of a drug overdose while partying in Vegas with a group of guys who paid for her to be there.”

“Tucker.”

“This world is fucked up, baby,” I remind her quietly, and tears fill her eyes. “She’s the reason Miles and I joined the FBI, why Dalton became a lawyer, and why Clay has worked his ass off to help women who might be trapped in a life they don’t think they can get out of.”

“So, she’s living on through all of you,” she says softly, and my throat gets tight.

“I never thought about it like that, but yeah, I guess she kind of is.”

“I’m sorry you lost her.” She reaches up to touch my cheek, and I grab her hand and kiss her palm.

“Me too,” I whisper, and she gets a strange look on her face, then her eyes widen. “What?”

“He… he just peed on me,” she mumbles, squeezing her eyes closed.

“What?” I frown.

“He just *peed* on me.”

“Oh no,” Kingston whispers, lifting his head, and Miranda laughs.

“It’s okay, lovie. It’s just an accident,” she assures him, and I laugh, getting off the bed, and then I lift a still sleepy Kingston off his mom.

And just like, another morning of chaos ensues, one that includes getting Kingston into the shower, changing the sheets on the bed, and all of us having breakfast before the three of us get ready to leave for the day. And throughout all

of it, not once do I wish I were anywhere else.

"BECKETT, Thatcher, I need to speak with the two of you in my office!" Deputy Chief Stedman hollers from his office, and Miles and I look at each other before getting up.

"Do you know what this is about?" Miles asks, and I shake my head as we walk to the door across the room.

"Close it behind you," he orders, and I pull the door in and stand with my arms at my sides, while Miles takes a seat across from him. Folding his arms across his large stomach, his gaze moves between the two of us. "I just got a call from Pastor Green," he says, and my hackles rise. "He's concerned, and so am I."

"Chief—"

"Do you have evidence to support the allegations you've made?"

"We haven't made any allegations. We're in the process of investigating a murder. We have reason to believe Pastor Green's nephew, Steven Green, has information that could be helpful in closing the case, but he immediately lawyered up when we asked him to come down to the station," Miles says, and Stedman's face starts to turn red.

"Until you have evidence that he has done something wrong, I expect you two to stand down," he bites out, and I clench my teeth together. "I've known Pastor Green and his family for years. They are good, wholesome people who do great things for the community and this city. They don't need the mark your presence could leave on them and the church."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to Chief Marshall about this situation," I cut in, and his eyes swing up to meet mine.

"Chief Marshall is on vacation for the next two weeks. I'm in charge, Beckett, and I'm telling you to stand the fuck down," he growls, and I jerk up my chin, letting him know I heard him loud and clear. "You two are dismissed," he states, and I turn to open the door and feel Miles right behind me.

“Beckett, Thatcher,” he calls, and we both stop to look at him. “If you do find any evidence, I expect you to present it to me before moving forward.”

“Understood,” I clip, rage making it difficult to keep my voice even and my emotions in check.

Shutting the door behind us, I head for my desk and grab my gun from where I have it stowed along with my keys. Looking over at Miles, I watch him shrug on his jacket, and the second his eyes meet mine, he lifts his chin, and the two of us head through the room. Ignoring the looks coming our way, we walk out of the building and down the street to where my SUV is parked, and we both climb inside.

“What the fuck was that?” he bites out as I turn the engine over. “I’ve never heard of police—Deputy Chief or not—putting himself between a detective and a potential lead in a murder investigation.”

“We need to call Axel. I want all the information he can get us on Stedman.”

“We’re on the same page,” he says, putting his cell to his ear as I back out of my parking spot.

By the time he hangs up, Axel is as curious as we are about Stedman, and I’ve cooled down enough to go back to the station. But when I get back to my desk, I pay a lot more attention to who Stedman has around him and take notes for later. Something tells me we might have just found the closet with the skeletons hidden in it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

miranda

Walking into Tucker's spare bedroom, I look around and sigh before I start to pick things up. Yesterday after I got Kingston from daycare, he and I met Tucker at Target so he could pick out some bedding for the bed Tucker got for him from Miles. What should have been a quick stop turned into a two-hour shopping trip, and Tucker—who has obviously never been shopping with a kid—put almost every single item in the cart that Kingston claimed he needed for his room at his house.

After the tenth time of attempting to put things back when Kingston wasn't looking and being stopped by Tucker, I gave up and let the two of them bond over stuff neither of them needed. So, by the time we left the store, Kingston had new bedding, a nightstand bookshelf, a dinosaur lamp, along with a few toys and books. And now everything is everywhere like he spent the evening marking his territory.

When I'm finished cleaning up and making the bed, I step into the living room and stop in my tracks. My heart feels too big for my chest from the sound of Kingston giggling and Tucker laughing.

I would never discount Bowie's love for his son, and he really is a good dad, but the relationship between Tucker and Kingston is not the same as the relationship Kingston has with his father. Tucker is never too busy; he makes a point to be available and present when we are all together, and Kingston has been thriving on all the extra attention. And me? Well… I feel like I have a partner. And yeah, I know it's probably too soon to think of Tucker as my

partner, but there is also no denying he's stepped into that roll without me even asking.

"What are you two laughing about?" My feet come unglued when Kingston looks my way.

"I made a butt pancake." He breaks into another fit of giggles, and I look at Tucker.

He holds up his hands. "He's in charge of putting the batter in the pan. I'm in charge of flipping."

"Right." I sigh, looking between the two of them before I just shake my head. There are some battles worth fighting, but boys being weird boys is not a hill I want to die on. Walking to the wall oven, I open it up and check the egg bake I made, which is basically an omelet in a baking dish with onions, tomatoes, bacon, and sharp cheddar cheese. After checking and finding that it's done, I grab a pair of potholders and pull it out, placing it on the counter where we have a full spread of fruit, toast, jellies, butter, bacon, sausage, and a few different kinds of cheese on a cutting board. This morning, Miles, Winter, her mom Hazel, Clay, Willow, and Dalton are all coming here for breakfast. And I might have gone a little overboard with all the food.

I move some stuff around to make room for the pancakes Tucker places on a plate, then glance at the door when there is a knock. Since I'm closer and Tucker is busy with Kingston, I walk across the living room. Pulling the door open, I smile when Miles and Winter step inside, with a woman who looks like she should be on a runway in Paris right behind them. I've heard a lot about Hazel from Tucker, how she's married to a lawyer and the two of them are planning on having a baby soon, but he never told me how beautiful she is.

"Hi!" Winter sings, giving me a quick hug around my waist before yelling for Kingston and running his way, making me laugh.

"Hey, Miranda." Miles chuckles, dropping a kiss on my cheek, then he turns to the woman and touches her back. "Hazel, Miranda. Miranda, Hazel."

"Nice to meet you." I take her hand, her shake firm and strong and really fricking intimidating.

"You too. I've heard nothing but good things." She steps inside, and just as

I’m about to close the door, the elevator down the hall opens, and Dalton steps out, with Willow and Clay holding hands, still looking tan and euphoric from their honeymoon and the sun they spent two weeks in. If I had met the two of them while I was still married to Bowie I would have been green with envy. It’s so obvious for anyone in their presence just how in love they are, and how protective and gentle Clay is with his wife.

A hand touches my back and slides across to my hip, and my eyes connect with Tucker’s. “Miles took over pancake duty with the kids.”

“Okay,” I whisper, and he drops a kiss to my mouth. Yeah, I would have been jealous before but now I have all of that in Tucker.

We turn to the three people standing a couple feet away and my cheeks get warm as they look between Tucker and me. I bite my bottom lip.

“You’re adorable.” Willow laughs before she wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

“Whatever.” I hug her back, then accept a hug from Clay. “I hope you guys are really hungry. I might have gone overboard with the food.”

“I’m starving, and I brought a gift,” Dalton says, dropping a kiss to my cheek, and I notice he has a bottle of champagne in one hand and a bottle of orange juice in the other.

“I won’t be drinking today,” Willow announces as everyone starts to fill their plates, and Dalton gets down champagne glasses.

“Are you pregnant?” Hazel asks, sounding excited, and Willow laughs.

“No, but I woke up with a headache after last night.” She sends me an accusatory look.

“Hey.” I hold up my hands. “I’m not the one who thought we should open up that second bottle.”

Last night when we got to Tucker’s, Kingston immediately wanted to go upstairs to play with Winter. So, Tucker sent out a group text to his brothers, and the guys all decided we would order in dinner and eat while the kids played.

It was fun—and nice, seeing Tucker so happy and relaxed with his brothers. Plus, I loved spending time with Willow and getting to know her a little more. It wasn’t the first time I had met her and her husband but it was the first time we

really got to hang out.

“I knew I should have gotten an earlier flight yesterday.” Hazel sighs. “I always miss the good stuff.”

“Maybe we can all hang out tonight?” Willow offers, and Tucker shakes his head.

“I’m taking Miranda and Kingston to my cabin for the night.” I look up at him and frown. I didn’t know he had a cabin or that he planned on us going there.

“You are?”

He tips his chin down to meet my gaze. “I was going to surprise you, since Kingston is with his dad next weekend, and I have renters in there after that.”

“We’re going to a cabin?” Kingston asks with a happy smile.

“I want to go to the cabin.” Winter pouts.

Tucker takes his eyes off the two kids and looks around the room. “We could all go for the night. There’s plenty of room.”

“That sounds like fun,” Hazel agrees.

“Sounds good to me.” Miles shrugs.

“Us too,” Clay adds, wrapping his arm around Willow.

“You know I don’t have any plans,” Dalton says, and Willow gives him a disbelieving look. “What?”

“What about that girl you were talking to all morning?”

“She’ll wait for me.” He grins, and I almost roll my eyes, but I’m sure he’s right. Like his brothers, he’s good-looking and seriously charming. I bet every single woman he talks to is hoping he will stay interested for more than a night. I also know from Tucker that never happens. He’s a player, though I’m not sure “player” is the right word, since he’s up front about not getting into a relationship, and the women are still willing to put themselves out there anyway.

“All right, after breakfast, we’ll all pack and head out,” Tucker says as he helps Kingston get some more bacon from the plate on the counter.

“Then I’ll save the champagne for the cabin,” Dalton replies, catching my eye. “Unless you want some?”

“I’m good for now,” I assure him with a smile, and he puts the glasses back

in the cabinet while I get a plate.

It doesn’t take long for everyone to settle in, and as we eat, the conversation turns to work for the guys, while Willow, Hazel, and I talk about kids and life. It’s everything I didn’t know I was missing while I was with Bowie. And although I didn’t need my friends or family to like him in order for me to be with him, I can see now that it would have made a huge difference in our relationship if they had.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

tucker

"Walker, calm down." Miranda sighs for the fifth time in two minutes, and it takes all my willpower not to take her phone and toss it out the fucking window. The call from her brother started out with her audibly happy to hear from him, but after she told him about me, her tone quickly shifted to one filled with defensiveness and frustration. "Like I told you already, he's a detective, and—" He obviously cuts her off. "He's nothing like Bowie, Walker."

She drags in a deep breath, and I glance in the rearview mirror to check on Kingston, who's still asleep and has been since we started driving two hours ago. "Well, I don't need your permission or approval to date anyone." I see her glance over at me out the corner of her eye before she whispers, "I'm going to hang up on you if you keep being a jerk." She pauses again. "I can understand you have questions, but you're not here, Walker. And with how you're responding to me telling you that I've met someone, there is no way I'm going to put him on the phone with you."

She pauses, then groans, "If you come for a visit, you'll get to know him then." She goes quiet again, then whispers, "I love you, but there is nothing you can say that will make me question my decision, so you should stop trying." I glance over to see her looking out the window. "I get that you're worried after what happened with Bowie, but Tucker is nothing like him. He's kind and honest and so sweet with Kingston, who absolutely adores him. He makes me happy and hopeful, and you're just going to trust me, because I don't want to hang up the phone being angry with you, but I will if you say anything else except 'I

support you and trust that you're smart enough not to choose another man who will mistreat you.'"

She inhales deeply after that, then lets out a long breath as she listens to her brother speak. "Okay, well, I hope you're able to do that. I miss you, and it would be nice for your nephew to know that you exist in real life and not just on the screen of a phone. Plus, I'd like to meet this girl you're seeing." A minute passes before she whispers, "I love you too. Please be safe." She hangs up and places her phone in the cup holder next to mine. "Sorry about that."

"You okay?" I reach over for her hand, and she wraps her fingers around mine.

"Yeah, he's worried and being an annoying big brother."

"He loves you."

"I know. That's the only reason I didn't toss my phone out the window."

I chuckle, and she squeezes my fingers. "He's going to try to come visit this summer when our parents are here."

"That will be good."

"When he meets you, he'll understand, but right now—"

"Baby," I cut her off, "I'm not worried about your brother's opinion of me."

"I know, but I want you two to get along. He didn't like Bowie, and I know that's part of the reason why he never wanted to visit."

"What's the other part?"

She goes quiet for a moment. "Honestly, I think he stayed away, because if he came to the States, he'd feel obligated to see our parents."

"They don't get along?"

"They do, but there's always been animosity between my dad and him, maybe even between my mom and him too."

I glance over at her. "Explain that."

"Our dad cheated on our mom while we were growing up." She fiddles with my fingers. "I don't just mean he had an affair and realized he messed up, then worked to repair things. He would cheat, get caught, apologize, and beg forgiveness, then do it again with someone else."

"Baby." I flip my hand over and squeeze her thigh. Even if her trauma wasn't

the same as mine, it's obvious from her tone that it still left scars behind.

"Walker." She pauses for a long moment. "My dad is a good person, and I think it was really difficult for Walker to separate who dad was as a person, who he was as a father, and who he was as a husband." She lets out a breath. "Or at least that's the way it was for me, and I know neither of us understood why mom wouldn't just leave him. She had a job and would have been okay."

"Some people don't realize they are strong enough to make it on their own," I say quietly, then ask, "How is your parents' relationship now?"

"I think okay, but honestly, I don't know. My senior year, my friends came to me and told me about an affair my dad was having, and I was so humiliated." Her voice gets soft. "I could handle it when it was just a dirty little secret that stayed within the four walls of our house, but knowing people outside were talking about it was devastating."

"That's understandable," I tell her as I exit the highway and see her nod.

"I confronted him about it and kind of freaked out, because I was so embarrassed." She lets out a quiet breath, then whispers, "We hardly spoke after that for a long time. Things have recently only started getting better. As far as I know, that's the last time he cheated, but I don't know for sure, and that's not a conversation I'll have with my mom. That's why I couldn't even think about staying with Bowie. He knew what I had gone through and that there was no way I'd put Kingston through that, and he still had an affair."

"Straight-up, baby, you never have to worry about that with me," I assure quietly, and her fingers tense. "That's not me telling you what you want to hear. That's me being honest. Cheating is a choice you make. It's not something that happens by accident, and I would never betray the trust you've given me."

"I know," she murmurs.

"Mommy," Kingston calls from the back seat, and I glance up at the rearview mirror.

"Hey, lovie." She turns around in her seat to face him. "Are you okay? Do you need to potty?"

"Are we there yet?"

"About five minutes, bud," I tell him, and he sits up to look out the window

before trying to look behind us, but he's not tall enough.

"Where's Winter?"

"They're still behind us," Miranda assures him before facing forward and digging in the bag at her feet. "Do you want a snack?"

"No." He yawns. "There's wots of trees here."

"There is." I smile when he meets my gaze in the mirror. "There are also bears around here, and I've seen a few when I've been at the cabin."

"Real beers?" he asks, and I laugh at the way he says it.

"Yeah, so you have to be careful when you're outside. I'm not sure if they're out of hibernation yet, but they could be."

"Okay," he says happily.

I turn onto the dirt road with forest on each side.

"Oh my God," Miranda whispers when the lake comes into view. "This is so beautiful."

"Can we go swimming?" Kingston asks, looking at the water out his window.

"This summer you can. It's too cold right now, bud." I turn right at the fork in the road; going left would take us to the neighbor's property. When the cabin comes into view, so does a large truck parked on the concrete parking pad. A truck that shouldn't be here, since I have no bookings lined up until the weekend after next.

"That's Bowie's truck," Miranda whispers just loud enough for me to hear, and I look over at her, my jaw going hard. If he's here, then so is Naomie.

With my brothers all behind me in their vehicles—except for Dalton's, because he rode with Clay and Willow, I pull up to the cabin and park before opening my door. "Stay here," I order.

"Tucker—"

"It's all good, baby." I wrap my hand around the nape of her neck. "Just wait here with Kingston." When I get a nod from her, I pull her forward for a kiss, then let her go and jump out, slamming the door just as I hear Kingston ask Miranda about his dad.

"Who's here?" Miles asks, getting out of his truck.

“Take a guess.”

“Shit,” he mutters, looking at the cabin as Clay and Dalton get out of Clay’s Jeep.

“Tell Willow to stay put,” I say softly, and Clay instantly goes on alert. “It’s all good. Bowie and Naomie are just here.”

“Fuck,” Dalton mutters, closing the back door after he’s gotten out.

“How do you want to handle this?” Miles asks.

“The kids are here, so the less drama, the better.” I start walking toward the cabin with my brothers at my back. When we get to the front door, I don’t use my key. I knock and wait, seeing movement through the etched glass before Bowie’s face comes into view when he looks out.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asks as he pulls the door open, wearing a pair of sweats with his hair damp.

“I was about to ask you the same question.” I look past him and see Naomie in nothing but a towel, looking nervous. “Why are you in my house, Naomie?”

“*Your* house?” Bowie crosses his arms over his chest.

“*My* house,” I repeat, and he looks back at Naomie.

“I thought this was your place.”

“I.... Well….” She shifts on her feet. “It was ours.”

“It was never *ours*. I bought it. Your name wasn’t ever on the paperwork. The judge told you straight out that you wouldn’t be seeing a penny from this property.”

“We were married when you bought it,” she snaps. “I should own half of it.”

“And yet you don’t,” Miles inserts coolly, and she glares at him.

“Jesus, Naomie. Do you *ever* fucking tell the truth?” Bowie bites out, spinning away from the open door.

“What’s that mean?” she spits.

“First, the false pregnancy. Now this. And the lies about you still being with Tucker?”

“I explained all that.”

“Yeah, you’re really good at ‘explaining’ shit to fit your narrative. And I’m a fool for listening.” He storms through the living room toward the bedroom that is

on the first floor.

“Where are you going?” she cries when he tries to walk past her.

“To pack my shit and go home.” He shrugs her off when she reaches out to latch onto him.

“You can’t leave me.”

“Don’t pretend like you fucking care about me or what I do, Naomie. I might have been thinking with my dick when we got together, but I’m not a complete idiot.”

“You told me that you loved me. You chose me.”

“I thought I loved my wife and our family, but then I willingly fucking participated in the destruction of everything good I had. So, it’s obvious I have no idea what love is and that I’m just as fucked up as you are.” He pushes past her and goes into the bedroom.

She spins around to point her finger at me. “This is your fault.”

“I’m giving you ten minutes to pack your shit and get out of my house, or I’m calling the cops and having you arrested for breaking and entering.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.” I shrug, and she looks through my brothers and me before she spins on her heel and stomps into the room with Bowie.

When he comes out with a shirt on and a bag over his shoulder a minute later, I step in front of the door. “You need to take Naomie with you.”

“I’m done. She can figure out her own way home.” He steps to the side, and I do the same, blocking his path.

“Miranda and Kingston are out front in my SUV,” I state, and his jaw clenches. “You need to take her with you.”

“Fine. Let me go see my boy before she comes out.”

I don’t want to, but I still step out of the way and allow him to pass. I watch him toss his bag into the bed of his truck before walking to where I parked. The passenger door opens, and Miranda gets out, her eyes coming to me in question as he walks toward her with me on his heels.

“I just want to give him a hug,” Bowie says quietly, and Miranda looks at

him.

“When Naomie gets out here, we’ll be on our way. You’ll get no more problems from us.”

Her expression fills with sympathy from whatever she sees on his face, and she opens the back door.

“Daddy!” Kingston shouts happily, jumping into his dad’s arms, oblivious to the tension in the air.

“Hey, buddy.” Bowie wraps him in a hug. “Are you having fun hanging with Tucker and Mommy?”

“Yes, and we might see beers!” He leans back to see his dad’s face, his smile faltering. “But I can’t go swimming, because it’s too cold.”

“You don’t want to turn into a popsicle, do you?” Bowie asks, and Kingston gets a look on his face that states clearly he’s weighing the pros and cons of doing just that. “Dude. No swimming. It’s too cold, but maybe another time.” His tone sounds like the dad he is.

“Fine.” Kingston sighs, and I catch Miranda rub her lips together to hide her smile.

“Be good for Mom and Tucker, and I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“What about Grandma?” Kingston asks.

Bowie’s chest expands, then deflates as he looks into his son’s eyes. “She’ll be there.” He kisses Kingston’s cheek, then passes him over to his mom.

“Why are you still here?” Naomie asks loudly when she steps outside, and Kingston latches onto his mom’s neck with both arms.

“Get in my truck,” Bowie orders, walking toward her.

“You can’t tell me what to do.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“Get in my truck, Naomie, or I’ll let Tucker call the cops,” he growls low.

She looks at me, and I raise a brow.

“Fine.” She stomps to his truck and gets inside, slamming the door hard enough to make the cab rock from side to side.

His eyes come to me. “Take care of them.”

I lift my chin and then stand back with Kingston and Miranda as he gets in his truck and backs out. As they pass us, Bowie keeps his eyes on the road while

Naomie glares out the windshield.

“I don’t want to jinx us, but I think things are going to get better,” Miranda whispers as Kingston reaches for me. And I take him from her, resting him on my hip.

I tip my chin down to meet her gaze. “I think so too, baby.”

“Finally,” she whispers, and I lean down to kiss her smiling mouth. Kingston grabs each of our cheeks, pressing his face between ours and making a loud smacking sound with his lips.

“I wuv you.” He giggles and I pull back and look between him and his mom, feeling like I just got hit in the chest with a hundred-pound boulder.

I thought I knew what love was. I thought I had experienced it before. But I had no fucking clue until this moment right here.

And fuck me I will never take what I have for granted.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

miranda

With a fire burning in the pit, the guys dug in the sandy shore of the lake with the kids in front of the house. I lean back against Tucker with a blanket wrapped around me to ward off the chill in the night air. The day might have started out with a little bit of drama, but after we all got inside and settled, Tucker and I stripped the beds and began washing the sheets while everyone else took the kids to the grocery store to pick up burgers for dinner and a few necessities we would need for the night and tomorrow morning.

When they all got back, we took a walk down to the water, and the kids played on the beach with Skye, who was a soaking-wet mess by the end. Then we barbecued and ate dinner outside with the sun setting. It's been the perfect day and one I needed more than I realized. I just wish Emma hadn't had to work tomorrow because she would love it here. And she would also love Tucker's family as much as I do.

"I found another one!" Kingston screams, and Winter oohs and ahhs over whatever rock he's found to add to their collection using the flashlights Miles gave them. Listening to the two of them squeal with excitement each time they find one, you'd think they've struck gold about a dozen times.

"How many pounds of rocks do you think we're going to end up taking home?" Miles asks.

"At least ten," I say, looking over at him, and he grins at me as Hazel, who is sitting next to him, laughs and leans into him.

At first, I wasn't quite sure about their relationship dynamic. I mean, she's

gorgeous, and it's obvious watching the two of them interact that they have history. But more and more, it's become clear they are truly just friends who happen to have a child together. It's sweet, and they give me hope that one day Bowie and I might be able to be friends.

"I got the sheets out of the dryer and made the beds," Willow says, walking toward us, with Clay right behind her carrying a bag and some sticks in his hand.

"You didn't have to do that. I was planning on making them when I went back inside."

"It's not a big deal. The dryer went off while we were in there." She shrugs, taking the bag from Clay. "Winter, Kingston, do you guys want to roast marshmallows?"

"Yes!" the two of them scream and run in our direction with Skye barking.

"You have to be really careful," she instructs softly, and the kids bounce around her feet while she places the marshmallows on the sticks for them.

"Come here and I'll help," Dalton offers, and the two of them walk around the fire to where he's sitting. "Does anyone else want one?" She looks around the group. "They already have the chocolate insiiide," she sings, swinging the bag around.

"I'll try one." I laugh and take a stick she passes me along with a marshmallow. As Kingston eats his first one, I twirl mine, making sure it's perfectly browned before I take a bite of the soft, gooey outside and the melted chocolate center. "What kind of magic is this?" I hold the stick back for Tucker to take a bite, and he eats the rest.

"They are so good, right? I bought a bag and have been toasting them using our stove every night," Willow says, blowing away the fire on hers.

"Can I have another?" Kingston asks, and Willow tosses the bag to Dalton, who helps him put one on his stick.

"So good." I take the bag from Dalton and add another to the end of my stick.

Just as I'm putting it in the fire, Tucker's phone begins to ring, and he sits forward to take it out of his pocket. "Shit, I gotta take this, babe."

"Sure." I move so that he can get up, and Miles stands along with him, the

two of them walking off toward the house together.

“I hope they don’t have to leave,” Hazel says softly, catching my eye, and I bite my bottom lip. I hope not either.

I finish my marshmallow, and Kingston comes to sit on my lap. I wrap him up in the blanket with me, while Winter goes to sit with her mom, Willow sits on Clay’s lap and Dalton tells a funny ghost story.

When I hear Miles and Tucker talking quietly as they walk our way, I turn to look at them over my shoulder. With one glance, I know something has happened and that they’re going to have to leave.

“Miles and I have to head out, baby,” Tucker says quietly, and I try to hide my disappointment, but it’s difficult. He looks over at Dalton. “I’ll leave my SUV so you can drive Miranda, Hazel, and the kids home in the morning.”

“I can do that,” Dalton agrees easily as Winter gets up to hug her dad.

Tucker looks down at me, then moves his gaze to Kingston, and his face gets soft. “I’ll carry him inside and put him to bed,” he offers quietly, and I look down and find Kingston asleep.

“Thanks,” I whisper, and he squats down to pick him up. Kingston doesn’t even move as he’s lifted into Tucker’s arms.

“Do you want him in bed with you?” he asks when we get inside.

“It would probably be easier, in case he wakes up.”

With a nod, he walks to the bedroom on the first floor, and while he’s still in Tucker’s arms, I take off his shoes and socks, then pull back the blanket on the bed. When he’s down, I maneuver him out of his pants that are a little damp from being so close to the water.

“I’m sorry I have to leave you two,” he whispers, tucking the blanket around Kingston, and I meet his gaze.

“Is everything okay? Is it about Carrie’s friend?”

“We won’t know anything for sure until we get back to Nashville,” he says gently, grabbing hold of the loop of my jeans to pull me closer. “Are you gonna be okay here?”

“Of course.” I rest my hands on his chest, and his eyes scan mine as he cups my face in his palms.

“I’ll call you as soon as I get a chance.”

“Just let me know you made it back to Nashville,” I whisper, and he tips his chin down and presses him mouth to mine. When he pulls back, his thumb smooths over my cheekbone. He looks like he wants to say something, but instead he kisses me one more time, then lets me go and starts toward the door, grabbing his bag.

“Try to get some sleep.” He stops to look at me over his shoulder.

“I will,” I lie, because I already know I won’t be able to rest until I confirm he’s okay. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tell Kingston—”

“I’ll tell him you had to leave for work,” I cut him off. “He’ll understand.”

“Later, baby.”

“Later.” I watch him walk through the door and wrap my arms around my middle, then squeeze my eyes closed, because this goodbye feels all wrong, like something is missing. Rushing out behind him, I make it to the living room right when he reaches the front door, and he turns to look at me hearing my footsteps on the wood floors.

“Everything okay?”

“I forgot to tell you something.” I wring my hands in front of me. “It’s just that …” God, why is this so hard? “I know it’s too soon and that you’re going to think I’m nuts, but I just want you to know that I …” I glance around, suddenly unsure if I should admit that I’ve fallen in love with him. “Well, I …”

“I love you too, Miranda,” he says softy, and my shoulders deflate in relief.

“You do?”

“Yeah.” He closes the distance between us and wraps his hand around the side of my neck, smiling before he leans down to press a soft kiss to my mouth. “I’ll see you later, baby.”

“Okay,” I whisper, holding back the urge to jump up and down like an idiot, and he grins as he touches his lips to mine one more time before disappearing out the door.

“I’m glad he found you.” At that comment, I turn to find Clay standing a few feet away.

“I feel the same about him.”

“No, babe, you don’t understand,” Clay says softly, holding my gaze. “You brought him back to us.” He places his hand over his heart. “For that you’ll always have my gratitude.”

My nose starts to sting. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“Don’t. If he finds out, he’ll kick my ass,” he says, and I give him a watery smile. “Get some sleep, and I’ll see you for breakfast.”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

I watch him walk up the stairs before I go to my room and once there, I change into a pair of pajamas and grab the book I brought with me. I don’t fall asleep until I get a text from Tucker letting me know he made it to Nashville, but even then, my sleep is restless as I worry about him and Miles.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

tucker

With my back to the wall, I look across the hall at Miles and crick my neck. Four hours ago, Livy's mother brought her into the ER when she showed up at home distraught after going out with Isabel, Steven, and a group of kids from youth group. The plan was for all of them to go to the movies, and when it was over, Isabel would drop Livy off at her house. But Isabel's mother called her before the movie over and told her that she would be picking her up and that they had plans to go out to dinner with friends that evening.

Steven volunteered to drop Livy at home when the movie let out. When they left the theater, all the kids who drove separately left, and Steven and Livy got into his car. She claims that on the way to her house, he attempted to touch her.

The first time, he placed his hand on her thigh, she pushed it away, thinking he was joking. Then he did it again and made a comment about how he'd wanted her for a long time. When she pushed his hand away again, she said he got angry and grabbed her between her legs. A fight between the two of them ensued, and he hit her so hard in the head that she believes she blacked out. When she woke up, they were parked somewhere dark, and he was trying to remove her clothes. Somehow, she managed to get out of the car and make a run for it, but he caught her before she could get to help. After raping her, he forced her back into his car and drove around for an hour. She said she thought he was going to kill her.

She promised over and over again that she wouldn't tell anyone if he just took her home, and eventually he dropped her off.

Her mom just happened to be downstairs waiting for her when she arrived,

because she was later than she should have been. And the moment she saw the state her daughter was in, she brought her to the emergency room.

For the first hour, Livy refused to say who hurt her, but her mother knew she had been with Isabel at the movies, so she called Isabel's mom. After a conversation with her daughter, Isabel's mother called her back and let her know that Livy had been with Steven and that he was supposed to drop her at home.

When asked by her mom if Steven had been the one to hurt her, the flood gates opened, and Livy told her everything. Including admitting that Kristen told both her and Isabel that Steven raped her. Neither girl believed her. If they had, maybe Kristen would still be here, and Livy wouldn't have experienced what she did tonight.

When the door to the hospital room opens and the nurse walks out with a box in her hands, I come off the wall, and Miles does the same.

"How is she doing?" I ask, as she closes the door behind herself.

"She's doing as well as to be expected in this kind of situation." She passes me a thin white box that is sealed with red tape. "She has a good family who plans on getting her help, so I'm hopeful she will eventually be okay." She glances between Miles and me. "Are you guys going to pick this kid up tonight?"

"There are officers picking him up as we speak."

She nods, looking relieved. "If you need anything, let me know."

"We will," Miles says quietly before we head out of the hospital.

After dropping the kit off at the crime lab and asking them to expedite due to possible linkage to a murder investigation, we drive across town to the station where Steven is waiting.

The rage I feel when we walk into the interrogation room where he's waiting with his lawyer is familiar. The thought of a man his size and in his position hurting a young girl is enough to make me sick, and to know he's using the money of people who attend his uncle's church to pay for his lawyer is disturbing at best.

"My client will not be speaking with you this evening," his lawyer says, standing to greet us.

“We have proof he raped a girl tonight,” Miles says calmly, but knowing him I don’t miss the edge to his tone.

“Can you prove she was raped?”

“She knows what was done to her,” I bite out, not as good at hiding my emotions as Miles is.

“That was nothing more than two people caught up in the moment and the girl later having regrets after fearing what her parents might think about her having sex before marriage,” he weasels, and my hands ball into fists to avoid wrapping them around his gangly little neck. “Until you can prove he raped her, it’s his word against hers.” He looks between us again with a slimy smile. “I think you both know how this works.” He turns to Steven. “Let’s go.”

With my teeth gritted, I watch Steven get up. As fucked up as it is, he’s right. All we have is Livy’s word against his, and no judge is going to allow us to hold him on that alone. And I do not want us to fuck ourselves before we get the rape kit back. If we can prove he had been with Kristen before her death, chances are he will be going away for a very long time. If we rush this, we might blow everything and lose our chance at putting him behind bars.

So with my hands at my sides and Miles gritting his teeth, the two of us watch Steven walk out the door with his lawyer.

“I swear to God, when it comes time to arrest that motherfucker, I’m going to be the one putting the cuffs on him,” Miles growls low.

“Not if I get to him first.” I look over at my brother. “Livy is not going to be able to rest easy until she knows he’s behind bars.

“Yeah, and neither am I.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

miranda

With my hair still wet from the shower, I tie the silk robe Tucker bought for me around my waist and open the door to the bathroom. When I find Tucker in bed shirtless, with his back to the headboard and his eyes on the computer sitting on his lap, I bite my lip. For the last two weeks, the case he's working on has been eating away at him.

His easy smiles are a thing of the past. I don't know what to do to help him get them back, and I hate feeling helpless to help him.

After padding across his expansive bedroom, I put one knee onto the bed, and his eyes come to me. The soft smile he gives me is familiar, but it's still not the same.

"Hey." I move toward him on my knees, and when I'm close, he closes his laptop and sets it aside. I fall against his side and rest my head on his shoulder. "Were you working?"

"Checking email."

I slide my hand over his stomach and prop my knee on his thigh. "Are you getting any closer on your case?"

"Still waiting on the testing to come back. Even expedited, the backlog of cases is fucking ridiculous."

"I'm sorry."

"Hurry up and wait is the way these things go most of the time." His hand slides down my thigh to the back of my knee. "I didn't get a chance to ask about Carrie's application. Did she get it turned in?"

Yesterday, Carrie came over to my apartment after school, and I helped her fill out the application for the college Nikki works at after she assured her that she wouldn't have to pay a penny to attend. Between financial aid and a few scholarships Nikki found for her, she'll actually be getting paid to go to school. And with it being local, she won't need to find money for a dorm.

"She did, and I hand-delivered it to Nikki this afternoon."

"Good," he replies quietly, and I know he actually means that. He hasn't told me everything about what is going on in Kristen's case, but he has let me know that Carrie is no longer on his radar as a suspect or otherwise. I knew she wouldn't be, but I'm happy to know I was right.

"What time does Kingston get home tomorrow?"

"In the morning. Patty is dropping him off here before she goes back home." I tip my head back to look at him. "She told me when she called today that Naomie is no longer around and that Bowie let her know she and him are done."

"Since she's moving back to Colorado, I assumed as much," he says, and my brows drag together.

"She's moving?"

"When you walked out, I was reading over an email from her lawyer. She wants me to either buy her out of the house we owned or to put it on the market next month, because Naomie informed her today that she is moving."

"Wow, okay. Well, that's good, right?"

"Very good." He drags my leg farther over his waist, then grabs my hip and tugs until I'm straddling his lap. "What do you have on under here?" He pulls at the tie of my robe, loosening it.

"Nothing," I admit breathlessly.

"Easy access." He looks up at me and smiles a real smile before opening my robe. My nipples pebble as the cool air brushes against them, but the sensation only lasts a second before his hands cup both my breasts. "Look at me." I didn't even realize my eyes had closed or that my head had fallen back against my shoulders. Tipping my head down, my eyes meet his as his hand glides up to wrap around my throat. "So fucking pretty." He slides his hand around to the nape of my neck and drags me forward until our mouths are almost touching,

while his free hand slips between my spread legs. “Already wet and I haven’t even really touched you.”

“I know,” I breathe against his mouth, my hips jerking as he spreads me open with his fingers and rims my entrance with the tips of his fingers.

“Jesus,” he groans, sliding two fingers inside me. My back arches, and my hips buck. “I need you.”

“You have me,” I whisper, and he takes a deep breath, then leans back.

“Pull me out and show me.”

Biting my bottom lip, I slip my robe from my shoulders, then lean back and pull his cock from his boxers. Sitting up on my knees, I rub the head of his cock over my clit, and my skin tingles as I watch his eyes darken. Tilting my hips forward, I place him against my entrance and whimper as I take the first inch of him. A week ago, we had the whole birth control and testing talk, and since then, the seal of No Condom between us has been broken, making sex with him even better, though that shouldn’t be possible.

“Tucker,” I whimper as I fall forward, taking all of him—every single inch.

“Hold on a second.” He grabs my hip to hold me still. “How is it possible that your pussy has gotten hotter and tighter?” he groans, and I dig my nails into his shoulders. Knowing just how turned on he is, that I have the ability to make him lose control before he’s ready, is a sort of euphoria all on its own. I roll my hips just to see what he’ll do, then whimper when his hand comes down hard on my ass. “I said hold on.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.” He drags my mouth down to his and uses his hold to move my head just where he wants it, licking into my mouth and devouring me. Unable to hold back any longer, my hips start to slowly roll against his. He doesn’t stop me; instead, he starts to meet me thrust for thrust. So lost in everything I’m feeling, I gasp when his fingers skim over my swollen clit.

“Oh God.”

“Fuck me hard,” he demands against my mouth, and I do—or I try to. My scalp starts to tingle, then that sensation spreads across my skin before settling between my legs. I start to pulse around him, and when his movements become

erratic, I work my hips harder and faster before I fall against his chest, listening to him groan as he comes inside me.

“I think I’m going to need another shower,” I pant, and his arms wrap around me tight.

“Later,” he mutters, pulling the blanket up over us.

“I miss you.” I say quietly after a moment and his muscles bunch. “I know it’s stupid but I can’t wait until you get the answers you’re looking for and come back to me.”

“Jesus, baby.”

“I don’t want you to feel bad, I get that this is your job and this case is difficult. I.”

“I’ll work on it.” He cuts me off, smoothing his hand up my back and into my hair, tugging until I look at him. “Nothing is more important to me than you and Kingston. I’ll work on it.”

“I just wish I knew how to help you deal with the stress.”

“This.” He cups my face. “Just having you, coming home to you, fucking you and knowing that you love me is how I deal with it.”

I bite my bottom lip as my eyes start to water. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He says quietly, pulling me forward so he can kiss me. When he pulls back he tucks the side of my head against my chest and drags in a deep breath. “I love you, baby.”

I close my eyes as his heart beats against my ear. “I love you too,” I whisper back, still not sure those words are enough to really encompass how I feel about him. But since I don’t have any others, they’ll have to do.

STANDING in the kitchen with a cup of coffee in hand the next morning, I watch Winter as she waits impatiently by the door for Kingston to get here. Five minutes ago, Tucker went downstairs to get him from Patty, and two minutes after he left, Winter knocked on the door like she knew he was about to be home.

It’s sweet how close the two of them have gotten over the last few months,

but the closer they've gotten, the more fights we've had to break up between them.

"Aunt Miranda?"

"Yeah, honey?" I prompt as she walks toward me.

"Are you and Kingston going to live here, or are you going to live somewhere else, like Uncle Tucker did before?" she asks, and I place my cup of coffee down on the counter.

"I don't know. We haven't really talked about that," I say quietly.

The truth is, even though I know Tucker and I are real and that eventually we will have to have that conversation, it just hasn't ever come up. Really, I haven't even thought about it until right at this moment.

"I want you to live here."

"I'll keep that in mind." I smile.

"I'll let Uncle Tucker know too," she decides as the door opens.

"Let me know what?" Tucker asks, but Winter is so caught up in hugging Kingston that she doesn't even pay any mind to her uncle. "What is she going to let me know?" he asks me, walking toward me, but right at that moment, Kingston runs past him and crashes into my legs.

"Hey, lovie." I pick him up and squeeze him against my chest. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too." He wraps his arms around my neck.

"Did you have fun with Grandma and Daddy?"

"Yes." He smiles.

"Uncle Tucker," Winter calls, and I look over at her. "I think you guys should live *here*."

"What Bug?" he asks, and she rolls her eyes.

"I don't want you to get another house. I want you to live here."

"Oh." He glances over at me, and I shrug, because honestly, I don't know what to say in this moment.

"I want to wive here." Kingston's eyes widen like he just realized that's an option. "Please! Can we wive here wif you?" He holds his hands together.

"Oh goodness," I whisper as both kids start to beg.

“We’ll have to talk about it,” Tucker tells them softly.

“Why do you have to talk about it?” Winter questions, and Tucker looks at me.

“Because adults have to make those kinds of decisions together, and I don’t know if we are all ready to live together yet.”

“But you’re always together.” Winter looks between Tucker and me like we’re idiots.

“Well, yes. But… moving in together is a big deal.”

“Adults are so weird,” she mutters, and I press my lips together to keep from laughing. “Can Kingston come to my house? I want to show him a new game I got.”

“Sure, but only for an hour, okay?” That’s about the max they have before the bickering and fighting usually starts. Then they take a break and are all good again for another hour.

“Okay.” She smiles, and the two of them rush out the door.

“So where do you want to live?” Tucker asks, crowding me against the counter when the door closes behind them.

“I love this place,” I admit, and his face softens.

“So, you’d move in here?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, now, what’s the appropriate amount of time to be together before that happens?”

“I don’t know. A year?”

“That’s too long.”

“Eight months?”

“Too long.”

“When would you want us to move in?” I ask because it’s obvious this could keep going.

“When is your lease up?”

“In about six months or so.”

“Perfect,” he mutters, wrapping his hand around my throat. His head dips, and my lashes flutter closed, anticipating his kiss.

“We gotta go,” Miles voice cuts into the quiet moment, and my eyes spring open. Looking around Tucker’s shoulder, I see Miles in the doorway with his eyes on his brother. “We finally got the results. They’re a match.”

My stomach drops at this news, and Tucker’s body deflates, like all the pent-up frustration and anger he’s bottled up for weeks and weeks has poured right out of him. “Can you keep the kids?” Miles asks, looking at me.

“Of course,” I whisper, and he jerks up his chin.

“Meet you downstairs in ten,” he tells Tucker before disappearing.

“I gotta go.” Tucker turns back to me, and I lean up on my tiptoes, grabbing his face.

“Go get your guy.” I touch my mouth to his, then let him go. When he comes out of the bedroom a few minutes later, he’s dressed with his gun on his hip.

“Love you,” he says, stopping to kiss me. Then in the next instant, he’s gone, and the kids are walking through the door while I say a silent prayer that everything goes as planned.

CHAPTER FORTY

tucker

"Steven Green, you're under arrest for the murder of Kristen Stable and the rape of Livy Peterson," Miles states loudly, walking up to where Steven is sitting on stage as his uncle gives Sunday service.

"What? You can't do this here," Pastor Green whispers, his voice echoing through the microphone attached to his face.

"You have the right to remain silent," Miles says, shoving Steven to the ground. "Anything you say can and will be used against you," he continues, and I move to place my cuffs on Steven's wrists.

"I didn't do anything!" Steven cries, trying to wiggle out from under Miles's knee.

"This can't be happening. He hasn't done anything," Pastor Green hisses, looking around frantically as Miles finishes reading Steven his rights.

Once we know he's secure, we haul him to his feet, and he looks around at the congregation. The room is silent, so quiet you could hear a pin drop even with the thousands of people watching us.

"Lauren, call my lawyer," Pastor Green says as we walk Steven down the long aisle that leads to the doors at the back of the sanctuary.

"I didn't do anything!" Steven shouts, trying to pull free, and I tighten my hold on him. When we exit the room, I hear commotion behind us, and I turn to find Chief Stedman step out into the hall behind us with three other officers I recognize.

"What do you think you two are doing?" he shouts, storming toward us.

“If you’ve got a problem with us doing our job, take it up with Chief Marshall,” I clip, and his face turns a concerning shade of red.

“I told you that I wanted you to present any evidence you have directly to me.”

“Marshall was back from vacation by the time the call came in,” Miles says easily, and I can tell Stedman wants to say more, but he thinks better of it. Which is smart, considering the FBI has already began building a case on him. And with any luck, he, and the men at his side along with a few others will be visiting Steven in jail.

Though I doubt they’ll get the same treatment he will from their fellow inmates.

WITH MILES RIGHT BEHIND ME, I push open the door to my place four hours later, and the moment we step inside, I see Miranda didn’t feel like being alone. Not only is Emma here, but so are Willow and Clay.

“You’re finally back!” Kingston runs up to give me a hug, and I lift him off his feet as Winter rushes toward her dad.

“Sorry about that, bud. I had some work to do.” I carry him down the step to the living room, and Miranda’s eyes meet mine and soften before she stops whatever she’s doing at the stove and walks toward me. When she’s close enough to touch, I wrap my hand around her hip and drop my mouth to hers for a quick kiss.

“Did you get him?” she asks quietly as I put Kingston on his feet.

“Yeah,” I say softly, and she melts against me, dropping her temple to my chest.

“Carrie will be relieved.”

“A whole bunch of people are going to be sleeping a little easier tonight.” Even without Steven confessing too raping Livy and Murdering Kristen the case we have against him is strong, and I have faith that he will pay for his crime. Now it’s going to be up to a jury to do the right thing and put him away. I kiss

the top of her head, and she looks up at me.

“Are you hungry? I’m making spaghetti.”

“You’re cooking?”

“Hey, I can cook. You’re just better at it.”

“I’m starving.”

“Then I need to get back to cooking.” She leans up, touching her lips to the underside of my jaw before she lets me go and walks back to the stove.

I look around and see Kingston and Winter have run off to play a game on the TV. Clay and Willow stand attached at the hip at the counter, and Miles sits with a beer in hand, laughing with Emma. And even if Dalton and Hazel aren’t here, seeing everyone who is, together, is just what I needed tonight.

There will always be another monster, another victim, and another family searching for answers, and as much as I dread the next call I’ll get, I’m fucking thankful for the moments that remind me this world isn’t all bad. That even when things are dark, there’s always a light if you keep on going.

epilogue

MIRANDA

A little over 6 months later

With the sky dark and the stars bright above us, I lean back against Tucker as his arms wrap around me.

Somehow, he pulled off the impossible, getting everyone together for a weekend of barbecuing, swimming, boating, and lots of laughter. Looking out into the yard, I watch my parents and Carrie with Kingston and Winter, the three of them helping both kids with the sparklers we picked up on the way to the cabin.

Since my parents arrived three days ago, they have been soaking up every second they can with the kids, and Winter and Kingston have loved having two more people to spoil them rotten.

And Carrie has become like our pseudo second child, spending lots of time with Kingston, Tucker, and I, going out to dinner, movies or just spending time at the house. I swear I've hugged her a million times to make up for all the times I wished I could have before. And I'm so proud of her, she graduated top of her class and is already preparing for college. She's amazing and is going to change the world.

When Walker, who is standing by the blazing bonfire, says something to make Tucker laugh, the happiness that's warmed my chest since the day I met the man behind me only grows. The two of them had a heart-to-heart the first night they met, and although I don't know what was said, I know that since then,

they have become two peas in a pod, sharing inside jokes and smiles between each other.

When Tucker fiddles with the ring on my finger, I tip my head back to look up him. Yesterday, standing on the dock with the sun setting and Kingston at my side, he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. The moment was perfect and more than I could've asked for it.

Life is fucked up. It causes pain, makes you second-guess your decisions, and sometimes it leaves you in tears, questioning your ability to keep going. Then one little thing happens, one little thing that means everything, and it's in those moments you know all the pain and all of those tears were worth it, because you have something extraordinary. Something to be happy about. Something to look forward to. And something that—even though this world is fucked up—reminds you just how beautiful it really is.

I never would've guessed my sorrow would lead me to something even better than I could've ever imagined, that I could be this happy, this at peace, or feel this loved. I'm excited about the future, about building a life with Tucker, having babies with him, and watching them grow up.

Who knows where the next few years will take us, but I do know that no matter where the road leads us, at the end of the day, it will always be him and me together as partners, as friends, and as lovers.

"I love you," I whisper, and I watch his face get soft before he drops a kiss to my lips in a sweet kiss that holds a million kept promises.

Thirteen years later

Tucker

PULLING into the driveway and hitting the remote for the garage, I notice Kingston's car is not parked in its normal spot, meaning he's out and probably on a date. And since that kid dates like he's trying to make sure he personally knows every single girl at his high school, I'm not even surprised to see he's out

on a Friday night.

I park, grab my briefcase from the passenger seat, and get out.

“Hi, Dad,” Jenny and Anna call out in unison when I walk through the garage door into the kitchen. My two girls, thirteen and eleven, look so much like their mom that I know in just a few years I am fucked. Especially if they take up dating as a sport like their older brother has.

“Where is Mom?” I ask, stopping to kiss each one on the top of her head.

“I don’t know,” Jenny says as Anna shrugs.

“Where are your brothers?”

“They were in the game room earlier, but Mom sent them to their rooms because they were fighting,” Anna explains, rolling her eyes.

“Right,” I mutter, setting my briefcase down on the island. I walk past the living room and the dining, finding both empty before I head up the stairs.

Finding the media room empty, I knock on Finn’s door.

“Yeah,” he calls for me to come in, and I push it open. Never quite sure what I’m gonna find on the other side, I hold my breath.

“You and Liam were fighting?” I ask, and he hops off his bed, ready to plead his case.

“It wasn’t my fault. He wanted to play some stupid game I didn’t want to, and he got mad.”

“You told me that you would play it with me,” Liam argues, poking his head out his door.

Looking between both my boys, I shake my head. Telling the two of them to get along has been an everyday occurrence since they were tiny. And with Finn being almost two years older than Liam, it’s only gotten worse.

“Do you know where mom is?” I ask, and they look between each other and shake their heads.

“Go downstairs and ask Anna to order pizza for dinner,” I tell them. They grin at each other before the thunder of footsteps travels down the hallway and then down the stairs.

With one last place to look for Miranda, I head back down the stairs after them to our bedroom and close the door behind me. When I see light leaking out

from under the bathroom door, I walk to it and push it open, finding my wife in the empty bathtub, with one of the podcasts she listens to playing from her phone.

“Hey.” She smiles when she sees me, and I can’t help but laugh.

“That bad?”

“It’s been a whirlwind day, and nothing but arguing, fighting, and yelling since all the kids came home.” She watches me kick off my shoes. “I came in here to hide for a few minutes.” I step into the empty tub and settle behind her.

“I’ll call Carrie and see if she wants to babysit this weekend and we can get away.”

“She has a boyfriend now, so I’m not sure she’ll be available.” She’s wrong; Carrie would do anything for Miranda or for any of us. But that feeling is mutual.

“Anna is ordering pizza.” I kiss the side of her head.

“That sounds good.” She relaxes into me then whispers. “I know one day I’m going to miss all the chaos, but today, I just needed a few minutes to myself.” She leans back against me, and I wrap my arms around her.

More than once over the years, I’ve found her just like this, hiding in our bathroom after a stressful day of work and being a mom, and I’ve never questioned it. Where she needs these quiet moments alone to decompress, I need *her*.

She’s the center of gravity for me, the thing that keeps me tethered to earth and reminds me every single day that although this world is fucked up, there is still so much beauty to experience while you’re here.

a note from aurora rose reynolds

THANK YOU

I never feel like those two words are enough to express how grateful I'm when a reader takes a chance on one of my stories but just like Miranda those words are all I have, so they'll have to do. Without each of you this dream of mine would not be a possibility so I hope you to know how much I appreciate you.

Thank you bloggers and book pushers for your unwavering dedication to reading and spreading that joy.

Thank you to my family and friends who are always cheering me on, especially, my two guys.

Thank you Shauna, you're harassment for more words is a constant annoyance but I wouldn't know what to do without your support. You are so appreciated.

Thank you to my editors, proofreaders, designer and photographer, each of you are so vital to bringing my books to life.

YES Miles and Dalton will be getting books of their own, and if you'd like to know more about Clay and Willow you can read their Happily Ever After in Until Willow.

If you suspect sex trafficking you can reach out to the Department of Homeland Security at 1-866-347-2423 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If you suspect that a child is being or has been abused you can contact your local police department to file a report with them.

check out until willow

Chapter 1
Willow

Sitting across from Alec, I tap my fingers against my martini glass as he stares at his cell phone and types frantically. Pressing my lips together as I study him, I wonder how long it would take him to realize I was gone if I just got up and left.

My guess? Twenty minutes, if not longer.

He and I have been dating for a few weeks; he's a nice enough guy who checks all the appropriate boxes. He hasn't stood me up, hasn't once looked at another woman when we've been out, he opens car doors and as a bonus he's good looking. The thing is he's as boring and as obsessed with work as every other man I've dated. And, I mean, I get it–work is important but so is enjoying life.

And if I'm honest I'd like a man to be a little obsessed with me–I mean, not stalkerish–but I wouldn't mind finding a guy who puts me first, who makes it clear that he can't get enough of me–a man who gives me his undivided attention when we are in the same space, especially when we're out on a date at a fancy restaurant and I've put in the effort of actually dressing up for the occasion.

With a sigh, I look across the dimly lit restaurant and spot the sign for the restroom with an arrow pointing down the stairs. Maybe a couple of minutes away from the table will give him time to finish with what he's doing and give me time to get out of my head.

“Hey.” I reach across the space between us and touch his hand and his head flies up. “I’m going to use the restroom before our food comes. I’ll be back.”

“Sure.” He gives me an apologetic smile. “And I’m sorry. There’s just a lot going on at work.”

“No worries.” I muster up a smile and scoot out of the booth. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.” He checks me out as I stand and his eyes darken, letting me know he is not completely oblivious to me.

I walk across the restaurant then navigate down the stairs in my heels. When I reach the bathroom, I go inside, and since one of the stalls is already occupied I use the other. It takes a second to get the heavy wooden door to close but once I get it locked I take care of business, then try to open the door. It doesn’t budge, so I push it harder, and it still doesn’t move.

“No way.” I shove my arm into it like I’m a linebacker causing pain to race across my shoulder to the back of my neck, then kick the door as hard as I can. Nothing. “Oh my god.” I bang the door and yell for help getting no response, then look around the entire frame of the stall finding that there is only about a ten-inch gap at the top and nothing at the bottom. Taking a breath, I try to calm down and think, I don’t have my phone so I can’t call anyone, but someone will have to come in here eventually. Right? Right. Crossing my arms over my chest I wait, then wait some more. Without a watch or clock, I don’t know how much time has gone by, but it had to have been at least fifteen minutes, if not longer.

Starting to get anxious I look at the top of the stall then at the toilet. Maybe, just maybe, if I stand on the seat I can reach the top. Carefully, in my heels that are slick on the bottom, I place one foot on the edge of the toilet, then jump up as high as I can, barely catching the frame with the tips of my fingers. Using all my strength I pull myself up then swing my leg catching the toe of my black platform sandal on the frame. Without a doubt, I look like an idiot, but when I get my leg over, I use that to pull me up, only to find myself squished between the roof and frame of the stall. Wiggling, I squeeze through the tight space, then drop my legs and then look down as I hang there.

It’s not far, but I’m still about a half a foot off the ground. I let myself fall

and thankfully I land on my feet, though my right ankle wobbles causing enough pain to make me gasp. I limp over to the sink then blink at my reflection in the mirror. My hair and my black body-hugging wrap-around top is covered in dust. I glance down, finding my black jeans are just as dirty as the rest of me.

Great!

I wash my hands then attempt to dust myself off, getting the worst of it before washing my hands again and leaving the bathroom. When I get back to the booth Alec looks up at me from his plate that is already half eaten. I slide into my seat.

“I got locked in the bathroom.”

“I was wondering where you were. I was about to send a search party.” He laughs.

My throat prickles with annoyance because he obviously didn’t care enough about me being gone to send someone to make sure I was okay, or even come looking for me himself.

“This isn't going to work.” I mutter to my self and turn to grab my cell phone along with my bag then jerk my head around when his hand grabs my upper arm.

“I didn’t mean anything by that. I was just joking.”

“I know.” I pull my arm back then dig into my bag for some cash, finding two twenty-dollar bills. I place them on the table with him watching, then start to scoot out of the booth.

“You’re leaving?”

“Does it even matter if I’m here?”

“Of course it does.”

“Alec, we hardly see each other, and when we do, you’re normally distracted by work or talking about it.”

“My job...”

“Is important–believe me, I know.” I tell him gently because I don’t want to end things on a bad note. I mean he is a nice guy, he’s just not the guy for me. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.” I get up and then, without sparing him another glance, I walk through the restaurant to the front door and out.

Thankfully I drove myself, since he was coming to dinner straight from work, so I head for my car that I parked in the lot just down the street. When I get behind the wheel, I ignore the excessive pings from texts Alec is sending, turn on my engine, then back out of my parking spot. After I turn out of the lot, I hear the rumble of a motorcycle engine and on instinct I check my mirrors. With my heart in my throat, I watch as a black Harley, with it's driver matching the bike in a black jacket and helmet, cut off the SUV that was behind me. With their shield down I can't see their face, but I can tell the man driving is not a small guy. Still, no matter how big he is, riding a bike can be dangerous, and I'm half-tempted to yell out my window that he should be more careful.

I keep an eye on him in my rearview as I drive toward my condo, but when I'm halfway there, I spot the sign for a liquor store and decide at the last minute to stop and get a bottle of wine, so I'll have it for the bath I plan on taking as soon as I get home. I turn into the lot, noticing the motorcycle pass, then search for a place to park.

I wander the isles in the store, trying to figure out what I'm in the mood for. Merlot is normally my go to but there is something about a hot bath and Rosé that goes together perfectly. After a good ten minutes of debating, I end up getting both, then check out and leave the store with my bag in hand. As soon as I step outside, I notice two guys dressed similarly in jeans and hoodies with baseball caps; they're standing near the rear of my car next to a large black SUV with tinted windows. A prickle slides down my spine as they turn to look at me, and I'm half tempted to spin around and go right back into the store.

"Hey baby." A deep voice calls out and I look to my side finding a man approaching me, a man that is dressed exactly like the guy on the Harley minus the helmet. He's big, probably over six feet with broad shoulders, dark hair that's cut low on the sides, longer on top, with a thick well trimmed beard covering the lower half of his face and tattoos that I can see peeking over the collar of his shirt. "You didn't tell me you were stopping here."

"Umm." My brows dart together, and I turn to check and see if there is someone behind me because I have no idea who he's talking to. When I turn back around, he's in my space–like all the way in my space and next thing I

know his large palm is wrapped around the back of my neck and he uses it to pull me forward. Stunned stupid I do nothing as his soft, warm lips cover mine and he kisses me. I should not feel a zap of electricity snap to life between us or find this kiss hot considering I have no idea who he is. Still, the muscles in my lower belly twitch in response, then my core clenches when I feel his tongue drag across my bottom lip. Gasping I put my hand up against his chest to push him back, but he doesn't let go or at least not completely.

"Don't fight me, not with those guys watching," he whispers against my lips and my body stills.

"Good girl." He mumbles lifting his head and tucking my face against his chest under his chin while wrapping his free hand around my back. My heart pounds franticly against my ribcage and I'm sure I'm going to pass out as I listen to car doors slam and an engine start. "They're leaving the lot now." He rumbles holding me for a second longer, before letting me go and taking a step back.

"You kissed me." I know those should not be the first words out of my mouth, but I've never felt what I just felt when kissing anyone, and I don't know what to do with the fact that I swear my world spun when he was kissing me.

"And you kissed me back." He shrugs before he turns and walks off.

"I did not kiss you," I hiss at his back, then panic when he walks to my car and squats down so he can reach under the bumper. "What are you doing?'

"Hold on." He moves his hand around then holds it out to me a couple of seconds later, and I see that he has a small, round, metal device in his palm that's about the size of a quarter.

"What is that?"

"Tracker." He drops it on the ground between us then crushes it with his scuffed up black boot.

"A tracker?" I shake my head. "Why is there a tracker on my car?"

"Pretty girl, young, nice body." His eyes wander over me slowly. "They could get a few grand for you a night or sell you off at auction to the highest bidder."

"What?" I breathe, sure that I heard him wrong.

"There's fucked up people in this world, babe, and a lot of them would do

just about anything to make a buck. Good news is I've been watching them and caught them watching you."

"Auction me to the highest bidder?"

"Like I said, there's some fucked up people in the world." He moves his gaze to my car. "I'll follow you back to your place and make sure you're locked in for the night."

Absolutely not. "I don't think so." I take a step back from him then swing my purse around and drop my eyes to it and dig out my cell from the bottom along with my car keys.

"When they realize they don't have a signal to the tracker they're gonna come back, and could just follow you."

"Or this could be some weird set up and you're in on it." I narrow my eyes on his. "You playing the savior, trying to make me comfortable, only to turn around and do what you said they were going to."

His expression darkens and he takes a step toward me. "Do not put me in the same box as those motherfuckers."

"I don't know you." I hold my ground, refusing to cower, even though it's difficult when faced with all his scariness up close. After a long stare-down, I drop my eyes to my cell, find my dad's number and press call. It rings once and my body relaxes when he picks up.

"Hey kid what's up?"

"Are you in Nashville?"

"Yep, are you okay?"

"I'm not sure," I mumble, then explain to him what happened with the guys and the tracker.

"I'll be there in five. Go wait in the store until you see me pull up."

"Okay."

"Love you."

"Love you, too. See you soon." I hang up and spin on my heel and head across the lot.

"When is your man gonna be here?" Mr. Scary-guy asks, stepping in sync with me.

“My dad will be here in five minutes.” I peek over at him, and he grunts something under his breath. “You don’t need to wait with me.”

“I know. Still going to do it.” He opens the door to the liquor store, and I stand next to the glass window and watch, hoping my dad hurries up. The man at my side doesn’t say a word, but then again, he doesn’t need to speak for me to know he’s here. His presence is almost overwhelming, and it feels like he’s sucking up all the oxygen, which is making me light-headed.

It takes less than five minutes for my dad to arrive and the minute he pulls into the lot on his Harley, I push open the door, then notice an SUV roll in right behind him.

“Fuck,” my new shadow mutters.

I glance up at him. “What?”

“Nothing.” He walks toward the SUV while I go to where my dad is swinging off his bike.

“Hey kid.” He greets me with a hug that lets me know that everything is going to be okay then asks. “Who’s the guy?”

“I don’t know.” I look at the man in question and watch him talking with the two guys who pulled in behind my dad. I don’t recognize either man but it’s obvious by the familiar way that Mr. Scary is talking to them that they know each other. Both men are around his age and good looking, one with dark blonde hair, clean cut in jeans with a Henley under a vest, and the other wearing an outfit similar to my dad's and Mr. Scary's. The second man has longer dark hair and scruff on his jaw and looks a lot like the man talking to him. “You brought reinforcements?”

“There’s been some issues recently with women being targeted, I was with them when you called.” He lets me go. “They wanted to see if the MO is similar.”

“Oh.”

“Where’s the tag?”

“On the ground behind my car.” I follow him to the back of my ride where he bends to pick up the metal disc off the ground and the three guys come to join us.

“Where did you go tonight?” Dad asks.

I shift on my feet feeling all eyes on me. “I was at Cabriana’s with Alec.”

“You’re still seeing that guy?” Dad questions.

I roll my eyes. He never liked Alec, not that he had a reason not to besides the fact that I’m his daughter and Alec is a man.

“Not after tonight,” I mutter then add, “and before you ask, no, he didn’t do anything. It just wasn’t working.” I hear two distinctive chuckles and force myself not to look at the man standing at my side, once again sucking up all the oxygen.

“How’d you know she’d been marked?” Dad asks, focusing about a foot above my head at my side.

“This is my brother, Clay.” The guy with dark blond hair speaks up.

I know my eyes widen because they look nothing alike, like *nothing* alike.

“As family we’ve spoke about what’s been going on in the city recently.”

“I was on my bike when I saw someone tag her car. I decided I’d follow,” he says, leaving out what he told me, that he was watching them, which I find interesting.

“You didn’t think about calling it in?”

“Nope,” he says easily.

I rub my lips together when my dad’s expression turns scary.

“This isn’t a game.”

“I’m aware,” Clay bites out.

I’m almost tempted to step between him and my father, but instead I ask, “So is it the same kind of tracker used in other cases?”

Clay’s brother takes it from Dad and flips it over in his hand. “Looks like the others to me.” He hands it to the man next to him.

“I’d say it’s the same.” He hands it back to my dad then meets my gaze. “Did you get a good look at the guys?”

“Not really.” My nose scrunches. “They were both average looking white guys.” I shrug wishing I had more information, but the truth is I was distracted by the man at my side about two seconds after I spotted them standing next to my car.

“What about you?” my dad asks Clay.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “The man who placed the tracker was not one of the men who were here.”

“So, they might not be connected,” I surmise.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Clay's brother says softly. “These guys tend to work in teams.”

“There has also been a string of carjackings over the last few months. The tracker could have been placed in order for them to find your car later and steal it,” the guy with dark hair explains.

“So, no one has any idea what was intended.” I lift my hands and let them fall to my sides. “Should I be worried?”

“You should always be worried,” Dad says.

I glare at him. “That’s not helpful.”

“I taught you to always be aware of what’s going on around you and to trust your gut if something doesn’t seem right.”

“I know but I’m asking if this tracker situation is something I need to be worried about right now. Will whoever put it on my car put another one on it?”

“I wish we could give you that answer, but we can’t.” Clay’s brother says, then adds, “all you can do is stay vigilant.”

“Great.”

“Why don’t you stay with me and Mom tonight?”

“Brodie is out of town until tomorrow, I’m keeping Jeb for him until he gets home, and besides Leah is home so I won’t be alone.” I watch him let out a frustrated breath, probably because he doesn’t like Brodie who happens to be a guy I dated a while back but stayed friends with, and he knows he can’t force me to stay with him and Mom, even if he really wants to.

“All right, I’ll follow you home, but if you go out this weekend, I want you to tell me when and where you’re going.”

“I can do that.” I agree then look at Clay’s brother and the man with him. “Nice meeting you two.”

“Tucker.” Clays brother says.

Then the other man adds, “Miles.”

I give both of them a smile, then glance up at Clay. “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“No problem.” He jerks up his chin.

With nothing else to do I turn to my dad. “I’ll wait for you before I pull out.”

“Yeah, kid I’ll be just a minute.” He lifts his chin.

I hustle over to my car and get in behind the wheel. After putting my bags in the passenger seat, I start the engine then look at the rearview mirror at the men still behind my car, talking. I have no idea what is being said but neither Clay nor my dad look very happy, which is making me curious. After a minute, my dad walks off with the other guys, and Clay stands there watching them go, then turns his head. Our eyes meet in my mirror, and I bite my lip then drag my eyes off his. I put my car in reverse then check the mirror to make sure it’s clear. When I see it is, I back up, then pass my dad, hearing the sound of his bike pull up behind me along with another. When I look in the mirror again, I see my dad and Clay riding side by side and a sense of *déjà vu* washes over me. My grandma’s always said that *déjà vu* is just a way of something bigger than us letting us know that we are on the right path. I just don’t know what that means for me in this instance.

Chapter 2
Clay

HEARING someone banging on my front door, I drop the weights in my hands to the mat at my feet and grab a towel off the weight bench. As I make my way across the concrete floors, Skye falls into step with me, with her ears up and her tail wagging.

“What’s up?” I greet Tucker and Miles as I swing open the door then turn to head for the kitchen.

“What the fuck was that yesterday?” Tucker asks as I grab a bottle of water out of the fridge.

“What the fuck was what?” Dayton asks, looking a little worse for wear as he steps out of the room he’s been crashing in since he got into town a couple of days ago.

“Were you out all night?” I raise a brow his direction.

“Yes, *Dad*.” He squints his eyes. “Why the fuck do you need so many windows?”

“I like the light.” I put the bottle to my lips and tip it back.

“Are you going to ignore my question?” Tucker bites out, planting his hands on his hips.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “Yesterday I was helping you out.”

“You know you’re supposed to be invisible. We can’t catch these guys if we don’t have a trail to follow.” Tucker points out.

My jaw clenches. He’s not wrong; I’ve been laying in wait for months, waiting for these guys to slip up, and yesterday when I was sure they did, I fucked up. I shouldn’t have stepped in, I should have just got the information I needed to put the pretty brunette on radar, then let the situation play out, but there was something about her that clawed at my insides and urged me to protect her.

“Not sure it’d be wise to use Nico Mayson’s daughter as bait anyways.” Miles mutters.

Tucker’s jaw clenches.

“And you wanna talk about blowing my cover? What the fuck was that with you telling him I’m your brother?” I ask.

“You don’t know Nico. If I hadn’t stepped in, you’d likely be in jail on some charge he made up until he could figure out who you actually are, and he would find out,” Tucker bites out.

I raise a brow at Miles.

“He’s not exaggerating.” He shrugs.

“I’m obviously missing something,” Dayton says, looking between us.

“You’re not missing much, we’re still at square fucking one when it comes to tracking down anything new about Arya.” Miles walks to the couch.

The water in my empty stomach settles like a lead weight. Arya became my sister when I was twelve and ended up in the same foster home as her, Tucker, Miles, and Dayton. The family we lived with was better than some of the other foster families I had stayed with in the past. We never went without food and always had a bed to sleep in, though they made it clear from the beginning that we were not a part of their family, they had kids of their own and were only doing their duty as god-fearing people by taking in unwanted children.

And each of us had been passed along through the system so often at that point we were use to being the outcasts, so we formed our own family within that family, until one day we came home from school and found out that Arya, who had just turned thirteen was being adopted by a couple that lived out of state. By that weekend she was gone, leaving all of us who were helpless to do anything to keep her from going.

For the first year after she was adopted, we would get letters in the mail from her almost weekly, but eventually those letters started to come fewer and farther between until they stopped all together with no explanation as to why. That's when Tucker, Miles, Dayton, and I made a pact that as soon as we aged out of the system, we would track her down.

Only we had no idea at that time what we would uncover when we did finally find her.

"Clay." A hand lands on my back. I snap out of my thoughts and look at Dayton who has moved from the island to stand next to me. "Did you hear what I asked?"

"No." I finish my water then walk across the kitchen and drop the bottle in the recycle bin.

"I asked if you checked the chats to see if this woman you stepped in for had been requested by someone?"

"I checked last night, and couldn't find anything."

"I'm still not sure they were tagging her," Miles says from the couch across the room. "Over the last few months numerous car thefts have taken place, and in the cases where those cars are recovered before they could be scrapped, there's been a tag just like the one you found yesterday."

“That doesn’t explain the two guys waiting for her outside the liquor store.”

“Maybe they weren’t waiting for her, maybe you just want a lead so bad you thought they were.” He holds up his hands as my jaw clenches. “It’s understandable–we’re all fucking tired of waiting for a lead, man.”

“So, what do you guys have, anything since I was here last?” Dayton asks, looking between Miles and Tucker.

“Two new missing person cases were opened up, one–a sixteen-year-old girl with a history of running away, the other–a dancer at a club called “Teasers”. Neither woman has used their phone, credit cards or had contact with anyone since disappearing and we have no leads.”

“So, a young impressionable girl with an obvious history of some type of family issue—” he holds up one finger “—and a girl with a job in an industry where women have been known to be victimized.” He holds up a second finger. “Both of those are like blood in the water for the type of predator we are hunting.” He looks at Miles and Tucker. “Do you know the woman from yesterday? Does anything about her history give you an inclination that she would be an easy target–a woman who wouldn’t be missed?”

“We don’t know her, but we know her father. He’s close with all of his kids and loves his wife.” Miles looks at me and smirks. “And given the way he was ready to go for Clay's throat yesterday, I’d say he’d burn down the world to find the person responsible if his daughter went missing.”

“He wasn’t a fan of yours?” Dayton asks me with a grin.

I press my lips together. The truth is I couldn’t give a fuck how Willow’s father felt about me, but I could appreciate the way he showed up when his daughter called him. A lot of people say they love their kids but saying those words and putting action behind them are two different things.

“You need to stay clear of her,” Tucker says.

I turn his way. “Pardon?”

“I saw the way you were watching her, and I’m telling you that you need to steer clear. We work with her father and they’re obviously close. We don’t need you blowing up our shit just to get your dick wet.”

“Who the fuck are you talking to right now?” I take a step toward the living

room and Miles flies up off the couch stepping between us while Skye goes on alert and comes to stand next to my side laying her weight against my calf.

“You–I’m talking to you.” Tucker taunts, knowing just how to get under my skin having had sixteen years to perfect it.

“I’m going to tell you this only once: do not ever try to tell me who I can fuck or spend time with.”

“So, you are going to go there?”

“If I do, it’s none of your business.”

“Fuck! What the fuck did I tell you?” he asks, pointing at Miles who just shrugs. “You can’t be okay with that?”

“He doesn’t need my permission.” Miles sighs.

“Okay, lets all calm down.” Dayton steps in front of me.

“I’m calm.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You need to talk to him.”

“You know Clay would never do anything to jeopardize us reaching our goal.” He turns his back to me so he can face Tucker. “Right?”

“Right.” Tucker mutters, flexing his hands.

“Then chill. We all want the same thing, we’re on the same team, so fighting amongst ourselves isn’t going to help us right now.” He looks around at us. “Are we good now?”

“We’re good.” I let my arms fall to my sides.

“Tuck?” Dayton sighs and Tucker lifts his chin. “Fuck, why is it that I’m still keeping you two from killing each other?” He walks to the couch and falls lazily into it. “Have you been dealing with this bullshit since I’ve been gone?”

“All the fucking time, and it’s worse now than it’s ever been.” Miles sighs, taking a seat next to him.

Dayton looks at Tucker. “Are you still pissed at Clay because of the shit Naomi pulled?”

Leave it to Dayton to call Tuck out like the lawyer he is.

“She was drunk,” Tucker mutters.

I shake my head. “Brother, you know I love you and I’m all for you trying to figure shit out with your wife, but you know that’s a fucking lie.” I scrub my hands down my face. “She might have been drinking but she was not drunk.”

“She’d been going through a lot since the miscarriage.”

“I know.” My tone softens because fuck I know that him loosing that baby gutted him. His wife–I’m not so sure, she seemed almost relieved when talking about the miscarriage. Then again, everyone deals with loss differently, so what the fuck do I know?

“She had been drinking, she needed a shoulder to cry on and Clay gave her that.” He looks at me. “She told me what she did as soon as she got home.”

I know she did, and I know that shit was only because I made it clear that I was going to tell him no matter how much she cried and begged me not to. To this day I still don’t know why she showed up on my doorstep. Yes, we had gone out on a couple of dates before her and Tucker got together but it was never serious. And after she married my brother, we were cordial at best and only really spoke in a group setting. Finding her outside my door had caught me by surprise, but I love my brother, and knew that they had gone through something difficult, so I didn’t tell her to leave like I should have. No, I invited her in and about ten minutes into her being here I knew I fucked up when she tried crawling up my body to get to my mouth.

“So, you get that Clay wasn’t at fault?” Dayton raises a brow.

“She was vulnerable.”

“And you think I took advantage of that?” I let out a hollow laugh.

“You knew we’d been struggling.”

“I’m not doing this.” I head across the loft toward my bedroom then stop and spin to face him. “Actually, let me say one thing.”

“Clay.” Miles groans but I keep my eyes locked on Tucker's.

“I don’t want your wife, and I think it’s probably about time that you came to terms with the fact that maybe you don’t want her either.”

“Fuck you, man, you live your life uncommitted to everything and everyone. You don’t know shit about marriage or relationships.”

“I’ve never been married but I know that the person you choose to be with is someone you should actually want to fucking *be* with.”

“You don’t know shit.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I know you're miserable, I know you make a lot

of excuses for your wife's behavior, and I know that you're taking that bullshit out on the wrong person." I let out a deep breath. "Now I'm gonna shower." I leave my brothers in my living room without a backwards glance and walk into my room with Skye at my side. I strip out of my clothes as I head for the shower knowing one thing for sure, nothing good is going to come from that confrontation and if anything, it just caused more of a rift between Tucker and me.

FUCK!

Want to read the rest of Until Willow? Grab it here! Available in KU!

about aurora rose reynolds



Aurora Rose Reynolds is a New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling author whose wildly popular series include Until, Until Him, Until Her, Underground King, Shooting Stars, Fluke My Life and How to Catch an Alpha series.

Her writing career started in an attempt to get the outrageously alpha men who resided in her head to leave her alone and has blossomed into an opportunity to share her stories with readers all over the world.

To learn more about her and her books, visit her website or join her reader group on Facebook! Subscribe to her newsletter, so you won't miss any book news and releases!

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