FALLING FOR her



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FALLING FOR HER

NATASHA MADISON



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To Rickie . . . My own version of Finley! Thank you for being the muse to one of my favorite heroines! No notes!

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LINCOLN
I need a nanny for the next month.
My ex-wife is getting remarried and going on her honeymoon.
Leaving me in charge of our son full-time.
Finding someone to help shouldn’t be this hard, but the candidate pool is slim to none.
Finley is my last resort. She’s impulsive, wild, and too pretty for her own good.
And I suspect she takes joy in pushing every single button I have any chance she gets.

FINLEY
The only thing I want is for my husband to divorce me.
Just one problem: he wants half of everything I have.
I need an escape, to lay low and take my mind off it.
Accepting a job as a nanny seems like a good idea, even if I have never been employed.
And I don’t know the first thing about cooking, cleaning, or kids.
Also, my new boss is the sexiest grump I have ever met.
What’s the worst thing that can happen?

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PROLOGUE

FINLEY

“Lunch was amazing.” I lean in and air-kiss Kelly’s right cheek and then the left one. “Next time it’s my treat.” We attended the same boarding school for just a few years as young teens and reconnected at the club when she moved to the area a few years ago.

“Of course.” She moves to her shining-white BMW without a speck of dust or dirt on it, wiggling her fingers my way as she gets into the driver’s seat.

One of the valets drives up with my silver Mercedes, which is a few years older than Kelly’s new BMW. It was the last gift my grandparents gave me before they passed away. I hold my purse in both hands as I wait for him to stop. Only then do I start walking toward the driver’s side. My heels click-clack on the cement. “Here you go,” he says, holding out his hand, helping me in. I turn to put my new light-pink Hermès purse on the passenger seat. The valet slams my door shut.

After snatching up my gold-rimmed sunglasses, I make the long drive home, classical music playing softly. Kelly insisted we meet at this restaurant that just opened, which everyone is talking about. It’s well over an hour from where I live without traffic, and we lingered, so now it’s rush hour. I don’t think it lived up to the hype, but Kelly happily posted several photos of each course to her Instagram. Each and every single time the food

came out, we couldn’t just start eating. No, she had to take at least fifty photos before we could think about picking up our silverware. Then she mulled over editing each of them before finally digging in.

When I pull up in front of my apartment building, the doorman is already making his way around the car to open my door. “Welcome back, Ms. Westbook.” Even though I’ve been married for the past three months, no one calls me by my married name.

I nod at him. The glass doors slide open for me, and I step into the cool, white lobby. He retrieves the valet key from his desk and heads to the garage to park my car. I press the elevator button to go up, and one of the six elevators opens. Stepping in and pressing *PH1*, I enter my code on the keypad. Only when the code is confirmed do the doors close, and the elevator starts to rise.

The elevator doors open to a spectacular view of the sunset. The whole back wall of my penthouse is floor-to-ceiling windows. Two steps lead me down into the sunken dining room that has a table for eight facing a state-of-the-art kitchen. The only thing I’ve ever done in there is make my coffee and heat up my food. I put my purse on the white granite counter before kicking off my pink slip-on high-heeled sandals. I open my purse, taking out the folded papers I picked up before lunch, and head back to my closet to change into my cashmere lounge set of wide-legged pants and an oversized shirt that falls off the shoulder.

In the kitchen, I pick up my phone and dial my husband, Davis. It rings twice, and then he answers, his voice low as if he’s hiding something.

“Do you know what time you’ll be home?”

“Later,” he says. “I’m busy now. At a meeting. Don’t wait up.” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer him; he just hangs up.

“*Busy* my ass,” I mumble.

I move down two more steps into the living room and out the glass door to the patio. I lean on the railing beside my private swimming pool and look

out at the shimmer of lights from the skyline in the distance. The loneliness comes roaring into me like someone just opened a box full of memories. I've never felt this way before, even though I've always been by myself.

My parents were both only children, so no cousins on either side. It was just me. My father's parents really tried to forge that family bond, but they were both older when they had him, and they could be a bit selfish. Still, I knew they loved me with their whole hearts. My grandfather owned O-Tex Oil and was a key player in the industry. To this day, it's still going but is run by the shareholders. I get my checks every single month, so much money that I haven't even touched my trust fund. My grandfather also bought me this penthouse when I was twenty-one, so I could have a place of my own.

Except nothing about this place has ever felt like home. It's more like a place that I stay in, even more so now, since that day exactly two months ago. I went to see my husband at his office and caught his secretary ordering diamond earrings for herself and another woman, charging them to his personal credit card. When I confronted her, she just smirked and showed me the email from him telling her to do it. I could see the other woman's address on her screen, so I turned on my heel and immediately drove there. I was humiliated, and my heart was broken, but the last thing I wanted her to see was that she got to me, that she had won.

I don't know what shocked me more, the fact that he was there when I rang the doorbell, or that he was annoyed I was interrupting whatever the fuck they were doing. And just so I was clear, it was not a business meeting. He answered the door in pants that were barely tied and his shirt open all the way down, showing his bare chest.

I fled. I came straight home and called my lawyer and told him I was going to file for divorce. It was a big step, but I knew I deserved better, and from the way he reacted when I caught him, I knew he had no interest in changing his behavior.

He came home that night, sauntering in like he didn’t just get caught cheating on me, as if nothing had happened. He even asked me if we were having dinner together. He saw nothing wrong with him sleeping around. In fact, he made it seem like if he didn’t sleep around, it wouldn’t be normal.

When I told him I wanted a divorce, he nodded at me and then walked to the spare bedroom where he slept that night. The next morning, he again pretended like nothing was wrong. I asked him when he would be moving out, and he laughed at me.

He bent to kiss my cheek. “I’ll move out when you give me half of your trust fund.”

I scoffed at him, knowing I had a prenup which, according to my grandfather’s lawyer, was ironclad. The most he was entitled to was part of what I earned in the months we’d been together from the investments my late grandfather made, and I’d fight him getting even a single fucking dollar of that.

One day turned into two and then five. He kept acting like he’d done nothing wrong. I hired someone to find any and all evidence that would help me get a clean divorce. I didn’t know I was opening Pandora’s box. He was having multiple affairs, including some sort of throuple deal with his secretary and her best friend. He’d also told friends that from day one, he didn’t even like me; he was just in it for the money. And he still refused to leave the penthouse or agree to a divorce unless I agreed to give him half of my trust fund, at a minimum. He even had the nerve to tell my lawyer that.

It was the first time in my life that I really regretted anything. Being with Davis was that one thing in my life that if I could go back and do over again, I would not only not do it, I would run the other way as fast as I could. I thought he was everything I wanted in a man. He was handsome, charming, well connected, and came from a family where his parents doted on him. When we met, he had just moved to town to take on a junior executive role at a Fortune 500 company. He was ambitious and

hardworking, or so I thought. To me, his long hours in the office meant he was working hard to move up in the company. What I only recently learned was that he was spoiled, lazy, and entitled. He slacked off, and he barely graduated from college. His father was the only reason he got the job; he called in a favor. The company was actually going to let him go for his incompetence, but then I came into the picture. Through me, he got into the local country club. Thinking about him walking in there with his shoulders back and head held high almost makes me want to laugh. He should have been hunched down and avoiding all eye contact. He made influential friends because of me and then used his networking skills to remain an asset to the company and keep his job.

My phone rings, and I see it's Collins calling.

"Well, hello there," I say. Collins and I met on a podcaster's true crime forum. We both had the same thoughts, and our friendship grew from there. She knew me for me, not because of who my family was. I didn't know anything about her family. That's changed in the last couple of months. She's become one of my best friends, my sounding board, someone who stood by me when my life was blowing up. Every single day, she calls or texts to check up on me, and it means more to me than I can even put into words.

"*Hello there* to you," she replies softly. "It's been three days since I've actually talked to you."

"Sorry about that. I just . . ." I close my eyes. "I don't know what else to say."

"Have you decided what you want to do?"

"I finally have divorce papers ready to serve him when he gets in." The pit of my stomach clenches. "I'll call you tomorrow and let you know how he took it."

"If you don't call me, I'm calling you," she threatens.

“Don’t worry about me. You’re having a baby, so you have your own things to worry about.” My heart soars for her, knowing how happy she is about this. “Focus on that and your man.” I picture her smile when I mention her boyfriend, Theo.

“Call me,” she urges, but is interrupted by a siren. Collins works as a paramedic and must be at the station. “I have to go.”

“I will,” I assure her. She disconnects before I can say anything else.

I stare out into the distance until my eyes get tired. Going inside, I sit on the couch, waiting for Davis to get home. The minutes tick by, turning into hours, and finally, a little after 1:00 a.m., the elevator door opens.

He steps out wearing the black suit he had on this morning, but his shirt is untucked, and only two buttons are closed. In one hand, he has his suit jacket. His head is down, and only when I clear my throat does he notice me. “What the hell are you doing up?”

“I was waiting for you.” I rise and walk to the kitchen island.

“I told you not to do that,” he snaps as he steps into the dining room.

I turn to face him again, seeing the smear of lipstick across his neck. I wait for the pain to hit me, but it just leaves me hollow. “Well, I don’t really listen to anything you tell me to do, so why start now?” I hold out the papers to him, and he grabs them from me.

He tosses his jacket onto the table as he unfolds the documents. He reads the top, and I know right away when he sees the part that says divorce, because his head snaps up and he looks at me furiously. “What the fuck is this?”

“I think it’s pretty self-explanatory. Two months ago, I told you I wanted a divorce. I tried to do it amicably, but, well, if you think this is a joke, it’s not.” I fold my arms over my chest. “You can’t run away now because you’ve been served. You can’t hide anymore. Everything you need to know is there in the papers. You can see yourself out.” I turn and start to walk to my room. “You can have your lawyer contact mine.”

“To hell with that.” He grabs my arm as I try to walk past him. “I don’t accept this.” He holds up the papers then throws them on the table. “No fucking way will I accept this.”

“I don’t think you have a choice.” I rip my arm out of his hand, ignoring how it throbs from his grip.

“I have been telling you since you said you wanted a divorce that I would only give it to you under one condition. I want your trust fund, and only then will I sign the papers.”

“That is never going to happen, and you know it. I’m going to bed. I hope when I get up tomorrow, you’ll be gone. This time for good.” I rush out of the room and to my bedroom. Hearing the sound of a vase being shattered, I lock the door behind me. I want to kick myself for not bringing my phone in with me. I listen as if my life depends on it, and then I hear the ping of the elevator.

I unlock the door and stick my head out to see if I can see him. The vase of roses I had on the table is smashed, and suddenly, I don’t feel safe in my own home. I snatch up my phone and step around all the glass, spotting the papers on the floor. I run to my closet, grabbing just my purse. Then I’m pressing the button to go straight down to the parking garage.

I look right and left as the sound of my heavy breathing fills my ears until I spot where the doorman parked my SUV. My hands shake as I unlock the door and get in. Locking it right away, I start it and practically peel out of there. Only when I’m out of the garage do I breathe a sigh of relief. I don’t even know where I’m going, but I call Collins.

She answers after one ring. “Finley?”

“Were you sleeping?” I look at the clock.

“No, I’m on duty for another hour.”

“I just left him.” I feel the wetness hit my cheeks, not because I’m sad but because I’m angry that he’s not just going to go away. I should have fucking known that love wasn’t a thing.

“Where are you going?”

“I have no idea,” I admit to her, driving aimlessly through the streets that are almost deserted. “I just can’t be there when he comes back.”

“Come here,” she urges. “I want you to come here.”

“Are you sure?” I ask her and pull the car over.

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” I say softly.

After we disconnect, I look out into the darkness of the night. One of these days, I’ll find a home I can go back to.

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CHAPTER ONE

LINCOLN

My finger taps the steering wheel to the beat of the country song playing softly from the radio. Pulling into my neighborhood, I spot a couple of the retired men out mowing their lawns. Both look up when I drive by, raising a hand to say hello. It's the same neighborhood I grew up in; most of the neighbors are the same people who were around back then, though a few have sold and moved on. I hold up my hand, returning the gesture before I turn into my driveway.

My sister and I inherited this house when our parents both passed away. We had our own houses by then, so we started renting it out. But last year, I bought it from her when I needed a place to live. The overhanging trees block out most of the sunlight during the day, which makes it bearable during the summer, especially on days like today. It's the second week of July, and it's already a scorching hot midmorning.

Theo's truck is parked at the curb, and I look over to the second garage I built last year. Theo is waiting for me to do the second walk-through after recent renovations. I was planning on making it a storage area, even a toolshed, but I had to pivot when my ex-wife told me she was getting remarried. I'm hoping she'll agree to figure out a new arrangement that will let me take our son, Asa, more often. For now, I know she is going to be spending a month in Europe for her honeymoon, leaving me to solo-parent.

If I were able to have full custody of Asa, it would be a dream. Except Maggie is a good mom. A shit wife, but a good mom. Or maybe I was a shit husband, but nothing could make her cheating on me okay.

My work as a police officer doesn't give me the most flexible schedule, and I don't know what the arrangement with Maggie will be going forward, but I want to be prepared. So I hired Theo and his team to convert the spare garage into a modest apartment for a live-in nanny.

I'm about to pull open the garage door when the phone rings. It's Maggie.

I step to the side of the house toward the backyard. Sunlight streams through the elm tree my father planted when he first bought the house, shading the cherub statues in the garden my mother bought when I was a kid. They've seen better days, but I keep them there to remember her by.

"Hello."

"Burke," she says my name as if I'm not the one who answered the phone. "Hey, how's it going?"

"It's going," I reply, keeping it polite. "What's up?"

"I was calling you so we could discuss the next couple of weeks. As you know, I'm getting married on Saturday."

I look up to the sky and pinch my nose, irritated in a matter of seconds. "Congratulations," I retort sarcastically.

She sighs yet her voice is full of cheer. "Thank you so much. I'm very excited."

"Well, hopefully it works out for you this time."

I try not to snort when she hisses. "I think we were both to blame for that, weren't we?"

"Is that what you think?" I laugh. "Let's just say we have a difference of opinion, since I wasn't the one who stepped out on you. But I'm sure that's not what you called me for."

“It’s not.” I hear a car door slam on her end, and I hope this conversation is almost over. “I’m calling to discuss our son.”

“Asa,” I say. I hate when she doesn’t use his name. “What is there to discuss? I thought we already covered everything we needed to.”

“I’m going away for a month,” she snaps.

“I’m aware. I believe you saw the construction work that was going on in the garage when you dropped him off last week.”

“I did. But that doesn’t answer my question about childcare. Have you gotten any leads?” I close my eyes at her question. “It feels like time is running out, and the last time we spoke, you hadn’t found anyone.”

“I have an interview today.” I tell her of the woman I got references for from a friend of Harmony, whose son, Wyatt, is Asa’s best friend.

“That’s cutting it close, don’t you think? You’ve had over two months to get it done.” I can hear her tone shift. “Typical of you to wait until the very last minute.”

“Maggie, I know this is going to come as a shock to you, but us being divorced means I don’t have to listen to your bullshit anymore.”

“Us discussing our son isn’t bullshit, Burke,” she hisses out.

“You aren’t discussing *Asa*, you are discussing my parenting. I think it’s safe to say I’m not going to let anything happen to him. Go on your honeymoon and enjoy the time away.” I try not to reveal how nervous I actually am that I don’t already have a nanny in place. Even I know that time is ticking at this point, and all my leads have led nowhere.

“We need to discuss me calling in and speaking with him.”

“When he’s not with me, I’ll make sure he has his tablet so you can get in touch with him.”

“Thank you,” she says softly, “that means a lot to me.”

“If that’s all, I’ll see you when I pick him up the morning after the wedding.”

“Actually, do you think you can get him at the bakery in about an hour? I thought I would be back in town sooner, but my wedding makeup trial went longer than it should have.”

“Yeah, I’ll pick him up. You can get him on your way home.”

“Thanks, Burke. Will you let me know when you find a nanny?”

“As soon as I know, you’ll be the second person, trust me. He’ll be well taken care of. I’m not just going to leave anyone with Asa.”

“Fine,” she huffs. “I don’t know why you have to always be so difficult. Bye, Burke.”

“Later.” I hang up the phone and rest my hands on my hips, hanging my head. The kink in the back of my neck gets tighter with all the pressure. I really need to get someone to watch Asa, or I might have to beg my neighbors to help me out, and that’s just not something I want to do. He needs someone stable who will be with him all day, who is part of his routine, instead of getting bounced around from person to person.

I hurry to the garage, knowing Theo is probably waiting for me to end his day. Theo moved to town not long ago to join his cousin Caleb’s contracting company. The two of them stay busy, since they’re the only reliable contractors in the area. I pull open the black metal door and step into the cool air. The space that was open before now has a wall up in the middle of it, which separates the living room from the bedroom and the kitchen from the bathroom. It took him two weeks to totally convert the garage into a place where a nanny could live, and it looks amazing.

Theo is facing the door, leaning on the counter in the back of the room, where we put in a little kitchen area. Nothing big, just a sink with a counter between the refrigerator and the two-burner stovetop.

I see the furniture I bought was delivered today, like they said it would be. To the side is a love seat with a small wooden coffee table. “This is really nice,” I say as I walk over to sit and test it out. “Pictures were right.”

“Yeah,” Theo agrees, putting his phone away in his back pocket, “it’s the perfect size for the space.”

I get up and slide open the barn door to check the queen-size bed I ordered. The bedding is lying on top, and I know I’ll have to come back in and fix it. “The bed takes up most of the room,” I joke with him, looking at the side to see that he made a small closet along the wall.

“We work with what we got.” He chuckles. “It’s homey.”

“It’s perfect. Now, what I need is someone who is going to actually stay in here.”

“How’s the nanny search coming along?”

I shrug. “It’s coming. I have a meeting with someone in about thirty minutes.” I check my watch. “I’m really hoping it works out because it’s coming down to the wire, and I’m trying not to freak the fuck out about it, but I’m actually freaking the fuck out about it.”

“I wish I knew someone—” He pauses. “Actually, Collins’s friend is coming to stay for a while, I think she said.” He takes out his phone again and dials her number, putting her on speaker.

“Hey,” she answers after two rings.

“Hey.” The smile on his face is automatic at the sound of her voice. “Are you busy?”

“No. We just stopped for some coffee.” Collins is one of the paramedics in town, and we’ve even been on a couple of emergency calls together. She’s a local girl who hasn’t had the best luck in her life, mostly because of her parents being awful people. Now that she’s pregnant with Theo’s child, he’s making sure she stays safe and taken care of, which is more than what her parents could ever do.

“I’m with Burke, and you’re on speakerphone.”

“Okay,” she sings out, her tone wary.

“Your friend who’s coming to town . . .”

“Finley? Yeah?”

“Do you know how long she’s planning to stay and what her plans are?”

“Not sure. I know she’s in the middle of a divorce and needs to get away.” He looks at me and raises his eyebrows. I don’t know if I want to deal with someone who is probably bitter that they are going through a divorce. “Why?”

“Burke is looking for a nanny.”

“I don’t know . . .” Her voice trails off. “I’m not sure she’s looking for work.”

“It’d be a good way for her to take her mind off of things,” Theo tells her. “Why don’t you give her a call and see what she thinks?”

“No.” I immediately cut off this plan. “Thanks. But let me see how this interview goes, and then if I still need someone, I’ll call you back.”

“That works,” she agrees. “I can get a feel for it in the meantime and let you know if it’ll be a no-go.”

“That works too. When is she coming to town?” I ask, just in case.

“Should be by tomorrow for sure,” Collins replies. “I know she’s driving down. She wasn’t sure if she was stopping along the way.”

“Okay, I’ll keep you posted on what I decide. Thanks, Collins.”

“No worries. Good luck with the interviews.”

Theo hangs up the phone, and I look at him. “What do you know about this girl?” I ask him, and he shrugs.

“She’s friends with Collins, so that should mean something.”

“Collins is friendly with everyone,” I point out. “I mean, not to say anything bad but—”

He holds up his hand to stop me. “I know they are part of this online group. I think it’s about crime podcasts or whatever, so there’s that. I’ve met her via FaceTime a whole bunch of times, and she seemed really nice.”

“So did Ted Bundy,” I remind him, and then we both hear a car door being slammed. “That’s my interview.”

“Let me know if you want me to do any more work. I checked everything, and it’s all good to go.” I follow him out of the garage, and there’s a woman walking up the driveway. They pass each other, and Theo nods to her, but she doesn’t notice him, or she’s too focused on me. Her salt-and-pepper hair is cut short in a bob and curled under. She smiles at me as she walks closer.

“Hello.” I hold up my hand. “Are you Mrs. Larue?”

She just smiles as she stops in front of me. “Are you Burke?” she asks after a moment.

“I am,” I confirm. “You must be Mrs. Larue?” I say again, holding out my hand to shake hers.

“Oh my, I can’t really hear out of this ear.” She points to her left ear. “And this one is getting fuzzier.” She points to her right ear. “Now, where is this little boy? Oh!” She starts toward one of the cherub statues in the garden. “Hello, little one, what’s your name?” she calls. “Tell Mrs. Larue what your favorite food is, and we’ll make it together.”

“Um,” I start.

She turns back to me and smiles big. “He’s not too talkative, is he? So, when do I start?”

I hesitate and then smile. “I’ll have to get back to you. I have to speak to Asa’s mother.” I hold out my arm to walk her to her car. She drives away, almost hitting a parked car on the side of the street. I say a silent prayer while I take my phone out and text Theo. Maybe it’s better to be safe than sorry.

ME:

Ask Collins to see if her friend is interested in being Asa’s nanny.

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CHAPTER TWO

FINLEY

All four windows are down in my SUV, the wind flying in as I zoom down the highway. The GPS tells me I'm going to reach my destination in thirty-two minutes. My hand grips the steering wheel as I sing "You can dance, you can jive" at the top of my lungs, like I'm onstage and singing to a sold-out stadium of forty thousand people, with a fan blowing the wind through my hair.

I pass the town sign: *Montgavin*. I let out a little sigh of relief, but then the feeling of anxiousness comes rushing to me, and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I look down and see I'm going twenty miles over the speed limit. I take my foot off the gas at the same time a black truck turns behind me. I check the rearview mirror, seeing the guy behind the wheel.

"Fuck." I check the side mirror, then my rearview mirror. "Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit." I catch my reflection in the mirror. I look a little run-down, to say the very least. My blonde hair is too tousled from the way the wind was whipping it around. I have bags under my eyes from not sleeping the last couple of nights. I drove until I couldn't keep my eyes open, grabbing the first motel I could find. It smelled of stale smoke.

"It's going to be okay." My hands grip the steering wheel tighter. "It's fine. It'll be a ticket, and then they will let you go." I look in the rearview

mirror again. He’s wearing aviator sunglasses, both hands on the steering wheel. “Holy shit, he looks like the Terminator.”

The female voice of my GPS interrupts the music. “In two hundred feet, turn right.”

I turn my blinker on before looking in the rearview mirror to see if he’s also going to put on his turn signal.

“If I don’t get this ticket,” I vow to the universe, “I promise I will not speed ever again.” I shake my head as soon as I say that. “I mean, I promise I will not speed when I don’t have to speed. Like if it’s a leisurely drive, I won’t speed, but if I’m late and I have basically no choice”—I have to speed things up again—“but I won’t do it as much as I did before.” I slow down and turn onto the right street. “Okay, moment of truth.” I inhale and hold my breath, then see that no one is behind me. “Yesss!” I sing out. I take a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure that I’m really not being followed. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” I shimmy my ass in the seat. “It’s a great day. It’s finally a great fucking day.”

The road leads me down to the town and the hustle and bustle of people coming and going. The shops are nothing like back home, where it was all small, high-end boutiques and cars honking for you to get out of the way or to tell you that you’re an asshole. No, this is pure small-town charm. One storefront is a hairdresser, and you know it’s a hairdresser because they have pictures of hairstyles in the window. Right next door is a “corner store.” I don’t even know what they sell in there, but it looks like a mishmash of things. Their window displays cleaning supplies on one side and bedding on the other.

Turning my head to the other side of the street, I see small, pink iron tables in front of a bakery called Maddie’s. The pink script on the window with three cupcakes under it is charming, just like the rest of the town. “That is probably a coffee shop too,” I mumble to myself. I look for a parking spot and pull into one between two cars. It takes me four tries to

parallel park this big SUV; I'm still getting used to it. After the fourth attempt, I just let it be. I'm sticking out on the side, and my front is more out than my back. "C'est la vie," I say to myself.

My legs are cramped from sitting for so long, so I bend my right leg, then my left, before taking the first full step forward. I look around to see people walking down the street and smiling at each other, and I silently laugh to myself, "Am I in *The Truman Show*?" At least I blend in, in my cutoff blue jean shorts and a light-pink tank top. Back home, I would never be seen wearing these clothes, not even in the house by myself. My new wardrobe is courtesy of the store I stopped in after I left. My long legs are toned and tanned, thanks to hours and hours of Pilates, my trainer, and a special blend of self-tanner spray I typically get weekly.

I walk past the bakery window to the door. When I step inside, I smile big at how cute it is. The floor is black-and-white tiles, with four white cast-iron tables with matching chairs. The walls are painted a light pink, and a long white counter with a stainless steel coffee machine is right next to the glass display case. Built-in shelves sit behind the counter with jars of what look like homemade items. Someone comes out from the back kitchen and smiles at me while cleaning her hands in her white apron. "Welcome to Maddie's. I'm Ms. Maddie."

I walk to the counter. "Hi," I chirp, looking at the different donuts they have in the display cases right next to me. My mouth waters. "Everything looks so good."

"It is"—she winks at me—"and it's because we make everything in-house, including these cakes," she points to the cellophane-wrapped cakes, "which are usually sold out." She shrugs. "We have sandwiches that we make daily, but those are sold out. There are a couple of pieces of pie and one white chocolate raspberry Bundt cake left."

"By any chance . . ." I look up at the menu board, seeing they serve coffee, tea, cappuccinos, and sweet tea. ". . . do you make matcha?"

“That green concoction for people who don’t want coffee?” she asks me, and I throw my head back and laugh.

“That would be it.”

“We do. My daughter just added it to the menu. It’s all the rage, apparently.” She shakes her head. “I’ll get her to make it for you. Last time I tried to make it, it ended up being paste. Everleigh,” she shouts over her shoulder, and someone who must be Everleigh comes out of the back. Her black hair is pulled back in a hairnet, and the white apron is tied just below her breasts, showing off a baby bump. “This lady—” She points to me.

“Finley,” I point to my chest, introducing myself, and Everleigh smiles at me.

“. . . wants one of the green things.” I roll my lips when I see Everleigh chuckle.

“I got it.” She shakes her head. “Excuse my mother, she is not good with change.”

“Is anyone?” I ask her, and she thinks about it.

“Some change is good,” she replies. “How would you like your matcha?”

“I don’t know if you have oat milk—”

“Here we go,” Ms. Maddie snorts. “I’m going in the back.” She looks at Everleigh, then at me. “Have yourself a wonderful day and tell your friends about us.”

“I will.” I know full well I will not be telling any of my friends about this place, since I’m running away from said friends and my small-dicked soon-to-be ex-husband.

Everleigh waits until her mother is away. “We do have oat milk,” she confirms. “But we have a special drink I’ve been making called the matcha coconut cloud.”

“Ohh, I’ll have one of those. That sounds delicious.”

“They are my favorite.” She takes out the items to make my matcha. “I did a post for our social media the other day, and it went viral, so we’ve been slammed for it.”

“That’s incredible.” I grab my phone and open my social media to pull up their account. The last video has 7.4 million views. I’m still watching the video, seeing how she does it, when she places the see-through plastic cup on the counter. The bottom part is green, and the upper part is white with some foam, sprinkled with matcha powder on top.

“Enjoy.” She smiles at me, and I pick it up, moving my wrist in a circle to mix it together with the straw she hands me. I take a sip, and my eyes widen.

“This is the best matcha I’ve ever had”—I take another sip—“and I’ve had matchas from all around the world.”

“I think the key is the sparkling water.”

I look at the cup again, taking another big sip. “Whatever it is, I’ll take fourteen,” I joke, and she laughs. “Thank you. I’ll definitely stop by while I’m in town.”

“We’ll be here.” I hand her a twenty-dollar bill and turn to walk out. “Um, your change?”

“Keep it,” I tell her, lifting the cup in my hand, “it’s worth that much.”

“I like you,” she says.

I push the door open with my back and bring the cup up to my mouth to take another sip as I walk back toward my car. I’m obviously not paying attention because I slam right into a hard chest. Wetness seeps through my top and then moves down to my stomach and toward my shorts.

“Mother of—” I start as I look up into the mirrored glasses I saw in the rearview mirror. My heart starts to race.

“You should really watch where you’re going.” His voice comes out smoother than I expected. He holds on to my upper arms and moves me away from him, and I make the mistake of looking at his arms. He’s

tattooed, from his wrist to under the sleeves of his police uniform, or maybe it's a sheriff's uniform. I don't know what they are called in this town. I know, without a shadow of a doubt, he's a *whatever* with his black cargo pants and tight, matching button-down shirt with a bulletproof vest on top. My eyes lock onto the gun at his side, right next to his handcuffs. Yup, definitely law enforcement. His black hair looks like he just ran his hand through it and pushed it to the side, his beard perfectly trimmed. He looks down at his black shirt that now is covered in green dust. "What is that?"

"It's a matcha coconut cloud." My pink shirt is now a shade of brown. "Or what *was* a matcha coconut cloud," I remark of the now-broken and empty cup in my hand. "Thanks for that." I shake my head. "You should not just ram into people while you're walking."

"I didn't ram into you, you rammed into me. How was I supposed to know your head was in the clouds?"

"My head was not in the clouds. It was right here, in the middle of . . ." I look around to see if there is a street sign anywhere. "I guess, Main Street."

"You weren't even watching where you were going. You were looking down."

"So you saw me looking down, and instead of avoiding me, you crashed right into me?" I shake my head. "Wow, how very Southern gentlemanly of you." His mouth opens in shock that I'm talking back to him. "Good day, sir." I storm away.

Then I think about maybe not going to my car so he doesn't see that it was me he was tailing as I sped through town. I stop and look back at him. His head is still turned toward me.

"Are you checking me out?"

"What?" he asks, flabbergasted. "Of course not."

"Well, I walked away"—my voice raises and he looks around to see people have stopped to watch—"and you are staring at my a—" I stop short

of saying *ass* in the middle of the street, where there are kids and now adults looking our way. “My, uh, private area.”

He shakes his head, muttering something before turning and heading into the bakery. As soon as I see him inside, I hightail it to my car. I start it and pull a U-turn instead of driving in front of Maddie’s. I look in my rearview mirror. Not seeing him, I check in my side mirror and again I think I’m in the clear.

The GPS voice fills the SUV. “Turn right and make a U-turn.”

“I will not do that,” I tell her. “I will go around”—I turn right at the first stop sign—“and hope for the best.”

The GPS reroutes me until I pull up to Theo and Collins’s house. I don’t even have the car off before the front door opens, and Collins comes out. “She’s here,” she hollers over her shoulder. “Finley.” She runs down the steps toward me, and I hold up my hand as I walk around. When I needed to get away, she was the only one who encouraged me to take a break, so now here I am.

“I’m drenched in matcha.” I point to my shirt, and she pauses.

“What happened?” She looks worried.

“Some big old oaf ran into me.” A smoking-hot oaf who I will be avoiding for the whole time I’m here.

“Let’s get you in the shower.” She smiles at me and puts her arm around my shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re here, I’m so excited.” We walk up the four steps and Theo, her fiancé, comes out of the front door. “Theo, she’s here.”

“I see that, baby,” he says softly, “and she needs a shower.”

“I do,” I agree. “I would give you a hug and thank you for having me, but . . .”

“I’ll get your things.” He motions with his chin toward my car. “She’ll show you your room.” He walks past us, stopping to kiss Collins’s head, his hand going to her baby bump before heading to my car.

“You need to get ready,” Collins urges. “Your interview is in thirty minutes.”

“Huh?” I ask her, confused.

“The nanny job we spoke about?”

I put my hand to my head. When I called her last night, after driving for what felt like two straight days and finally getting a hotel room, I was so tired I don’t remember half the conversation.

“You said you would go and meet the dad and get a feel for it,” she reminds me.

“I was kind of joking.” She stops by the bathroom door. “I mean, me? A nanny to a real-life human child?”

“He’s eight years old, so it’s not that big of a deal. He can basically do everything for himself. I think you should do it. I think it’s the perfect distraction.” I look at the bathroom and think about my imploded life right now. I know I should have booked a hotel room and not just crashed at Collins’s place, but she insisted. “Just go and see. It might be perfect for you. And it’s just for a month, I think.”

“Okay, I’ll go, but don’t be surprised if I don’t get the job.”

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CHAPTER THREE

LINCOLN

“I know you just clocked out, but I’m going to need you to come back to the station,” Captain says.

I was just unlocking my front door when he called. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he replies, but something about his tone makes me think things are actually not okay.

“I’m supposed to meet with a potential nanny in about twenty minutes. Can this wait until tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid not. There are people here waiting for you.”

“People,” I repeat his word. “Okay, let me change, and I’ll be right in.”

“Gotcha.”

“Captain,” he waits for me to continue, “that sounds like trouble?”

“We’ll talk when you get here.” I toss the phone on the table by the door and head up to my bedroom.

When I moved in, the first thing I did was hire contractors to gut the house and renovate it. The electrical needed to be redone in the entire house, and let’s not talk about the plumbing. The renovations went about eighty thousand dollars over budget, and then I decided to convert the garage into an apartment, thinking that if I needed to hire someone to watch Asa, they would want a private space. That took the rest of my spare cash.

I turn right as soon as I reach the top of the stairs and enter my bedroom. The big king-size bed in the middle and two side tables beside it fill half the room. The thick dark-gray comforter is rumpled from my waking this morning and not making my bed. The black sheets are half on the floor. I walk to the side and end up in my walk-in closet, grabbing a white shirt and a pair of dark-blue jeans. Tossing the uniform in the overflowing basket, I make a mental note to start a load of laundry tonight when I get back. I text Theo before getting into my car.

ME:

Hey, had to go back into the office for an emergency meeting. Can you get in touch with the girl and ask her to be on call for when I'm done?

I get into my truck and head to the station, the text coming in as soon as I park.

THEO:

Yeah, sounds good. She just got here, so she's in the shower. Let me know when you'll be home, and she'll come on by.

I grab my phone, putting it in my back pocket before I pull open the station door.

Cathy sits at the desk, her eyes coming up from her computer to look at me. "He's waiting for you." She motions with her head toward the hall that leads to his office. Cathy has been the front desk dispatcher for the last ten years. She makes sure this place runs smoothly and deals with everything.

"Is he in there alone?" I ask her, and she looks around.

"No, got company."

"Fuck." I nod at her as I walk to the rear of the building. The bullpen, where we all gather before shift, has about six desks, each assigned to someone. My desk is in the corner, and I swear, I spend maybe ten minutes of my shift sitting at it. The rest of the time, I'd rather be in my car patrolling. The door at the back of the room is closed and has the word

Captain across it. I look over to a couple of guys, who give me a chin-up as I knock.

“Come in,” Captain’s voice booms out. I turn the handle, pushing my nerves to the back.

He’s sitting behind his desk with his hands folded on top of it. The vein in the corner of his temple pulses. “Burke,” he says. “Come in.”

The two chairs facing his desk are occupied by a man with jet-black hair and a woman, both dressed in jeans, T-shirts, and work boots.

“Hey,” I say, looking at the guy who is closest to me. “I’m Burke.”

The guy gets up a bit from his chair to shake my hand. “Martinez.” He sits back down, and I lean over him to the woman.

“Johnson,” she states, reaching out her hand to shake mine. Her brown hair is on the top of her head in a ponytail. Her light-green eyes give me the once-over, and I turn to Captain.

“What’s up? I got here as soon as I could.”

“These are Detectives Martinez and Johnson,” he says, introducing them as if I didn’t just meet them. “DEA from Groveton.” Groveton is a larger town about an hour from us. “I’ll give the floor to Martinez.”

“Thank you. It’s come to our attention”—Martinez leans back in his chair and crosses his hands over his chest—“that we have drug runners using Highway 25.” That’s the big highway that runs north and south and has another highway that crosses it, going east and west. “They’re getting the drugs by boat right under the highway, unloading the goods, and then distributing them across nearby states.”

“It’s a great spot.” I look up at the map Captain has on the side wall. “They meet up in the middle, and they can get maybe ten, or if they are smart, twenty cars and have them distribute out in all different directions.”

“That’s what I think they’re doing. We’ve sent up a couple of nighttime drones, and from what we’ve collected, it’s just four cars now. But”—

Johnson looks at Martinez, and he nods at her, giving her permission to continue—“it seems to be increasing with each drop.”

“Do we know what it is?” I ask them.

“From what intel says, it’s a fucking mix of everything, from cocaine to Special K.” The date-rape drug has been making its way around more and more. We’re lucky it hasn’t hit our small town yet, but it’s only a matter of time. “We’ve been seeing a few strangers come into town, and we think they’re probably here to scope it out. I think it’s safe to say we know that we can cut off the small guys, but it doesn’t stop.”

“Okay, so what does this have to do with us?” I make eye contact with Captain, then he looks down.

“We’re looking for a couple of local cops to come in and help with the case,” Martinez says.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“We’re putting a team together to work on uncovering the full operation.”

“We think, if we get one of the guys, they might turn on each other,” Johnson shares. “Either way, in our conversation with Captain, he said you would be the best person for the job.”

I look at Captain. “You sure I’m the right person?” He just stares at me like he wants to punch me in the throat. He’s usually like that when I ask him dumb questions. We’ve been working side by side for the last twelve years, so we both know each other well. “Before I agree to this, I need to know what the hours are like. I’m going to be a single dad for a month. I need to know if it’s going to be more night or more day hours.”

“So far, we’re looking at mostly days. There might be some nights where we’re going to want to go to the scene and maybe put out a bit of heat.”

“I can do that”—I look at Captain—“if it’s okay with him.”

He nods. “My hands are tied. This request is coming from a couple of different agencies.” He looks at Martinez and Johnson. “There is a meeting tomorrow with all the other agencies. The two of us will attend, and hopefully we’ll get more answers then.”

“Sounds good,” Martinez says, getting up and shaking Captain’s hand, followed by Johnson, who also nods at me before she leaves the room.

I wait for the door to close behind them before I turn to Captain. “Mind sharing why we are getting involved in this?”

“Got a call this morning,” he starts softly, eyes down, “from our neighbors in Brownsborough. A couple of kids were brought into the emergency room after taking something. Most of them were passed out—no, not just passed out. They remembered nothing.”

“Fuck. How old?”

“Sixteen to seventeen.” I look up at the ceiling. “Kids were at the lake. One of the guys brought stuff that he got from someone. He says he doesn’t remember who.”

“What do they think it is?”

“We’re waiting for the results from the blood work, but we think it might have been Special K.”

“That could have been Asa and his friends at the park. Someone comes up to them . . .” I shake my head, not ready to think about the rest. “I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Go home. Get a good night’s rest.” I reach for the door to walk out. “Hire a fucking nanny,” he hisses. “Asa can’t tag along with us or you for this case.”

“No shit,” I retort, already pulling out my phone to call Theo. I hold my hand up for Cathy as he answers the phone.

“Hey,” I say. “I’m on my way home now, so she can come at any time.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her. She was waiting for your call.”

“Perfect.”

I GET HOME as the streetlights come on. Tossing my keys on the table, I check the kitchen to see what I'm going to eat for dinner. When I hear a car door slam, I shut the fridge and make my way down the hall to the front door. Peeking through the window, I see the same car I clocked coming into town this afternoon. The one I was about to pull over for speeding before I got a call out.

"No fucking way," I grumble.

When the doorbell rings, I pull open the door, ready to fire her before I even hire her. Instead, my mouth hangs open.

"Absolutely not," I snap, looking into the eyes of the woman who spilled her green shit on me when she walked out of the bakery.

"Is this a joke?" Her blonde hair is now pinned back away from her face. Her jean shorts and tank top are replaced with a yellow sundress; the top is tight and the bottom flows all around her.

"You," I spit at her.

"You." She folds her arms over her chest. "Mister-Smash-Into-Me-and-Then-Check-Me-Out-When-I-Walk-Away." Her voice is loud, and I glance next door where the neighbors are coming out to walk their dog.

"Come inside." I move away from the door, not wanting to have this conversation where people might hear. It's enough that the whole town was talking about my divorce when it happened.

She steps into the house, and I get a whiff of her vanilla perfume. "This is definitely nicer than where I thought you lived," she states.

My eyebrows pinch together. "What does that mean?"

"I pictured you living in, like, a forest"—she looks around then back at me—"under tree stumps, places like that." She holds out her hand. "I'm Finley." I look at her hand. "The gentlemanly thing to do would be to shake my hand and tell me your name."

“I didn’t get that memo,” I retort, reaching out instead of doing what I want to do, which is to put my hands on my hips. “You know, since I live under tree stumps and all.”

“I guess I was wrong.” She looks around at my house as our hands move up and down in a handshake.

“You came into town today. Clocked you going twenty miles over the speed limit.” I drop her hand.

“Um, are you sure that was me?”

“I remember the make and model of your vehicle.”

“I don’t own a one-of-a-kind vehicle,” she fires back.

“I bet if I checked, it would be the same license plate.”

She thinks about that for a moment. “Okay, well, did you clock that on radar or are you just assuming?”

“Does it matter? You weren’t going the speed limit. That means you’re careless with the way you drive.”

“That was one time.” She holds up her finger. “How do you know I wasn’t speeding to get away from someone? What if I had an emergency?” She throws up her hands. “You didn’t even check up on me. Way to protect the people.”

“Are you kidding me?” Her face is one-thousand-percent serious, leaving me speechless. The only thing going through my head now is: *I’m never going to find anyone*.

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CHAPTER FOUR

FINLEY

“Are you kidding me?” I gawk at him. “Is this how you interview everyone?” I don’t know if I’m asking him the actual question; words are just flying out of my mouth. “It’s no wonder no one wants to work for you.” Maybe pissing off your potential boss before you even interview for the job isn’t the best idea, but I just can’t help it.

“Are you kidding *me* right now?” He folds his arms over his chest, and that just makes him seem bigger than he is. And he’s already pretty fucking buff. I thought he was King Kong–shaped when he smashed into me, but I assumed it was because of his uniform. Now that he’s just wearing a T-shirt, I can tell he spends some time in the gym.

“I most certainly am not.” I mimic his stance by folding my arms over my chest, but I don’t think I’ll get the same reaction as he does. “How many interviews have you had?”

All he does is raise his eyebrows.

“That look right there means it’s a lot.” I grimace. “So I think it’s safe to say that you’re the problem and not everyone else.”

Again, I should tell my mouth to shut up. It almost feels as if, driving over the city lines, a brand-new person has emerged, and she’s not going to take any shit from anyone anymore. My whole life—with my parents, with my friends, and especially with my soon-to-be ex-husband—I’ve bitten my

tongue when I should have said something, anything. I stayed quiet and in the background, not ruffling any feathers.

“You know nothing about the other people I’ve interviewed, so you turning it around and pinning it on me—” I swear I see the vein at the side of his temple throbbing, and from the way his chest is heaving, he’s either really freaking pissed, or he’s turned on. I’m going to say that with the way his eyes are almost in slits, he’s pissed off.

“I’m not pinning it on you, per se,” I cut him off. “I’m just saying that maybe”—I shrug one shoulder—“perhaps, it wasn’t them who were the problem. And I may not have met your son yet, but I don’t think he would have been the problem either.”

“How do you even know that?” The scowl on his face comes out.

“He got 50 percent of his genes from his mother, so chances are in his favor.”

“You know, for someone who wants this job, you are not putting your best foot forward.” His jaw is tight.

I snort. “You basically attacked me when I walked in the room. You accused me of speeding, even though there is no evidence that it was me you saw. Unless you have a tape somewhere that we can replay?” He sighs and rubs his hands over his face. “I rest my case, your honor. Now, do you want to do this or do you want to say you failed again?”

He takes a second to think about what to say next, and my head screams at me to just turn around, walk out, and not bother with any of this. But let’s face it, I need to stay somewhere. Even though Collins and Theo have been super welcoming, the last thing they need is me crashing into their lives when they have just started dating each other. Talk about cockblocking.

“Fine,” he practically hisses, “come with me.”

Don’t say anything to change his mind, my inner voice screams at me. I literally could be on a beach somewhere or holed up in the fanciest hotel room, but I would be alone. At least here with this job, I’d be close to

Collins, and I'd also have something to keep my mind off the disaster that my life has become. "I'd love to." I clench my teeth after saying the words.

"I will save the tour for later." He looks over his shoulder at me as he walks down the hallway, and I take a second to look around. A white wooden table with one little lamp and a potted plant is right in front of what looks like an office. A big mirror hangs above the table. We pass a little entrance on the left with a white built-in shelf with three hooks in the middle, two jackets, and a couple of sweaters hanging. The bench under the hooks has a backpack in the corner, and there are three drawers under that, which are closed and probably hold their shoes.

Past the stairs that lead to the bedrooms, we enter the open floor plan, with the family room on one side and the kitchen/living room on the other. He turns toward the family room, and I take in the back wall, with a fireplace in the middle and two windows on each side. Above the fireplace is a black mantel and then a giant television. I'm not surprised in the least that he has such a big television; it takes up most of the wall. There are two white cabinets under each window, one of them holding a bunch of books and the other one looks like it holds decorations.

"Where would you like to sit?" he asks me when my eyes find the picture of his son on top of the cabinet.

I look at the long couch that seats three people and then at the love seats on each side. "I'm going to sit right here," I say, deciding on the love seat next to the frame. I want to say I did it because it's closest to the door, but it's to see the picture better. The big black square coffee table in the middle of the room holds three candles, and I have to wonder if they're just for show or if he actually lights them. Two remotes are casually thrown on top of the table as well.

"Then I'll sit facing you." He walks to the chair right across from me, sitting down. He puts his hand on the armrest and looks at me. I drink in his caramel eyes, taking a second.

“Shall we get started?” I ask him, nerves filling my body. My stomach feels like it’s spinning like a washing machine. My hands are getting all clammy and I hold them tightly in my lap.

“Sure,” he gives in. “Let’s start with the easy questions.”

“Let’s.”

“Can you describe your experience working with children of different ages?”

My head barks out a laugh. I have never really been around children, so this should be fun. “I like children of all ages,” I start, and then smile at him. “Although if I had to pinpoint my favorite age, it would be somewhere between seven and ten.” Collins did say Asa was eight, didn’t she?

“Why not older?”

Shit, balls, motherfucker. “I mean, I like those ages also. It’s just the older they are, the more—” . . . *like assholes they are*. “I just get along better with younger children.”

“Do you have experience with children who have allergies?”

Wait, that’s actually a thing? “Yes.” I nod my head while my brain screams at me: *Run out of the fucking house and just chalk it up to this entire thing being a bad idea*. “I mean, I would assume you would give me directions to make sure I know what to avoid and what to do if your son has a reaction. Everyone has different reactions. I only found out I was allergic to beer last year when someone handed me one with lime, and my nose started to get itchy. I thought it was just from being outside, but the next week I had fish and chips, and the same thing happened again. I thought I was allergic to limes, but when I asked them about it, they said there was no lime in the beer batter.” *You should really shut the fuck up right about now*. “Anyway, safe to say I’m not going to be giving your child beer.” I laugh nervously. “That has to be a plus one for me.”

He doesn’t reply to that. “Are you CPR certified?”

“Um,” I smirk at him, “I actually am. Bet you didn’t think so. But I got it last summer.” I pretend to brush the hair off my forehead. “Next question.”

He stares at me, clearly unsure of where to go from here.

“Have you ever been a nanny before?”

I sort of snort-laugh. “I have not.” I haven’t worked a day in my life. I leave that out. “However, I never back down from a challenge.” His head tilts to the side. “I mean, not that watching your son would be a challenge. It’s more of a learning experience . . . for a better term.”

“So we’re your guinea pigs?” His eyebrows go up.

“Everyone starts somewhere, don’t they?” When he doesn’t reply, I continue, “Like, did you not have a first day on the job?” Again, he just stares at me. “So you had to learn what you were doing. You probably weren’t good at your job on day one. You had to learn.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” Now he doesn’t give me a chance to answer him, he just hits me with another question. “What is your approach to discipline?”

“I’m going to have to discipline your child?” The words come out of my mouth before I can even stop them, and he just looks at me. “I mean, is it really my place to do that?”

“Well, you will be with him for the majority of the day, so yeah.”

“Right, and I’m assuming you are going to be the one who will give him the rules.”

“What if he doesn’t follow the rules?”

“Well, then I think maybe it should be good cop/bad cop.” I can tell the answer isn’t the right one. “I think the bigger question here is, why isn’t he following the rules to begin with?”

“Finley . . .” I can hear his frustration.

“I don’t even know your name, so I can’t call you anything.”

“Lincoln, but people call me Burke.”

“Well, people just call me Finley. Now, back to discipline.”

“You answered right the first time.”

Phew. “I thought so.” I try to sound sure of myself. “But I will, if you want. Or I can keep track of anything that comes up, and you can either discuss it with me or with him.”

“So you’re going to critique my parenting”—he leans back in the seat—“when you have no children of your own?”

“Well, I’m a human being, and I’m assuming your child is also human, so chances are he isn’t perfect. I mean,” I gesture to him, “case in point.”

“Okay.” He gets up. “This is really not going to work.”

Fuck! Get it back, get it back, get it back. “I mean, I’m sure you have lots of other candidates to pick from.” I get up too, trying not to freak out. “Collins and Theo said you had a Mrs. Larue here and that she made a great first impression.”

I can see from his face that he’s shocked I know about Mrs. Larue. The only reason I do is because Theo got a call from his cousin who knows someone. Let’s just say, news travels fast in a very small town.

“So, are those the only questions you have for me?” I don’t wait for him to answer. “I was also going to say that I will do the cooking and cleaning for you.” *What the fuck are you talking about?* my head screams at my mouth. *You have not cooked a day in your life. And you probably don’t know how to turn on a vacuum*. “But, well, you made your decision before you even gave me a chance.” I hold out my hand. “It was nice to meet you, Lincoln.” I shake my head to correct myself. “Burke. Whatever you want to be called. I’m sure you’ll have better luck with Mrs. Larue.”

He looks at me and then at my hand. “Everything is telling me not to hire you.”

I drop my hand and roll my eyes. “Why? I’m really curious. Why is that? I answered your questions honestly.”

“You did,” he admits.

“I even threw in cooking and cleaning, and I’ll even do laundry if you want . . .” *Stop fucking talking before you offer him other things you know nothing about*. “. . . just to prove to you I can do this job.” I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I cannot do this job. I’ve never been around kids in my whole life, well, not since I was one.

He stares at me, and I look at his plump lips and almost-perfect face, minus the little scar at the side of his right eye. “Okay, if you want to be stubborn and not give me the job to prove your point, you win.” I nod. “Good day.”

I’m about four steps into my march out when he snaps, “Fine.” I turn around to look at him. “You can have the job.”

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CHAPTER FIVE
LINCOLN

“Fine,” I snap at her retreating back.

Her hips stop swaying side to side as she slowly turns around. Her blue eyes look bright, as if she knows she won this fucking game, which might irritate me more than anything. But I have to be honest with myself. There was nobody else, and I think she knew that.

“You can have the job.” I can’t even believe the words are coming out of my mouth.

She folds her arms over her chest, and her head tilts to the side. I think she is trying to hide a smirk, but the look on her face tells me she knows that I know she won.

“Hmm.” She taps her finger on her chin. “Now I don’t know if I want it.”

I look up at the ceiling and close my eyes. “It’s going to be a long month.”

My phone rings, and I untuck it from my back pocket to see it’s Maggie calling. “Yeah,” I grunt, putting my phone to my ear.

“Hey, Burke.” I can count on one hand how many times she’s actually called me by my first name.

“Yeah?”

“Listen, something came up, and I have an emergency I have to take care of with Tim.” Tim is the guy she cheated on me with, her future husband. “Can I drop off Asa in ten minutes?”

“Yeah.”

She laughs. “Do you know any other word?” she asks. “Asa, let’s go,” she yells for him. “See you in a few.”

“See you then.” I hang up. “Good news, you’re about to meet Asa,” I tell Finley. Her eyes widen, and I see she’s nervous. “You would have had to meet him eventually. While we wait, I can show you where you will be staying.” She nods, and I motion with my head toward the back door. “Follow me.”

I walk through the kitchen toward the mudroom, pulling open the door that leads to the garage.

“Hey, did Theo tell you how Collins and I met?”

“He said something about a podcast.”

“A *true crime* podcast forum.”

“Okay?”

“Just letting you know, I’m not going to be tricked into following you down into a cellar where you can keep me hostage for years.”

“Theo knows where you are and that you’re meeting me.”

“I’ve watched enough *Dateline* to know you can tell them I left here. Meanwhile, I’m downstairs chained up to the cement walls.”

“Okay, rule number one . . .” I hold up my finger at the bottom of the steps while she stands on the second step and looks down at me. “No watching *Dateline* with Asa or bringing up episodes or true crime podcasts.”

“Why not?” she gasps. “That’s doing a disservice to him.”

“What? How is that a disservice to him?”

“Well, for one, he could learn what to look for when he comes face-to-face with a psycho.” I look at her and all I can think of is, *What the fuck did*

I get myself into? “Two, he can learn what questions to ask to make sure he’s not with a psycho. What do you think about us watching *Intervention* together?”

“Excuse me?”

“It could show him what can happen to him if he does drugs.” She shrugs. “It’s a valuable lesson. You should think about it.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?”

She rolls her lips, trying not to laugh. “I mean, I didn’t mean to fuck with you, but then I just . . . It’s kind of fun.” She takes the two steps to the bottom. “Let’s see where I’ll be living for the next month, Lincoln.”

She walks to the side door of the garage and turns the handle. “This is me escaping and not being left in a room with you, not knowing if you have a cellar or not,” she throws over her shoulder. “See? Something else Asa could learn.”

She walks out, and I put my hands on my hips and look up at the ceiling. “God help me,” I groan before I rub my hands over my face.

“Um.” She sticks her head back in the garage. “Are you coming or not?”

“Yeah.” I walk out of the house and past her toward her apartment. “Welcome to your home for the next month.” I press the code and push open the door, waiting for her to step in before me. “Theo just finished it a couple of days ago, so if you see anything you need to have changed or that isn’t working, just tell me and I’ll have him come down and take a look at it.”

She steps in and looks at the couch, then walks to the back of the room, where the kitchen is. “This is nice,” she says, walking to the bedroom and sitting on the unmade bed, bouncing up and down. “Solid.” She glances at the two open closet doors. “Is there a bathroom in here?”

“Of course,” I say instead of fucking with her. “It’s in that corner.” I point back to the kitchen and the closed door. “It’s a stand-up shower since

the space is so tight. If you want to use a tub, you can use the one in the house."

"I think I'll be good"—she walks past me and to the bathroom—"but then it all depends on you. If you give me a hard time and I want to drown myself, I might have to borrow your tub."

I can't help but bark out a laugh.

A car door slams.

"Asa's here," I say before walking out of the apartment and toward the driveway.

Maggie comes out of her side of the SUV and looks at me, then her eyes go over my shoulder to Finley. Her eyebrows rise.

"Dad," Asa calls, running to hug me around my waist. His caramel eyes are a mirror of my own, and I smile at him before bending to kiss the top of his head. "You got taller in a day. I have to bend less," I tell him, and he snorts. "You got your things?" He nods.

"Thanks for taking him," Maggie says to me, but her eyes keep going to Finley. "Is that your—" She points to Finley.

"That would be the new nanny," I inform her. "Asa," I look down at him, "meet Ms. Finley."

She smiles at him and holds out her hand. "Asa, I've heard so many good things about you and so many stories from your dad."

My mouth opens at this because we literally didn't even talk about him.

"You did?" He enthusiastically shakes her hand. "Did he say I was cool?"

She *pfft*s. "He said you were way cooler than he was—"

"Hi," Maggie cuts in to the conversation. "I'm Maggie. I'm Asa's mom."

Finley looks at her, and I can see right away she's put on a different persona than she had with me; it's written all over her face. "Hi, Maggie,"

she says, her tone dripping with professionalism, “it’s a pleasure to meet you.” They shake hands.

“So, how long have you been a nanny?” My neck goes tight because Maggie is asking her questions like this instead of trusting me with picking someone.

“Oh, years,” Finley replies.

“Okay, I didn’t eat yet, did you?” I say and look at Asa, who nods his head.

“I could eat again,” he states.

I laugh, putting my hands on his shoulders. “Shocking,” I retort. “Do you want me to drop him off before I go to the station?” I ask Maggie.

“Yeah, that should be fine.” Her eyes go to Finley again, as if she wants to say something else.

“Let’s go inside,” I say to Asa, motioning with my head. “You and Ms. Finley can get to know each other.”

“Cool.” He looks up at Finley. “Did you see my room yet?”

“I did not,” she answers. “Your dad was showing me my room first. Have you seen my room?” He shakes his head. “It’s cool.” I notice she uses the word he just used. “Want to check it out first?” Asa runs ahead of her. She smiles at Maggie. “It was nice to meet you,” she says before turning around and heading into her apartment.

“How old is she?” Maggie asks right away.

“Not sure. Pretty sure it’s discriminatory to ask someone their age,” I reply, running out of patience. “I’ll drop him off tomorrow on my way to the station.”

“Is she even old enough to take care of a child, being one herself?” she huffs out. “Does she even have experience?” When she sees that I’m not giving anything to her, she rolls her eyes. “Fine,” she snaps, turning and storming away from me.

I stop watching her when the apartment door opens, and Asa runs out. “I’m going to go pick up my things in my room.” He speeds by me and into the house. I chuckle at him as Finley follows, closing the door behind her.

“Soo,” she drawls, “that’s the ex-wife?” She watches Maggie’s SUV driving away.

“Yup.” I let out a heavy sigh.

“She’s pretty.” She folds her arms over her chest.

“Yup,” I agree.

“She’s also a bitch.” I look over at her. “The walls are not soundproof.” She takes a deep inhale. “I’m twenty-seven, by the way. So I’ve been out of high school a while.”

“Good to know. Do you want to stay and eat?”

“No, but I’m going to because if she comes back, I want her to know she didn’t run me off.”

“So you’re staying here to spite her?”

“Not fully. I’m also staying because I know it’ll probably annoy you, and that’s now my second favorite thing to do.”

“What’s the first thing?”

“Sleep. Do you know how exhausting it is being this perfect?” She tries to hide her smile, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Ms. Finley,” Asa calls, coming out of the back door, “you can come in now.”

“Perfect.” She claps her hands. “Okay, you saw my room. It’s time to see yours.”

I follow her into my house but stop at the fridge to take out the marinated steak I prepped this morning, thankful I got three instead of just one.

Asa comes running down the stairs. “Dad,” he calls, “she’s never played UNO.”

Behind him, Finley shrugs. “I’ve never had the opportunity. But in my defense, he’s never played Suck the Well Dry.”

“That’s not a real game.” Asa looks over at her.

“It is. My grandmother taught me, and we would play for hours. So today we learn UNO, and later I’ll bring a deck of cards and teach you Suck the Well Dry.”

“Fine,” he says to her, “even though it’s not real.”

“I’m going to grill the steaks and veggies,” I tell them.

Asa walks out the door before me and goes to the table on the deck. “Come on, Ms. Finley,” he urges, and she follows and sits down facing him. He takes the cards out of the box as he explains the rules to her.

“Okay, but can we do a test run?” Finley asks him. “Like, not a real game, more of a practice to see if I get the rules?”

“Fine,” he huffs out, “but after that, it’s on, and if you lose, you lose.”

“Got it.” I turn the grill on as Asa deals out the cards. “Okay, I’m going to go first because I’m a girl and it’s the gentlemanly thing to do to let me go first.”

“No,” Asa counters, “you go first because I shuffled. If you shuffled, it would be me going.”

“Whatever.” She looks at the card on the table. “This is a blue card, so I can put down any blue card I want, right?” He nods at her. “Okay, easy, here.”

“I don’t have a blue card,” he tells her, “but I have a four, so even though it’s yellow, I can still use it.”

The two of them play through the cards until she puts down her last card. “Ha!” She claps her hands. “I won.”

“No, you didn’t.” Asa smirks at her. “You didn’t say UNO”—she opens her mouth—“so you have to pick up two cards.”

She looks over at me, and I turn my head to avoid her. “Is he cheating?” She turns to him. “Are you cheating?”

“Nope.” He giggles and leans back in his chair. “Pick two, Ms. Finley.”

She begrudgingly picks up two cards. “Fine, your turn,” she huffs out.

He places a card down and then shouts, “UNO!”

“Not so fast,” she retorts. She puts down a Wild Draw Four card. “Now you have *cinco*.” She smirks at him, and for the first time, I think maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to hire her.

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CHAPTER SIX

FINLEY

I put my shirt in the bag and zip it closed before looking at the bed I just made. I know I didn't leave it the way it was when I got here. The pillows are out of whack, but at least I tried. Taking a deep inhale, I tell myself softly, "It's going to be fine."

Looking at the bedside table clock, I see it's just a little after 6:00 a.m. "I'm going to be exhausted by eleven." I grab my phone and type, *Do eight-year-olds nap?* in the search bar and read the response as I sit on the side of the bed. Well, it's not regular but not unheard of. I bounce my leg up and down when I hear the alarm coming from Collins's bedroom.

Now that they are somewhat awake, I get up to put my bag by the front door, then head to the kitchen and start a pot of coffee. I hear footsteps and look up to see Collins rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Good morning," she mumbles. I smile at her as I also start the kettle for the herbal tea she has in the morning. "How long have you been up?" She takes in my already dressed attire.

"I woke up at about four and tossed and turned for about an hour before totally giving up." I lean against the back counter as she slips onto a stool. "I'm really nervous."

"It'll be okay. And if you need anything, you can always call me. I start at three today, so I can always swing by before my shift."

“I think you have enough going on in your life,” I remind her. “I’ll be fine, and if I’m not, hey,”—I hold up my phone—“this has all the answers I need.” She laughs at me. “I should get going. The last thing I need is to be late on the first day of the job. He might fire me before I even start.”

“He’s not like that. He’s very kind and thoughtful.”

“Lincoln? The same guy who has the manners of a goat?” I shake my head. “Wait, I don’t know why I’m picking on goats.”

She snorts and then bursts out laughing. “He’s got a tough exterior. He’s been through a lot.”

I tilt my head to the side. “He’s not the only one, and I’m a delight to be around. Even though my soon-to-be ex-husband cheated on me since day one, and apparently only married me for my trust fund.”

“Ugh,” she groans. “I’m sorry he’s such a jerkface.”

“Wow, you really are taking not swearing in front of your child to a whole other level.” She leans back and puts her hand on her belly. “I don’t have any experience with children. I think the last person I knew who had a baby had cried the whole pregnancy because she thought she was going to get stretch marks. She kept asking if she should hire a nanny who was thirty years older than her so her husband wouldn’t get any ideas.”

“We really did grow up in two different worlds.” There is not an ounce of resentment in her tone, which just goes to show you what kind of person she is.

“Okay, so . . .” I say when the snap of the kettle sounds, letting me know it’s done boiling the water. Turning, I pour the water into her cup. “If I don’t come back here tonight, that means I survived *Jumanji* stage one.” I place the cup in front of her and then kiss her cheek. “Be good and tell Theo he’s the best.”

“He is.” She smiles so big it’s a wonder her cheeks don’t hurt. “I will.”

I take a deep inhale. “It somehow feels like it’s the first day of school, and I’m wondering if I’m going to be in a good class with the boy I like.”

“He is good-looking,” she agrees.

“Ewww.” My face does a grimace. “He’s really not.” *You are such a liar*. “Okay, I’m off. Godspeed, Collins.”

“Godspeed, Finley.” She holds up her cup. “You’re going to smash it.”

I laugh as I walk out of the house.

Just as I start the engine and reach for my seat belt, my phone starts to ring. My body is immediately on alert when I see it’s Davis calling me. My mouth fills with saliva, and I think I’m going to be sick. I start to shake as I let it ring until the voicemail picks up.

I know he hasn’t left a message when I see the text.

DAVIS:

Pick up the fucking phone and stop acting like the spoiled fucking brat you are.

I shake my head, wondering why he’s up at this time. He would usually start his day leisurely at around noon or early afternoon, because he would slink home at about 4:00 a.m. the next morning. Once I caught him, he stopped even trying to hide that he was cheating on me. What did he care? We were married, the deed was done, and I didn’t leave him on the spot—because it was my home—but he must have thought he could pretty much get away with anything.

DAVIS:

It’s time you came back home so we can talk about this.

I scoff at his message, pissed that he’s made me leave my home.

ME:

I will come back home when you leave my house. You don’t even want to be married to me. Why are you pushing this?

DAVIS:

I told you what you needed to do for me to leave.

ME:

Get the fuck out of here. We have a prenup. Why would I give you half my trust fund? I will never ever agree to that.

DAVIS:

You'll be sorry about that.

ME:

I'll be more sorry if I come back to you.

I block his number, take a screenshot of the texts, and send it to my lawyer.

ME:

Can you please see what we can do about this?

The only thing that Davis was a pro at, besides trying to screw me over, was schmoozing anyone. He literally could sell ice to someone who lived in an igloo. It made me think of the *Wizard of Oz* scene when the dog opened the curtain, and the wizard tried to hide his true appearance. I thought that I loved him, and I thought he loved me. I thought wrong. So very, very wrong. He was even in debt when we got married, but I was so in love with him that I didn't care. I just paid off the credit cards so we could start off fresh. The red flags were all there, I was just so blinded by the ruse that I didn't see it.

Putting the car in drive, I make my way over to Lincoln's house. I see lights on, so I know he's up. I mean, obviously, with a child, he would be up. I type, *What time does an eight-year-old wake up?* into my phone. *Around the time they need to be at school*, is the response. I skim the article. It recommends nine to eleven hours of sleep. Damn, I wish I were an eight-year-old kid.

I get out of the car and head to the front door before I change my mind. I think about ringing, but if Asa is still sleeping, I might wake him, so instead I knock lightly. I'll give him a minute. If he doesn't answer, I can always go to my apartment and drop my bag off now that I have the code. I

tap my finger on my leg, waiting. I hear footsteps and then the door opens, and I'm greeted by Lincoln dressed in black cargo pants and a black T-shirt tucked into the waist.

"Hey," he says, "come in."

"Sorry, I know you said come at seven thirty, but I was up and figured I might as well get the day started. If you want some alone time with Asa, I can go and put my bag away."

"No, it's fine. I was just making coffee." I follow him into the house. "Asa is still sleeping."

"Okay." There's a to-go cup on the counter. "That's fine, I guess I can . . ." I look around, not sure what I can possibly do since he's sleeping.

"You could just sit and wait for him to wake up, I guess." It sounds like he's in a rush. "You have my cell number," he pours coffee in his cup, "and I put some emergency numbers on the fridge."

"I mean, I think nine-one-one is the big one, right?" He doesn't laugh. "Wow, got it."

"You call me first and then work your way down the list."

"So if there is an emergency, I call you before I call nine-one-one?"

"Is it going to be like this all the time?" he asks me, turning the top of his insulated cup.

"I'm going to say yes to your question, but only because I don't know exactly what you're talking about, and it's better that you expect it and I not do it than the other way around."

"I can't get into this with you right now. I have to get going. I'll be gone all day."

"Well, that's usually what happens when someone goes to work."

His eyes narrow. "I won't be in the area," he clarifies between clenched teeth. "That's what I mean."

"Got it," I confirm, trying not to poke the bear so early in the morning. "I will wait for him to get up."

“Have him call me when he does.” He picks up his to-go cup. “Also, his mother will be calling in on his tablet. I think she said she’ll try to do it around nine our time.” I nod at him. “Call me if you need anything.” He walks out, shutting the door softly behind him.

“I will not be calling you if I need anything,” I tell the closed door. “I will be doing the opposite of that.”

I’m opening the cabinets to find a mug for coffee when I hear a thump. I’m about to rush upstairs, scared Asa fell out of his bed, when he comes down the steps, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His hair is sticking up all over the place.

“Good morning.” I smile at him, and he smiles back.

“Morning,” he mumbles, going over to the couch and face-planting. “Where’s Dad?”

“He just left. He wants you to call him.” I grab my phone and hand it to him. “You can use mine.”

He thumbs in his father’s number, which he must have memorized, and puts the phone to his ear. “Morning, Dad,” he says when Lincoln answers. “Yeah . . .” I can’t hear what Lincoln is saying. “Okay.” I look out the window. “Love you too.” He hangs up.

“So,” I ask him, “what do you do in the morning?”

“Watch television, eat breakfast.” He picks up one of the remotes. “Can I have cereal?”

“Um, yeah,” I reply, the mini freak-out that I would have to cook him breakfast is now gone. “Where do you keep it?”

He gets up off the couch and opens a side door, and I see it’s a walk-in pantry. Everything is organized and labeled. He grabs a box and walks into the kitchen for a bowl.

“So what do you want to do today?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “We can go to the park.”

“That sounds like a plan.” And really easy. “Why don’t you have breakfast, then we can head out to the park?”

He nods and sits in front of the television watching a video on some sort of building thing. At three minutes after 9:00 a.m., his tablet starts to ring.

“That’s Mom,” he mumbles as he answers it.

Maggie’s voice comes through, and I try not to look over and intrude on their conversation. I see that the sun is shining on her end and that she is wearing a sun hat. They have a quick call that lasts maybe five minutes, with Maggie doing all the talking and Asa just grunting out his answers. His eyes are on the television more than on his mother. She ends the call with “I love you.” He mumbles it back before he closes the tablet and tosses it to the side, his eyes never leaving the television screen.

He gets up, finally, at around 10:00 a.m. and looks at me. “Do I have to brush my teeth?”

“Um, yes,” I respond. “You should do whatever you think you would do if your father was here. What would he want you to do?”

“Brush my teeth and make my bed,” he sulks.

“Then let’s do that”—he nods at me—“and get dressed.”

“Got it.” He runs up the steps, and I wash the dishes in the sink. Not knowing where to put them, I turn them upside down on the counter to dry. My phone rings—Lincoln is calling.

“Hello.”

“Hey, it’s me.” I hear him walking on his end of the phone.

“Hey, me, how’s it going?” I roll my lips when I hear him mumble under his breath.

“What are you doing?”

“I just finished cleaning up.” I look around, thinking that was a good answer and half true since I did wash the dish and the spoon. “We’re going to go to the park.”

“Okay.”

“I can take him in the car, right? Like, my rights haven’t been revoked or anything?”

“Do you think you can abide by the laws?” he counters.

“You still haven’t proven it was me. Now, can I take him in my car? After, I was thinking we’d head into town and maybe have a milkshake or something.”

“If you promise—”

“Yeah, yeah,” I cut him off. “I promise I will be on my best behavior.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he deadpans, and I burst out laughing.

“Does he need like a special kid seat or something for the car?” I’m not sure if this is a test, so I beat him to the punch.

“No, he just got out of it.” He then snaps, “Okay, I have to go.”

“You called me,” I remind him, and he hangs up. “Goodbye,” I say to the phone that now has dead air.

Asa comes down the stairs in shorts and a T-shirt, wearing white socks. He heads to the door to grab his running shoes.

“I’m going to grab my soccer ball,” he announces as he runs out the back door and comes zooming in not a second later, the ball under one arm.

“Let’s go.” I open the door, and he walks out behind me. He presses the pound sign and the door locks.

I open the door to my car, but Asa says, “We can just walk. It’s not far.”

“Do you play soccer?” I ask him as we slowly make our way to the park.

“Only with my friends, not on a team. I play baseball, though.”

“Do you like it?’

“Yeah, it’s fun. Slow at times, but it’s fun when I’m on the field.”

“I get that,” I say as we round the corner, and I see the park.

He sees a couple of his friends and yells for them. “Can I go play?” he asks me. I nod my head, and he zooms away, dropping the ball on the grass and kicking it to his friends.

As the four of them run and kick the ball around, I sit on a park bench to watch them. Two other kids arrive with their mothers and run right past me.

“Wyatt,” the woman with a baby on her hip yells, “get back here and put on your sunscreen.”

He runs back and grabs the spray bottle from his mother. I sit up straighter as he sprays himself with it. My stomach roils when I look over at Asa. He’s the only one without a hat on his head, and I know, for sure, he definitely doesn’t have sunscreen on. I get up off the bench and walk over to the mother. “I’m so sorry, I know this sounds so strange”—she smiles at me—“but can I borrow some sunscreen for . . .” I point to Asa. “I forgot this morning.”

“Of course.” She hands me the bottle. I feel guilty that he could have gotten sunburned, and I would have been to blame.

“Asa,” I call, and he looks over at me. “Come here.” I motion with my hand, and he runs over.

“Okay, one, we didn’t put sunscreen on,” I tell him as I spray his arms. “Turn,” I instruct, spraying sunscreen on the back of his neck and even his ears. “Why didn’t you bring a hat?” He shrugs his shoulders as I spray every single inch of him twice, and he moves away from me.

“It’s too much,” he complains. “I’m good.” I shake my head when he runs away from me.

“You must be Finley,” the woman says. “I’m Harmony. I was helping Burke find a nanny when he told me about you. Wyatt and Asa are best friends.”

“Hi.” I hold out my hand, knowing by tonight the jig will be up. Lincoln will definitely fire me when he hears I forgot the most important thing a child needs to do when going out into the sun. He’ll figure out I know nothing about childcare. I take a deep inhale. “It’s nice to meet you.” I turn to look at Asa running and think that maybe it’s for the best.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

LINCOLN

“I’ll be right back,” Johnson says, walking out of the conference room we’ve been sitting in for the last four hours, going over different routes that each driver might take. Right now, we are up to fifty directions. That’s just too many, and it has to be dialed back down before we make even one move.

Seeing it’s almost 5:30 p.m., I pull up Finley’s number on my phone. The whole day, she’s sent me two texts. One to tell me they left the park and are eating lunch, and then another one saying they got home and would be playing cards.

ME:

I won’t be home for dinner, so it’ll only be the two of you.

I press send and then turn my phone over, looking out of the conference room to see four desks—one in each corner of the room—empty, the people who were at them probably out on a call or doing whatever they need to do. The whole team is undercover, including this office space, which has the name of an accounting firm on the door.

My eyes go back to the whiteboard as I look over the different routes, trying to eliminate some of them. I’m leaning back in my chair with my hand on the armrest, when the door slams as Johnson carries in a big brown pizza box.

“Sorry about the late night,” she says, putting the box down in the middle of the table. “It’s the only time the guy could come out and meet with us.” She walks out to the little staff kitchen they have set up and comes back with paper plates in one hand and two bottles of beer in the other.

“It’s all good,” I assure her, sitting up and grabbing a plate from her and then shaking my head at the bottle of beer as I look around. “Where is Martinez?”

“He went home for a bit. His wife just gave birth a couple of weeks ago.”

I nod my head. “Nice.” I open the box and grab a slice. “You have kids?”

She sits in front of me, opening the bottle of beer and takes a pull. “Nope.” She takes a piece of pizza. “Was married for ten years to a Marine. We grew apart. You?”

“I have a son, Asa,” I tell her. “Was married, but then she cheated on me.” She shakes her head as she takes another bite of her pizza. “Got remarried to the guy she left me for this weekend.”

“Well, at least you can move on.” She smirks at me, taking a pull of her beer.

“I guess so.” I grab the bottle of water that is in the middle of the table.

“How long ago did you guys get divorced?”

“On paper, six weeks ago.” She whistles. “I found out about them a year and a half ago.”

“Do you share custody?” I nod my head as Martinez comes waltzing in.

“Hey, you two,” he greets us. “Our informant called and told me he’ll be here in about twenty minutes.”

“Perfect,” I say. “I might make it home by the time my son goes to bed.”

When the informant arrives, his eyes dart all around, and he looks like he’s ready to bolt at any second. We don’t get much out of him because he

just started working for them. The only reason he's out on bail is because he took a plea deal with the stipulation that he give up information.

I walk out of there two hours later. "I'll see you tomorrow." Johnson says, walking out right after me. "Maybe we could have a drink after we get done?"

"Thanks"—I open my door—"but it's an hour to get home, and I just hired a nanny."

"Got it." She unlocks her own door. "Maybe next week, then?"

"We'll see."

She laughs. "Something a father would say." She gets into her car, and I get into my truck. The minute I do, I forget all about her.

My phone rings as I get onto the highway, and I look over at the center console screen, seeing Hudson's name. He's been my best friend since high school. The two of us joined the academy together. I went on to become a police officer, while he went on to become a firefighter. He's worked his way up through the ranks and is now a lieutenant.

Leaning forward, I press the green button. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," he snaps back, his voice filling the car from the speakers. "Where the hell have you been? I haven't seen you in a week."

"Yeah, I caught a case that's taken me out of town." I can't give him too many specifics.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, man. I meant to check up on you the day of the wedding, but work was crazy busy. How you doing?"

"It's been over for a while," I tap the steering wheel, "so I'm fine."

"Good. How's the new nanny?"

"So far, so good. I mean, it's been one day, and I didn't get any emergency calls."

"From what I heard, she's smoking hot."

I grip the steering wheel. "Who the fuck told you that?" I don't give him a chance to answer me. "Forget it, I don't want to know, and no, you can't

fuck my nanny."

Since he got his heart broken by his high school love, McKenna, when she left for college, he's been with no one serious. He's been playing the field ever since.

He laughs. "I wasn't going to fuck your nanny."

"Oh, I know you aren't. I'll kick your ass," I warn him. "I'm almost home. I'll give you a call tomorrow, and we can have lunch or something."

"Give my nephew a kiss for me." Even if he isn't a blood relative, he's Uncle Hudson to Asa. "Last time I kissed him, he wiped it off his face."

"I'll give him a high five, then." I chuckle. "Later."

I disconnect as I pass the town line, thinking about texting Finley to tell her I'll be home in a bit, but something stops me. I pull into the driveway at 8:45 p.m., later than I said I was going to be home. The porch lights are on, but the inside lights are off. I grab my phone and walk up the steps, thinking about how badly I want a fucking shower as I unlock the door.

I kick off my boots. The only light comes from the side table lamps in the family room and the television, dimly illuminating Finley on the love seat where she sat when I interviewed her. She smiles when she sees me, but my eyes go to Asa, who is on the couch sleeping, a blanket over his legs and his chest bare. His arm is over his head, and the remote control is beside him.

"Why is he sleeping on the couch and not in his bed?" I put my hands on my hips and turn back to her.

The smile is gone from her face, and her eyes are big. She gets up. "He fell asleep waiting for you." I can tell she's lying when she avoids looking at me.

"You can go now," I snap. "I've got it covered."

"See you later," she practically growls, walking past me to the mudroom.

“Why are you angry?” I want to bite my own fucking tongue. I should just let her go and be pissed by herself.

“I’m not angry.” She continues on her way out.

“Stop.” I glance over to see if I woke Asa. I didn’t. He could sleep through a tornado.

“What?” She turns and folds her arms over her chest. She’s still wearing the same clothes she wore this morning when she got here, a pair of light-brown linen shorts with a black sleeveless top that molds to her body.

“Why are you angry?” I ask her, and she just stares at me. “I know you’re angry, so you might as well just tell me.”

“Fine, I’m angry,” she admits. “Is that all you want from me?”

“No. I asked why you are angry.”

“Why am I angry?” Her voice is a lot calmer than mine would be if the roles were reversed and I was pissed at her. “Why do you think I’m angry, Lincoln?” My sister is the only person who calls me Lincoln. I didn’t know how much I’d like hearing it.

“If I knew why you’re angry, I wouldn’t be asking, would I?” I walk over to the kitchen and put my hands on the island separating us, stretching them out to the sides.

“You were gone all day. You came home and didn’t even ask me how our first day was. You just started picking on me.”

“I did not start picking on you. I just asked why he was on the couch.” I suddenly feel guilty that I didn’t ask her how their day was. She’s right, I just snapped.

“Same thing.” She shakes her head and turns to walk out of the room. “I’ll be here tomorrow, bright and early.” This time, she walks to the back door instead of the side door.

“I have to be in at eight,” I tell her.

“I will be here at seven thirty.” She doesn’t even glance back at me.

I grip the counter. “See you then.” I’m expecting her to slam the door, but instead she closes it softly, probably so as not to wake up Asa.

All I can think is: *Fuck, she’s hot, way too hot to be a fucking nanny*. My cock stirs in my pants, and I look down. “Simmer down, man, she’s off-limits.” And I’m pretty sure, after tonight, she wouldn’t save me if I were bleeding on the side of the road.

I follow her outside, and she stops right before she gets to her door. “What?” she snaps, her voice louder now that she’s away from Asa.

“Nothing.” I put my hands in my pockets to hide the semi hard-on I have for her. “I was just making sure you made it to your place safely.”

“It’s literally ten steps from your house. You are outside because you think I would have left, or better yet, I might key your car. But I didn’t. You want to know why?”

“Because vandalizing someone’s property is illegal?” I don’t know why, but fighting with her gives me life. It irritates the fuck out of me, but it’s also fun as fuck.

She *pfft*s at me. “That isn’t why.”

“Then why?”

“Could be a whole bunch of reasons. Off the top of my head, it might be because you would win.” She moves into the light, and I can see her blue eyes a bit. “You would know that you got to me, and I would rather eat warm sushi that has been festering in the sun than ever admit that you got to me.”

“You just admitted it,” I point out.

“I didn’t admit anything.” She takes another step toward me. “Now, I’m going to go and take a shower because I’ve been working for the past fifteen hours, and I didn’t even get a ‘hello’ or ‘how was your day?’ I got nothing. That’s on you.” She points at me. “And I only have about ten hours before I have to see you again. During that time, I don’t want to even think about you.” She pivots and opens her door.

“Have a nice night,” I say softly.

“No,” she snaps, her back to me. “It’s too little, too late to be a nice fucking guy. You can’t change it now.”

I laugh silently. “It’s never too late to be nice.”

She tosses a glare at me before slamming the door behind her.

“Yup, she fucking hates you.” I shake my head and go inside to Asa, locking the back door.

I turn off the television and notice she forgot her cell phone. I pick it up from the table and walk back outside. I knock on her door and wait for what feels like a minute, then knock again.

The door whips open, and she’s standing there with her hair wet, dripping all over the floor, a big white towel loosely wrapped around her. She’s glaring at me again. “Did I not just say I don’t want to talk to you for ten hours?” she snaps. “It’s been ten minutes.”

I hold up her phone. “You forgot this.”

She snatches it out of my hand. I’m so taken aback by her answering the door in a towel, wet from the shower, I don’t even have time to hold it tighter.

“Ten hours.” She slams the door in my face.

I blink twice. “Way too fucking hot to be a nanny.”

I turn and walk back into the house, locking the door once again and going over to Asa. I pick him up from the couch, and his eyes open.

“Dad,” he mutters, “where is Finley?”

“She went home. Did you have a good day?”

“Hmmm,” he mumbles as I carry him upstairs to his bedroom. I put him in his bed and cover him. “She’s really nice.” He turns on his side and then starts snoring.

“Yeah,” I admit, “she really is nice.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

FINLEY

I slam the door shut and tiptoe back to the shower, trying not to slip and break my head or my hip while I do it. The towel slides from around me as I step back into the water, letting it rain all over me. I spent the better part of today outside with Asa, keeping him busy. We stayed at the park until lunchtime. When the other kids were going to their houses, I got flustered thinking about what to make him, or what I couldn't make him, so we went to the bakery and had some sandwiches.

Dinner was another story. We went to the supermarket, and I grabbed a frozen pizza and one of those salad kits. Asa had to show me how the oven worked. I blamed it on it being my first time with that oven, and he fell for it. I read the pizza directions like my life depended on it, checking every two to four minutes to make sure it wouldn't fucking burn. It took longer than forty-five minutes to cook because I kept opening the oven door. After I took out the pizza, Asa told me I could have turned on the light in the oven. I tried not to glare at him, but he laughed at me anyway.

I thought I did an amazing job today. I even made him take a shower, and after, he was just lounging on the couch. How was I supposed to know he had to go to bed at a certain time?

I turn the water off and wrap my hair up in the semi-wet towel I snatched when I heard knocking at the door. I grab a fresh, dry towel to

wrap around me and walk out to my bedroom. The shades are already closed, and I moisturize and pull on shorts and a tank top. My phone rings, and I rush out to the living room to answer. Collins's name flashes on the screen.

I put her on speaker. "Hello."

"Hey, how was today?" she asks softly.

"It was long," I huff out, pulling the towel out of my hair. "I thought I was doing a great job. And then Lincoln came home and basically told me I wasn't." The sting of tears threatens, which makes me pissed that I'm letting him get to me.

"What do you mean he told you that you weren't doing a great job?"

"He came in and asked why Asa was on the couch." I tell her what happened. "Like, how am I supposed to know that you want him in his bed? I thought he would be happy to see his son after a long day."

"So, what did we learn on day one?" I can hear the smile in her voice.

"Well, we learned I need to ask him what time Asa needs to be in bed, and that Lincoln is a jerkface." She bursts out laughing as I spray my leave-in conditioner and comb it through my hair.

"Well, tomorrow is another day." I can hear she's tired.

"When are you going to stop working so many hours?" I pick up my dirty clothes from the floor. "You know you need double the sleep." Turning off the bathroom light, I go to my bedroom.

"How would you know that?"

"Theo told me." I try not to laugh when she groans.

"I'm fine." I hear chatter on her end of the phone. "Listen, I have to go. I have a call. But I'll call you tomorrow when I wake up."

"Be safe," I tell her, and she disconnects. I put my clothes in the laundry basket in the closet and slip under the covers. I prop two pillows behind me and open my phone, going straight to the search bar. "What to do with an eight-year-old boy?"

The circle thing shows me it's loading the answers. "Let's see what you got." I skim the results. "Okay, outdoor adventures like biking. I can do that. I wonder if Lincoln has a bike?" I open up my notes app, typing: *Questions to ask Asa's dad. Do you have a bike?* I open the browser again. "Camping. That is a fuck no. Never in my life will I ever do that. Or we could build a model rocket." I snort-laugh, pulling up the notes app. I picture Lincoln's face when I ask him in the morning, "Can I build a model rocket?"

I'm about to go back to the browser when I hear rustling coming from right outside. My head turns toward the window, and I hear it again. I sit up in bed, listening, not sure if it's a normal sound since it's my first night here.

When I lie back down, I hear it again. I turn on the light on the side table, throw back the covers, and walk to the window. My hands shake as I move the curtain to the side. I don't know why I'm expecting eyes to be looking at me. All I see is darkness. I let the curtain fall back in place and get back in bed.

The noise starts again. It could be the rustling of the trees. I get back up, go to the front door, and open it. It's literally what they tell you not to do, what all the scary movies warn you about. I turn on the flashlight on my phone.

"Hello?"

A gust of wind blows through. I step out and look around the yard. All the lights in the house are off. "Get your ass back inside and lock the fucking door," I tell myself. I go back in, slam the door, and lock it. Then I run back to my bedroom and jump back into my bed.

I turn off the light and lie back, pulling up my browser again. I was exhausted ten minutes ago; now I'm wired, listening to every single creak from outside. I turn off my phone, keeping it in my hand as I look over at

the window. I don't know what I'm looking or listening for, but four hours later, I'm still wide-awake.

WHEN THE ALARM rings the next morning at 7:15 a.m., my eyes slowly peel open. I moan as I shut it off. I get up with my eyes still closed. I've never brushed my teeth with my eyes closed, but then I've never had to set my alarm to get up to go to work. I've set alarms for school or to catch a flight, but never for work.

I rinse out my mouth and then cup my hands under the water and wash off my face before pinning my hair on the top of my head. I pull on a pair of loose brown shorts, my white bra, and a white tank top. "Does this say I'm a nanny or a babysitter?" I ask my reflection in the mirror. "Maybe put a shirt on." I slip on my long-sleeved button-down linen shirt before sliding my feet into my Birkenstocks.

My alarm rings again to let me know it's time to go. I walk out of the apartment and am five steps from the back door when I think maybe I should walk to the front. I'm about to turn around when the back door opens.

"Morning," Lincoln greets. He's dressed pretty much the same as he was yesterday, in black cargo pants with a black shirt.

"Hmm." I walk up the steps, feeling like a zombie. He backs up into the house, and I smell coffee. "Coffee," I whisper, heading to the kitchen and opening the cupboards to look for a cup. I find one right beside the coffee maker, pour some in, and smell it. "Ahhh," I sigh.

"So, not a morning person?" he asks me.

"I need coffee in me before I talk to you." I pull open the fridge, find the milk, and add it to my cup.

He pulls out his stool, sitting down with his own cup in front of him.

"Is Asa up?" I ask.

He shakes his head, and I take a sip of the coffee. “So can I talk now?” he asks jokingly. “Or do you need two sips first?”

“I need about two cups before I can deal with you.” I look over at the clock on top of the stove. He probably has to leave soon. “But I don’t think we have the time, so we might as well speed through it.”

“Speed through what?” He sips his own coffee.

“Well, you really didn’t tell me anything yesterday before you left. I mean, you just grunted out a couple of words.”

“‘Grunted out a couple of words,’” he repeats.

“Yes, like *Emergency here. Call me*.” I sound robotic.

He laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t sound like that.” I raise my eyebrows. “Okay, let’s get to it.”

“Right. Okay, so what time does Asa have to be in bed?” I put the cup down beside me and take out my phone.

“Yesterday was an exception. I’ll be home earlier today, before he has to go to bed.”

“Unless you’re scaling walls and saving lives and can’t come home on time. The hours of criminals are not nine-to-five.”

“Okay, if I’m not home by eight, max eight thirty, he should be in bed.”

“And if he says he wants to wait up for you, I tell him you don’t want to see him. Got it.” I nod, looking down at my phone. I like that he’s grunting and growling at the same time. “Bike riding. I’m assuming he has a bike, or no?”

“He has a bike,” he confirms. “He also has a helmet that he has to wear on the bike.”

Shit, that is good information, but I’m not about to have him think I wouldn’t have made him wear the helmet. “Obviously, I wasn’t going to let him go without it.” I roll my eyes and put “helmet” on the line next to “bike.”

“While he’s on the bike, where are you going to be?” he asks me.

“Tanning,” I deadpan. I’m expecting him to growl at me, but instead he chuckles. “What do we think about model rockets?” I’ve earned myself a glare. “So that’s a no.”

“That’s a no.” He gets up, and I don’t know why, but something feels off about him doing that. “What else do you have on the list?” He walks past me and puts his cup in the sink.

“Those were the only two things I had.” I put my phone down on the counter. “I will let you know if I add anything else.”

“When he rides his bike, you can use mine. Asa can show you where everything is.” I look up and meet his eyes. “Can you have him call me when he gets up?”

“Yeah.” I turn my head and pick up my coffee cup.

“I’m going to go and give him a kiss goodbye.” He walks to the stairs as I head to the front door and step out onto the porch. There’s a paper flipping under my windshield wiper.

“Shit, did I get a parking ticket?” I walk down the steps, looking for any parking signs. The paper is yellow and folded in half. My stomach roils as I pull it out from under the wiper. I open it and in the middle, in red ink, is written:

Reconsider coming back home now.

“Oh, my God.” My hands shake as I look right and left to see if anyone is watching me. The street is deserted.

The door slams shut, and I look up to see Lincoln with his sunglasses on, hiding his eyes.

“Was wondering where you went.”

I rush to ball up the note in my hand. The last thing I want him to know is that I have an ex harassing me while I watch his child.

“What’s in your hand?”

“Just a flyer for tires,” I lie. “Check and see if they left one on your windshield.”

He glances at his truck. “They didn’t.”

“Must just be because I’m parked on the street.” I walk around the front of the car, farther from him. “Anyway, I have to go inside. I don’t want my boss to think that I left his son alone. I’ll have him call you.” I keep my head down as I run up the steps and into the house. I close the door behind me, then lock it.

“Go to hell, Davis,” I mumble. I rip the note up and shakily toss it in the kitchen trash can. “Motherfucker.”

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CHAPTER NINE
LINCOLN

“Hey.” I do a chin-up as I enter the station.

Cathy looks up from her computer screen. “Hey, Burke, how have you been?” She greets me with a smile. Before I can answer, the headset she’s wearing flashes red, and then the phone starts ringing. “Montgavin Emergency Department, how can I assist you?”

I move past her to the end of the hall, where the offices are. Two guys are on duty. “What’s up?” I walk over to my desk in the corner, tossing my keys and my phone on it.

“Look who it is.” Trevor leans back in his chair, his white coffee mug in his hand. He’s been with the department for the last two years and is trying to work his way out of traffic cop work and into something more. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going.” I sit down and boot up the computer on my desk while Captain comes out of his office, looks around, and barks out my name.

“Burke!” He motions with his head toward his office. I get up.

“Shut the door,” he says as soon as I step inside.

Closing the door behind me, I sit down while he waits, hands folded on his desk. “Get me up to speed,” he says.

“Not much to say. We’ve gone over the possible routes, but to be honest, there are so many that it’ll take more daytime hours to cut it down. I

think the only thing that will help us is a tip."

He nods. "You think there's a tip in this town?"

I take a deep inhale. "Not sure, I could ask around." I put my ankle on my knee. "I was going to spend today meeting up with a couple of our sources."

"You going to be okay going out there alone?" he asks, worry on his face.

"Yeah, I think so. If you want, I can take someone, but then we would have to fill them in." He looks out the window to where a couple of the guys are lingering.

"I want you checking in hourly," he instructs. "Either with Cathy or me, but I want a check-in."

"Got it." I stand and head to the office door. "See you later. I'm going to try and get home at a decent hour tonight." He nods.

I put my truck keys in my desk drawer before going back to the front desk. "I need a car," I tell Cathy. She takes a set of car keys from her own drawer and hands them to me. "I'll be checking in hourly," I inform her, and her eyes widen.

"You really pissed him off." She snickers. "Hourly is a big deal."

I shrug, not willing to give her more information than I should. I grab the keys and head outside to the fenced area, waiting for the gate to open before walking over to the car. When I get behind the wheel, my phone rings.

"Hey, my boy," I answer.

"Hey, Dad," Asa mumbles, and I can tell he just rolled out of bed.

"How did you sleep?" I ask, annoyed that I haven't been there when he woke up for the last two days.

"Good." He sighs, and I wonder if he's lying on the couch while he's on his tablet.

“I’m going to be home early tonight, and we’ll spend some time in the tree house.”

“Really?” His voice perks up.

“You bet. I’ll call you later and check up on you.”

“Okay, bye, Dad.” He disconnects, and I put the phone in the cupholder before pulling out of the parking lot. I make my way to the bakery first to grab myself a to-go coffee and then head to the outskirts of town.

I pull up to a house known to be where you go to get things you shouldn’t be getting. I park in the driveway and can hear a dog barking. The front lawn has seen better days, that’s for sure. The side of the house has two cars that look like they haven’t been able to start in a while. They are both dust-covered, and one of the black one’s tires lies on the ground. The front steps creak under my boots, and the light on top of the doorbell turns green.

“You are being recorded,” an electronic voice warns when the light turns red.

“Good,” I say, pressing the bell and knocking at the same time.

The dog’s barking gets louder as I hear movement behind the door. “Who is it?”

“Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. Open the fucking door.”

The lock clicks, the door opens a bit, and a man’s head peeks out with one eye closed. “Good morning, Officer.” He winces. “What can I do for you?”

“I have a couple questions to ask you.” The dog behind him pushes out to smell my feet, tail wagging. “Is this your guard dog?”

“Supposed to be. He sucks at it.” I can smell marijuana coming out of his place. His blue basketball shorts ride low on his hips, and the white sleeveless tank top he’s wearing has what looks like pizza sauce on it.

“You going to invite me in? Or are we going to have this conversation on your front porch so everyone can see you talking to a cop?”

“Your truck is in my driveway.” He folds his tattoo-covered arms over his chest. “They’re already talking.”

I nod. The dog lies down beside me for a nap. “Word on the street is some new players are running things over on Highway 25.” I see a flicker in his expression. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

He shakes his head slowly. “Nope, not a thing.”

“Right. Hypothetically, if someone wanted to talk to someone who does know, where would they go?”

“Hypothetically”—he looks right and left—“they might ask Randy.” I know who he means. He’s another player a town over.

“You going to give him a heads-up?” I put my hand on the chipped black railing.

“A good friend would.”

“Are you a good friend?”

“I was a better one before he tried to get with my girl when I was doing a month in jail.”

“Okay. I’ll let you get back to sleep.” I turn and head down the steps. The dog watches me, tail wagging slightly, before rising and going back inside. The door is slammed shut, lock snapping into place, before I even make it to the sidewalk.

I SPEND four hours trying to track down Randy, then three hours waiting for him to come home, to no avail. I finally go back to the local strip club after 4:00 p.m. The dim lights inside are a stark difference from the outside sunlight. A woman onstage is going around the pole, and ten people are scattered at the tables. Randy’s in the corner getting a lap dance.

A waitress approaches me with a brown tray in her hand. “Can I—”

“Nope,” I cut her off, passing her and stopping in front of Randy. “Don’t you have a job?” I ask him.

He looks at me and then looks up at the ceiling. “I’m off today.” I know it’s a lie because I went to where he’s supposed to work and they told me they fired him two months ago. Something his parole officer would know if he actually did his job.

“Got a couple questions for you,” I say, and the woman looks over her shoulder at me.

“I don’t have any answers for you,” he retorts.

I look at the girl and do a motion with my head to scram. She takes the hint and quickly gets away from him.

“I paid for her to dance for me.”

“The faster you answer my questions, the faster you can get back to whatever you’re doing.” He leans back in his chair. “What do you know about the new people in town running Highway 25?”

He stares at me. “Nothing.”

“See, that’s how I know you’re lying. You weren’t even shocked about it. Anyone who didn’t know anything would be defensive.”

“Why are you busting my balls?”

“I don’t want anything to do with your balls. Tell me what I need to know, and I’ll be on my way.”

“I don’t know anything,” he hisses, looking around.

“I can wait while you think it over more.” I start to pull out a chair.

“Fine, okay. If it gets you off my back, I may know a guy who might know something.”

“Call him,” I order.

He sighs and pulls out his phone, careful to hide the screen from me as he dials. “It’s me, call me back.” He stuffs the phone in his pocket.

“What’s his name?”

“I’m no snitch. He calls me back, I’ll tell you.”

I check my watch. It’s just after 5:00 p.m. “I’ll be right back.”

I'm squinting as I step outside and dial Finley's number. She picks up after two rings.

"He's fine," she answers. "He's in the tree house. He said I can't go in there because no girls are allowed."

I laugh. "Okay, well, can you tell him that I'll be home later than I thought, but when I get there, we'll spend time in the tree house?"

"I will relay the message," she confirms. "Look at that now, I'm a secretary."

"Bye, Finley."

"Bye, Lincoln." She hangs up on me.

Back inside, Randy already has another lap dance going. I take a seat near the door and wait.

After two hours of nothing, I get up. "Call him again," I tell him, and he sighs.

"I've been calling him every ten minutes since you've been here."

"Then one more isn't going to bother you," I snap back.

He dials, puts the phone to his ear, then hangs up. "Went straight to voicemail."

"Okay, here's what's going to happen. You're going to set up a meeting with him."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I have no problem going to your parole officer and letting him know that you've been out of your job for two months." He groans. "You text me the time and place, and I'll be there." I stare him down. "Don't make me come find you again."

"I'll set it up," he assures.

I DON'T BOTHER CALLING Finley as I make the one-hour drive home. When I finally arrive, I see light coming from the kitchen.

“Hey,” I greet them. Asa’s on the couch, looking exhausted. “Sorry I’m late, buddy.”

“That’s okay.” He rolls to his feet. “I’m going to go to bed.” He yawns.

“We spent most of the day biking,” Finley explains from the chair beside the couch. “Wyatt, Lucy, and Sage joined us, and we rode for about four hours.” I look at her, surprised she knows his friends’ names.

I kiss the top of his head, which smells like shampoo, so I know she made him shower too. “I promise you tomorrow I’ll be home early.” He hugs me around the waist before heading toward bed. “Love you, buddy.”

He mumbles at me. “Night, Finley.” He drags his feet up the steps, and I look at her.

“Night, Asa,” she replies softly, “see you tomorrow.”

I wait until he’s upstairs before I ask, “Today was good?”

She nods, getting up. “It was nice. They have a lot of energy.”

I head to the kitchen and notice the empty stove.

“You didn’t make dinner?” I try not to snap at her as I turn. She’s standing across the island from me.

“I did for your son, and he ate,” she replies tensely. “When I said I’d cook and clean, I meant I’d cook and clean for Asa, but if you want me to cook for you—”

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “I shouldn’t have expected you to cook for me. It’s been a long day of doing practically nothing. Did you eat?” I pull open the fridge to see if there is anything.

“I ate a bit with Asa, but I was going to figure something out when he went to bed.”

“I’ll throw a couple of burgers on the grill. Want to stay?”

“I could eat a burger,” she agrees.

I take out the frozen patties and put them on a plate, adding salt and pepper to them. “We can sit outside,” I tell her, gathering everything and heading out to start the grill.

“You get in the tree house yet?” I ask her as she sits on the top step, watching me. Her face shows that she’s also exhausted.

“I kept trying, but it is still a girl-free zone. Lucy and Sage tried too and were told the same thing.”

I laugh as I add the burgers to the grill. “I’ll have a talk with him.”

She’s frowning at me. “You have glitter on your arms. And not for nothing, but you smell like roses and berries.”

I look down, and sure enough, I see the little sparkles of glitter. “It’s not what it looks like.”

She holds up a hand. “What you do is your business. I’m just saying that he was looking forward to spending time with you tonight.” She gets up. “He looked at the door every single time he heard someone drive by.”

“I was waiting for . . .” I can’t really tell her what I was doing. I flip the burgers. “It was for work.”

“If you say so. I think I’m actually going to call it a night. I’m too tired to eat.” She walks down the steps. “Have a good night, Lincoln.”

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CHAPTER TEN

FINLEY

Nerves are running through my body as I reach for the back door and pull it open. Lincoln's sitting at the island, hair still wet from his shower. The black shirt fits his shoulders like it was made just for him.

"Morning." I see he made a big pot of coffee today and I grab a mug.

"I'll wait until you get your first sip before I say anything."

I groan loudly. "Is there any way for us to do this without me being here?" I ask as I focus on pouring my coffee. "Like, why don't you text me *Gone* and then I'll come to work, and we don't have to do this every morning." I open the fridge for milk and notice the extra burger he made last night in a container. My hand stills. "Why didn't you eat both burgers?"

"Kept it for you so you could have it today," he replies softly.

"That was very nice of you," I say, grabbing the milk and adding some to my coffee. I take a sip, wishing I had steamed milk instead of just regular milk. I turn around and lean on the counter as he finishes his toast. I wait for him to look at me.

"I want to apologize to you for last night," I say. "I was out of line. I shouldn't have yelled at you about Asa."

He pushes away from the counter. I watch as he walks to the front door, opens it, and sticks his head out. He comes back and stops next to me to look out the window over the sink.

“What are you doing?”

“You just apologized to me,” he replies. “I was looking to see if the world was ending.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s a comedian.” I try to hide the smile pulling at my lips.

He doesn’t move away from me, and I see the ink on his arms up close and wonder what all the tattoos mean. He leans his hip against the counter. “I’m not kidding, though. I’ll be home tonight for dinner.”

“If you say so.” I put the warm rim of the cup against my lips. “But let’s not say anything to Asa, just in case you have to get in your Batmobile and save the world.”

When he’s this close, I can see the little, tiny flecks of gold in his light-brown eyes. “Okay, I won’t say anything, but I’m telling you so that you know.”

“Great. So I’ll be able to get out of here when you get home?” I ask him, and he nods.

“I have to head out.” All I do is nod my head. “You’ll have him call me when he gets up?”

“The first thing I’ll have him do, even before he brushes his teeth,” I reply, proud of myself that I made him brush his teeth yesterday and take a shower after our bike ride.

“Sounds good, Finley. Have a good day.”

“Be safe, Lincoln,” I reply.

I walk to the hallway where I can see out of the door window as he jogs down the steps. His head disappears, and then his truck pulls out. His aviator glasses are on, and I have to admit, he’s really fucking hot.

My thoughts are cut short when I hear footsteps coming down the stairs. “Did Dad leave?” Asa sounds disappointed, and my heart breaks for him.

“He got a call and had to rush out,” I lie.

He moans as he pads barefoot to the couch and picks up his tablet, calling his father.

“Hey, buddy,” Lincoln answers.

“You left so early,” Asa says softly.

“I’m sorry, buddy.” I retreat to the kitchen as they talk to each other. Lincoln doesn’t tell him he’s coming home early, and I’m thankful for that.

When he hangs up, I lean over the back of the couch. “What do you want to do today?” I ask him. “Anything you want, we’ll do it.”

His eyes go big. “Really?”

“Really,” I repeat, hoping he’s not going to make me do anything I’m afraid to do.

“Can we go fishing?”

I shrug. “Sure.” *How hard can that be?* “Why don’t you go and brush your teeth and all that, and we can have breakfast at the bakery. Maybe we can have Everleigh pack us a lunch and then see if we can find anyone who can lend us some fishing poles.”

He doesn’t even give me time to finish the sentence as he runs up the steps. “Make your bed,” I yell up the stairs after him, and hear him scrambling around.

Twenty minutes later, he’s coming down the steps. I have a bag with sunscreen in it, and we’re heading out to the car. I’m a little relieved that there is nothing on the window like yesterday. The minute I got the note, I sent my lawyer a letter and told him about it. I threatened to get a restraining order against Davis if he didn’t stop. My lawyer called me back to tell me he spoke to him and he will give me time. As if time is going to make me change my mind.

I make my way through town with all the windows open and the wind flying in. I park right in front of the bakery. When the two of us enter, we’re assaulted by the smell of banana bread.

“Ohhh.” I look around to see that most of the tables are taken. I follow Asa to the counter. “What do you want?” I ask Asa, who looks at the bagels.

“I’ll have the rainbow bagel with cream cheese,” he decides, and I smile at Everleigh, who comes out from the kitchen.

“Good morning, you two. What can I get you guys?”

“Asa would like a rainbow bagel with cream cheese, and I’ll have an everything bagel with light butter. And can I get a latte?” She nods as she turns to start our order.

“What do you guys have planned today?” she asks us.

“We’re going fishing,” Asa announces. Everleigh’s eyes shift to me.

“Apparently, we’re going fishing. So we’re going to have to grab a couple of those lunch boxes that you guys have, too. You don’t know where I can maybe rent some fishing poles? Do they rent those here?”

Everleigh silently chuckles. “I can call my husband, Brock. He’s at his mechanic shop right down the road. He took Sage fishing two weeks ago. She did not like it one bit. So he has a couple of rods he can lend you guys.”

“Great,” I say as Everleigh puts the coffee on the tray.

“Careful, that cup is hot. Why don’t you guys go sit down, and I’ll call Brock for you and have him bring them over.”

“Oh no, that’s too much trouble.”

“I left the house this morning early, and he hates it when I do that, so he’ll thank you for it,” she explains as I pick up the tray.

“So have you ever been fishing before?” I ask Asa as we sit at a table, hoping he knows what to do. He shakes his head. “Great, so it’ll be the two of us against the world,” I tease him.

Everleigh delivers the bagels to our table and lets me know that Brock is on his way.

Five minutes later, he’s walking into the bakery with two rods in his hands.

“Hey Asa,” he says, then turns to me. “You must be Finley.” I smile at him. “I’m Brock. Here you go.” He hands me a big brown plastic box with a handle. “There’s some extra fishing line and tackle in there.”

“Thank you,” I reply, taking a deep breath. “If I damage them, I’ll pay for them.”

“Don’t worry about it. Keep them. It’s safe to say Sage is not going to be going fishing anytime soon.” He nods as someone at another table greets him. “You’re going to need fresh worms.”

“Eww.” A grimace takes over my face. “Where does one get those?”

“There’s a stand not too far from the fishing creek.”

“And where would the fishing creek be?” I pull out my phone to take notes.

“You sure you’re going to be okay going fishing?” he asks. I want to tell him I’m not going to be okay. I actually want to go to the spa instead.

“It’s fine,” I assure him, trying not to sound petrified.

“Okay, just be careful. That creek’s got a fast undercurrent.” I nod my head, making a mental note to look up “fast undercurrent.”

Just as we finish our bagels, Everleigh hands us a square cooler box. “Here, you can return this whenever you get a chance. It will keep everything cold. I put in some waters and snacks.”

“That’s amazing,” I say. I pay the bill and tell her I’ll be back tomorrow to return it.

I carry the cooler while Asa carries the fishing rods and tackle box. I put the address Brock gave me into the GPS, and it takes us right to the little hut he told us about.

I pull over, and the man gives me a box of dirt and says, “Fish around in there for the worms.”

I don’t even want to touch the container, but I hold my breath and walk to the car. Opening the back door, I hold it out.

“This is so gross.” I hand it to Asa, and he snickers and takes it like it’s no problem.

I park the car on the side of the road by the creek and look around. “Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask Asa. He’s already out of the car. “Ugh,” I groan and grab the cooler while he juggles the rods and the worms.

We walk down the worn path toward the side of the creek. The water is moving down quickly. “Don’t get too close to the edge,” I warn him.

“I won’t,” he assures me, putting down the container. “What do we do?”

“Asa.” I look at him. “When you said let’s go fishing, I thought you knew how to fish.”

“I told you I don’t,” he replies. “Don’t you?”

“The closest I’ve come to a fish is eating one.” I pull out my phone. “Let’s see what it says online.”

I find a video tutorial, and we both watch it.

“Okay, that looks easy enough,” I mumble. “Get the rod.” He picks up one of the rods and brings it to me. “We need a hook.” He digs around in the tackle box and finds one. I sit on the ground, pausing the tutorial as needed. It takes me way longer than it should, but I finally think I have it right. “Got it.” I smile up at Asa, and he rushes to get the live bait. He pulls the top off, and the black earth inside writhes with worms. “Here,” he says. I look at him.

“Gross, gross, gross,” I mutter, grabbing a worm. It wiggles right out of my fingers. I get up, turning in a circle as he laughs at me.

“It’s not gross.” Asa picks it up off the ground and holds it out for me.

“Thanks.” I grab it and drape it over the hook.

“You need to stick it in the worm,” he tells me, and I close my eyes. “Want me to do it?”

“No,” I snap out, “that’s so pointy.” I hold the worm as it wriggles. “I’m so sorry,” I apologize as I stick the hook through him. “This has to be the grossest thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

“You’re the best,” Asa cheers. He’s grinning at me, and my heart seizes in my chest.

“Okay, go fish,” I tell him, handing him the rod.

It takes him a couple of tries before it flies in the water.

“I did it!” he yells, jumping up and down. “I did it!”

“Good job! Now I think we just wait until it pulls or something, and then you reel it in with that.” I point to the little round thing.

He tries the hook in three different spots. “This is, I think, somewhat relaxing, don’t you think?” I ask him as he looks at the water rushing downstream.

“Yeah.”

“You are really quiet today.” I push his arm with mine. “Especially after I just brought you fishing?” I smile at him. “What’s going on with you?”

“Mom didn’t call today or yesterday.”

I put my arm around him. “You miss her, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess. She said she was going to call me.” His voice is low, and I just want to take him in my arms and, at the same time, call Maggie and tell her to call her son.

“Maybe with the time change and everything, she thought you wouldn’t be up. Or, you know, we weren’t really home all day yesterday, so we might have missed her call. We wouldn’t even know since you brought your tablet with you and there was no Wi-Fi.” I’m just making shit up at this point, hoping that he doesn’t call me on it. “Once she’s back home, everything will go back to the way it was. I mean, now she’s married, so you have a new stepdad . . . Do you like him?” I have to wonder if any of the husbands my mother had after my father even gave a shit about me or the relationship we had. I barely had one with my mother, so I don’t think I was even given a second thought. Out of sight. Out of mind.

“Tim?” Asa shrugs his shoulders. “He’s okay, I guess. He tries really hard to get me to do things with him, but it’s just too much.”

“I’m sure it’s not easy for him.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “He’s coming in, and he knows how cool your dad is, so he has to try and be as cool. He’s trying to get you to like him, but not too much because he’ll never be your dad.”

“I never thought about it like that.” He reels his line in a bit. “He did say he wanted to be a bonus dad.”

“Maybe there are things that you and Tim can do together. Like, I don’t know, what about playing chess? Or fishing? Maybe find something that can be just for the two of you.”

“I guess I can do that,” he says, still unsure. “I just don’t want my dad to feel bad.”

“Asa, your dad is not going to feel bad. But if you want, why don’t you have a conversation with him about it? He loves you big time, so I bet he’ll be happy you went to him instead of keeping things inside.”

He doesn’t answer because his line pulls, and he shrieks, “I got something!” He starts to reel it in.

“Nice and slow,” I advise, like I know what I’m talking about, as he eases it out of the water. There’s a small fish on the hook.

“You did it!” I shout with my hands in the air. “You did it.” He pulls the fish up so it dangles in the air. “Eww,” I say as it flops side to side.

“Finley, I think he’s hurt,” he tells me, holding the fish in his hand. “You have to take it off and throw it back.”

“It’s okay.” I walk to him. “How about you hold the fish, and then I can take the hook out of him?”

I start to take the hook out of the fish, and the fish spasms, then flies up out of my hand, startling me. My hand moves instinctively to block my face.

I feel the burning right away, slicing through my hand. “Owww!” I holler, and I see Asa’s face go white. “Ouch, ouch.” I move my hand, and the rod comes with it.

“Finley, stop,” Asa says.

I look down. Blood is rolling down my hand and onto my wrist. The hook is stuck in my palm.

“Oh my gosh,” I screech. “I need my phone.”

Asa drops his rod and rushes to grab my phone from my purse. “Can you call Collins?” I tell him, and he goes to my call list, and I hear the phone ringing.

“Please answer, please answer,” I mutter quietly. She picks up after four rings.

“Hey, Finley.”

“Hey, so I took Asa fishing down at the creek and”—I try not to panic—“the hook is now stuck in my hand.”

“Don’t pull it out,” she warns. “You could have nerve damage, depending on how deep it is.”

“Okay, well, I’m bleeding, and I have Asa.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you, Finley,” Asa assures me. I smile at him.

“I’m on my way,” Collins states. “We’ll be there in ten.”

“I’ll be here,” I confirm and hang up the phone. “It’s going to be okay,” I assure Asa. “It’ll be okay.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

LINCOLN

I pick up my phone and dial the number for what feels like the fortieth time. It starts to ring and then goes directly to voicemail.

“Randy, I’m not going to call you again. If you make me come and find you, I’m going to be pissed, and you don’t want me pissed.” I spent the better part of my morning and half of the afternoon looking for him.

Giving up on tracking him down for now, I head back to the station. When the phone rings, I close the window while I press accept. “Burke.”

“Hey, it’s Martinez. Just got some intel on the next drop.”

“When is it?” I turn down Main Street.

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Afternoon?” I repeat. “In broad daylight?”

“Yeah, brazen as fuck. Again, this is just coming in so it might be changing.” He sighs. “I’ll text you any updates, but it would be good if we’re ready to roll as of noon.”

“I’ll be there at noon,” I huff out. “Later.” I disconnect and look at the dashboard. It’s just after 3:00 p.m., and I might actually make it home in time to have dinner with Asa.

I dial Finley. It rings three times before she answers. “Hey,” she says, and I can hear voices in the background.

“Just calling to let you know I’ll be home to make dinner for Asa.”

“Oh, great.” Her voice sounds off.

“Everything okay?”

“Oh yeah,” she says too quickly, laughing nervously. “We’re out, but I’ll make sure I’m home when you get there.” She takes a second. “What time would that be?”

“Should be within the hour.”

“Ummm,” she hesitates, “we’ll be there. If not, we’ll be there not long after.”

“Where are you guys?” I hear more voices in the background now.

“Just out enjoying the weather. Gotta go. All is well, see you later.” She hangs up.

I shake my head as I pull into the station parking lot and drive toward the chain-link fence. The gates open for me when I scan my card. I park the car in its assigned parking spot and grab my personal items from the passenger seat before heading inside.

As I pass the holding cell, I see a couple of people lying on the bench. I toss my keys on the desk. “Car four,” I tell Archie, who is in charge of collecting the radios and keys at the end of the shift, as well as taking care of the holding cell.

He picks up the key and writes the time and day in the logbook. “Captain was looking for you.”

I nod at him as I head up the steps to the office. All the desks are empty. I put my notepad on mine before heading to Captain’s office. I knock on the doorjamb since the door is open. He looks up from his papers.

“Burke.” He leans back in his chair. “Come in.”

“Door open or closed?” I’m not sure if he has something to tell me that is confidential.

“Everyone is out right now, but close it just in case.” I close the door and sit down. “How did today go?”

“Randy is MIA,” I huff out. “Checked all his local spots, and nothing.”

“You think he ratted himself out?” Captain rocks in his chair back and forth.

“No.” I shake my head. “My gut is telling me he’s getting high somewhere, and I’m not on the top of his list.”

“What are you going to do next?”

“I left him a message. Not sure if he picks up messages, but I figured it couldn’t hurt.” I move my leg up and down. “Got a call from Martinez on my way here.” His eyebrows raise. “They got word that a drop is happening tomorrow, sometime in the afternoon.” He whistles. “I don’t think the intel is right.”

“May be a trap. There is no way they’re doing that during the day,” he agrees with me. “You going anyway?” I nod. “I want you checking in hourly.”

I shake my head to let him know that I’m not going to be doing that. “I’ll check in when I can.”

“If you’re going to go in, I want to know when it happens.”

“Got it. I’m going to head home and spend time with Asa since I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. It might be an all-night shift.”

“Report in tomorrow morning when you head out from your house. There’s no reason for you to come in and then go there. Take time with Asa.”

“I won’t say no to that.” I get up out of the chair. “Later.”

“Later.” When I pull open the door, he adds, “Stay safe, yeah?” I look over my shoulder at him and nod.

Grabbing my truck key and phone from the drawer, I head out of the station. “Bye, Cathy.”

She looks over at me and smiles. “Have a good night, Burke.” She turns her head back to the screen. “See you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be working in the field tomorrow,” I tell her. “You’ll get some check-ins from me.”

“Great,” she sighs, “it’s like I’m a babysitter.”

I laugh. “You know we wouldn’t be able to do this without you.”

“Say that with a coffee and a donut.” She looks up for a minute, and then her phone beeps, and she answers as I walk out.

I jog down the steps and head toward the parking lot. The thick air in my truck hits me when I open the door, and I roll down the windows as I pull out.

Finley’s car is parked at the curb when I pull into the driveway. They’re in the backyard, and Asa is kicking a ball to her.

“Dad!” Asa screams, running toward me. I barely have the truck door closed before he’s lunging at me. I smile as I grab him in my arms.

“Hey, buddy.” I kiss his head.

“You got home early.” He wiggles out of my hold and bounces on his feet. “Can we go into the tree house tonight?”

“You bet,” I confirm, walking into the backyard as he runs ahead of me.

“Finley, Finley!” He’s practically bouncing toward her. “We’re going in the tree house tonight”—her mouth opens wide—“and it’s boys only.” She’s wearing a new pair of shorts that she wasn’t wearing this morning and a black tank top.

“Wow,” she deadpans, “I’m your best friend when you want something, but I’m easily pushed away when the big man gets home.” She puts her hand on her chest. “I’m hurt.” She sniffles, but Asa just laughs at her. She bursts out laughing. “Bazinga.”

“I knew you were joking.” He rolls his eyes. “Dad! Dad!” He turns back to me. “Should I tell her the slogan of the tree house?”

“There’s a slogan?” She looks from him to me. “I’m invested now.” She folds her arms over her chest, and my eyes spot the white bandage right away.

“It’s *Boys rule, girls drool*.” Asa laughs out loud when he sees her reaction.

“What happened to your hand?” I ask, a little too loudly. The two of them stop laughing.

“Nothing. I think I’ll call it a day now that you’re home.” She starts to walk toward her place.

“Finley.” Her name comes out harsher than I intended. But at least she stops in her tracks. She turns and stands almost in front of me. Her feet are bare, and I see her toenails are painted a light pink.

“It’s really nothing, I’m fine. And the best news of all is that Asa is fine, not a scratch. I was the only one who ended up with a couple of stitches.”

“A couple of stitches?” My heart speeds up. “A couple of stitches.” I try to control the way my tone sounds, but I don’t think anything could calm me down. “What happened?” Asa is looking down at his feet, avoiding my eyes.

“I’m going to count to three,” I start.

“Lincoln, I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“That isn’t what I asked,” I say, looking into her eyes.

“Okay, well, I took Asa fishing today.” The minute she says the words, my body locks tight. I know this is why my son is avoiding looking at me. “Well, Asa caught a fish, and I didn’t want him touching the hook because it was sharp, but then . . .” She holds up her bandaged hand. “I called Collins, and she came and took us to the emergency room, and, well . . . They had to cut the hook in half and then pull it out. I got three stitches.”

“You took him fishing?” It’s a loaded question.

“Yeah,” she answers, her voice unsure whether it’s the right answer or not.

“Where?”

“Um, some creek.”

“Some creek? You went fishing at some creek that you know nothing about. You don’t know anything about the current or the fact that you need a license to fish.”

“I mean, do you really?”

“Yes,” I bark out. Asa even jumps at my tone. “Whose idea was it?” I can tell right away that she knows she’s been played because her eyes widen for a split second before she turns back to me.

“It was mine,” she lies to me for Asa. “He and Wyatt were talking about it yesterday, and I’ve never gone fishing, so I thought, why not do it today?”

I walk over to Asa and put my hand on his shoulder. He looks up at me. “Whose idea was it to go fishing?” I ask him. He shares a look with Finley.

“It was mine,” he answers quietly.

“What did I say about going fishing with anyone but me?”

“You said it was dangerous and that you only wanted me to go with you until I was older.” This is exactly what I told him when we went fishing the first time.

“You lied to Ms. Finley about it.” He nods. I can see the tears welling in his eyes. “That was not the right thing to do. You took advantage of the fact that she didn’t know better and, in the end, she got hurt.”

“But Dad, I—”

“You lied to her,” I repeat, “and that was not the right thing to do. You are supposed to be the man of the house when I’m not here, and take care of things.”

“Lincoln,” Finley says softly, “it’s really my fault. I should have checked with you.” I look over at her.

“You should have,” I agree, “but he shouldn’t have put you in that position.”

“I’m fine,” she assures me.

“It could have been so much worse,” I inform her. “He could have slipped and fallen in the water. You could have had an accident, and then what?”

“I’m sorry. I never meant to put him in any danger. I thought it was just fishing.” She gives me a sad smile. “I’ll run things by you from now on.”

She looks at Asa. “See you two tomorrow.” She turns and walks into her apartment and shuts the door behind her.

My chest gets tight.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Asa says.

“I’m not the one you have to apologize to. You need to say you’re sorry to Finley.”

“Now?”

“First thing tomorrow morning.”

“I will. I’ll go and clean up inside.” He walks past me and up the back steps. I think about going to her, but I know I should give her and myself a couple of minutes to cool down.

I follow Asa into the house. “I’m going to go and take a shower, and then we’ll talk about dinner.”

The night drags as I make dinner for Asa and we head out to the tree house. Looking over at Finley’s apartment, I see light coming from the living room window. I hope she decides to come out and join us, but she ends up staying in her apartment all night. When we head inside to go to bed, the light is off.

I wait until I slide into bed before I text her.

ME:

Are you okay?

I don’t know if she’ll answer me or not, but I figured it’s the right thing to check on her.

A couple of minutes later, she answers me.

FINLEY:

I’m fine. A bit sore, but that’s normal, I guess.

ME:

Do you need anything?

FINLEY:

No. I just took two acetaminophen, and I'm heading to bed.

ME:

Let me know if you need anything.

After five minutes of her not answering me, I put the phone on the bedside table, turn off my light, and drift off.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

FINLEY

The throbbing wakes me up, and when I open my eyes, I look down at my hand. Every single time my heart beats, I feel it in my palm. I bend my fingers slowly and wince at the tight sensation. I flip the covers off me and head to the bathroom before grabbing two more pills and getting back in bed. I lie on my side for a couple of minutes, trying to get comfortable so I can catch some more sleep before I have to get up.

I don't even know how long I'm lying awake before I finally just give up and reach over for my phone. It's just a little after 6:15 a.m. "Might as well just get up now and start the day."

I get back up, stretch, fix the covers, then head to the little kitchen. I pull open the fridge, grab the milk, then walk over to the milk frother I ordered. I'm glad I got it. It was waiting for me when I got here yesterday after the hospital, and my new coffee maker was set up before dinner last night. I was so exhausted after all the excitement of the day, I had two pieces of peanut butter toast and crashed, the adrenaline from the day finally letting go. I pour the milk to the max line, and while it heats up and spins, I make my coffee. As the aroma of coffee floats through the small place, I close my eyes, waiting for the milk to be done. When the red light turns off, I pour it into my coffee mug, the liquid coming first and then the thick foam at the end.

“If that doesn’t look like the best coffee I’ve ever seen,” I gloat, placing the frother in the sink and putting water in it, “I don’t know what is.” I grab a spoon, stir, and take a sip. “Mmmm.”

Phone in one hand and coffee in the other, I open the door. The warm air engulfs me, and the birds’ singing fills the morning. I sit on the step, early sun pleasantly warm on my bare legs. I’m about to check my email on my phone when I hear the back door sliding open.

Lincoln steps out wearing gym shorts and nothing else. His hair is sticking up all over the place. My eyes roam down to his sculpted chest, then the light dusting of hair that spans his lower belly, disappearing behind his waistband. He notices me, and I have just enough time for my eyes to go back up. I’m thankful he didn’t catch me checking him out. How fucking awkward would that have been?

“Morning.” He seems surprised that I’m sitting outside. I notice his eyes move from my eyes to my legs. I should have changed before I walked out here. My nipples tighten, and I look down, thankful this tank top has a built-in bra. The matching loose linen shorts have a little ruffle at the hem.

“Morning,” I say, taking a sip of my coffee, not knowing if I should stay outside or retreat inside. It takes me less than a second to remind myself that I have every right to be outside.

“How you feeling?” he asks me.

“I just took two more pills, so I should be feeling better in no time.”

“Do you want to come up here and have coffee?”

I get up off the stoop and join him on the deck, pulling out the chair in front of him. “Did you guys end up going to the tree house?”

He nods. “We did. And about the girl rule—”

I hold up my hand. “It’s okay, I get it. My place”—I point to the garage—“is a girls-only space, so it works out.”

He laughs, leaning back in his chair. “Noted.” He extends his legs in front of him, crossing them at the ankle. “Everything working okay?”

“It is. It feels very homey.”

“Do you miss home?”

I shrug. “Some parts of me, yes,” I admit. “Other parts, not so much. I guess it’s a good thing to get away.”

“Why is that?” he asks, and I take a deep breath.

“I’m in the middle of getting a divorce.” I watch his face to see if he knows. His eyebrows go up a touch.

“Why are you getting divorced?”

The pit of my stomach tightens. “I wasn’t enough for him.” I don’t feel sad about it. Strange that I don’t even miss the man I thought he was when I married him. But I hate myself for not seeing all the red flags sooner. “Apparently, it’s okay to be with other people as long as I was the one he was coming home to.”

“He said that?” He looks at me, and I nod. He snorts before looking ahead again and taking a sip of his coffee. “What a fucking idiot.”

“Why did you get divorced?” I ask him, without skipping a beat.

“According to her, I was married to my job.”

“Were you?”

“I worked long hours, but I was trying to move my way up in the force.”

“I can see that.”

“Well, apparently that made it okay for her to be with someone else, because I didn’t give her the attention she needed.” My mouth opens; I never expected that she would cheat on him. “I guess it was a blessing or whatever. She just married him, the day before you started, actually. They should be making their way through Europe. He has a job that’s nine-to-five and, to her, that’s everything.”

“She cheated on you with the guy and then ended up marrying him?” I’m not sure if I missed a step while we were talking.

“She sure did,” he confirms with a small smirk.

I think about the report the investigator gave me, and about all the women Davis had been fucking and probably still is. “I mean, at least she didn’t do it with multiple people. It was just one guy.”

“I guess so.” He chuckles, shaking his head. “I’ll thank her for that the next time she calls me.”

That makes me laugh. “That’s very mature of you,” I tease him, taking a sip of my coffee. “I’m not sure I’d be that mature. I mean, having to continue talking with your ex after she cheated. The only communication Davis is going to get out of me from now on will be through my lawyer.”

“Well, we have Asa, and the last thing I want is for it to be shitty for him.”

“You’re a good dad,” I assure him. “Not many men would be as mature as you are.”

“I guess I am. I just hope he thinks the same when he grows up.”

“He would be a fool not to think that.” I take another sip of my coffee. “You worked all day and came home and still spent time with him.”

“Speaking of work, I have to be on an assignment today, and I don’t know what time I’ll be home.”

“On an assignment? I thought you just worked at the police station.”

“I do. I’m just working on something else.”

“Like?”

He just looks at me. “I can’t share that with you. It’s top secret.”

I don’t know why I care, but when he says that, I do. I try to cover the fact that I’m hurt he doesn’t trust me. “I get it. I could be a planted mole, for all you know.” I laugh nervously, trying to hide what I’m feeling.

“Finley,” he starts softly.

The back door opens, stopping whatever he was about to say, and Asa comes out. His hair is sticking up very much like his father’s. He’s wearing a T-shirt with some character I don’t know on it and a pair of black boxers. He rubs sleep from one of his eyes and squints at us through the other.

“Hey,” he says, walking to his father and collapsing on his chest. Lincoln wraps his big arm around him and kisses his head.

“Morning, buddy,” he greets him. “Sleep good?”

“Yeah,” he mumbles, and then he pushes himself up and walks over to me.

“I’m sorry, Finley,” he says, looking at my knees instead of my face, “for tricking you and lying to you.”

I smile as he peeks up at me, knowing it takes a lot for someone to admit they were wrong about something. I sit up, putting my mug on the table, and take his hand with my uninjured one. “It’s okay, buddy,” I say as I squeeze his hand. “I did the same thing when I was your age.” It’s a lie, but it seems to make him feel better.

“Really?”

“Yeah. One time when I was fifteen, I asked one of my friends’ brothers—”

“Okay, that’s enough reminiscing.” Lincoln cuts me off. He gets up. “I think this is a lesson learned for both of you.”

My eyebrows pinch together. “Yes. I learned I never want to fish again.”

“I learned not to trust Finley with a fish.” Asa giggles when Lincoln glares at him. “And to not trick people.” He turns to me. “Do you forgive me?”

I stand up and hug him. “Of course, I forgive you. But if you really want to make it up to me, you could maybe show me your tree house.”

He looks at Lincoln, who tries to hide his smirk. “I guess so,” he mumbles begrudgingly, “but only one time.” He holds up his finger.

“Yes!” I pump my fist in victory. “I’m going to go get dressed, and you can show me your tree house, and then we can maybe take a walk to the park.” I look at Lincoln. “That’s still okay for me to do with him, right?”

“That’s fine,” he confirms. “I’m going to get breakfast going.”

“I’ll meet you back here in a bit,” I tell them, grabbing my cup and heading to my little apartment. I have a quick breakfast, shower, and dress in a pair of jean shorts and a light-gray cotton T-shirt over a white sports bra. The shirt hits right above the shorts’ button. When I step outside again, Asa is already waiting for me.

“Come on.” He slips his hand in mine. “Let me show you the tree house.” As we climb up, Lincoln watches from the back door, wearing his uniform of black pants and a shirt.

“This is cool,” I say, ducking my head inside the tree house. There are two beanbag chairs pushed against one wall, the deck of UNO cards between them. “There’s enough room for you to have a sleepover in here.”

His eyes widen, and he rushes to the doorway. “Can we, Dad?”

I poke my head out above Asa’s to see Lincoln glaring over at me. “I think sleeping outside on a hard floor in a sleeping bag sounds like a great night!” I try not to laugh as I roll my lips together. “Too bad girls aren’t allowed.”

We spend the morning in the tree house, where he shows me all his little cool things. “I have to go,” Lincoln says, irritated and ignoring the request. “I don’t know what time I’ll be home.” Asa climbs down, and Lincoln kisses his head. “I trust you two will stay out of trouble today.”

I roll my eyes. “We’ll try our best,” I assure him and hold up both hands, crossing my fingers. He shakes his head and heads for his truck. “Have a nice day,” I call to his retreating back.

He just grunts.

“So, ready for the park?” I ask Asa, who nods enthusiastically.

AFTER THE PARK, we stop at the bakery on Main Street, where I get a matcha and he gets a lemonade before heading home. He’s telling me a story as we approach the house, and I notice the driver’s side mirror is

hanging off my car. I look up at the sky and pinch my nose. “Are you okay? Did you get a brain freeze?” he asks me.

“No, I’m okay.” I walk away from the car, hoping he doesn’t see. “Let’s get inside and relax for a bit.”

I unlock the front door, and he immediately settles on the couch.

“I’ll be outside for a second,” I tell him as he pulls up a video on his tablet.

I go back out to my car and study the damage. Not only is the mirror broken, but there’s also a long, deep scratch along the side, and a crack in the windshield. I find the number of the garage in town, and a man answers after two rings.

“Is this Brock?” I ask.

He grunts. “Who’s this?” He didn’t say yes or no, but from the grunt, I’m going to assume it’s him.

“Hey, it’s Finley, Collins’s friend. You lent me the fishing rods?”

“Okay,” he says.

“I’m—” I close my eyes. “It looks like someone sideswiped my car.”

“When did this happen?”

“I’m not sure. I left my car parked on that dirt road by the creek for a while yesterday, and it was pretty narrow.” I think back to yesterday. One of Collins’s friends who works at the hospital had dropped Asa and me off at the creek on her way home from work so I could get my car, since Collins was on a call. “I was kind of tired and distracted, but I’m sure I would have noticed this. The damage looks pretty bad. I have to watch Asa, so I’m not sure when I can bring it in, but can I make an appointment?”

“We can just pick it up and get back to you tomorrow with an estimate.”

“Really? That would be great. Do you need my credit card number?”

“No, we’ll figure it out tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re at Burke’s place, right?”

“I am, yes.”

“Be there in twenty minutes,” he says, and I hang up the phone.

I pull up Davis’s number right away and unblock him long enough to send out a text.

ME:

I’m going to need you to get the message and realize I’m not coming back, and if I do, it’s not to you. Fuck off and stop fucking with me.

I press send. The three dots come up, but before I get his reply, I block him again. The next message I send is to my lawyer.

ME:

Davis sent someone to do a hit-and-run on my car. This is ridiculous. Can we get a restraining order?

I’m about to call him when the door opens, and Asa sticks out his head. “I gotta show you the coolest video.”

I tuck my phone in my back pocket. “Coming.”

I know it’s only a matter of time before I have to tell Lincoln, especially now that Brock knows. “Great,” I mumble to myself, “just great.” I settle in a chair, and Asa perches on the armrest beside me with his tablet. I smile at him. “Okay, let’s see this cool video.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LINCOLN

It’s just after 5:00 p.m., and everyone in the room has been ready to roll out since noon. All of us are sitting in our bulletproof vests, waiting for the call to make this next drop.

“I’ll be back,” I say, heading outside to call the station and then Asa. Cathy answers on the first ring.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hey, you,” Cathy says. “I take it you’re still where you are supposed to be?”

“You could say that.” I look around at the cars in the parking lot, seeing that it’s full. When I got here this morning, there were only two cars.

“Is Captain free?” I ask her.

“He is. I’ll transfer you now. Have a good night.” She quickly puts me on hold, and it rings.

“Burke, anything?” Captain says when he picks up.

“Nothing.” It’s the same answer I’ve given each time I’ve checked in today.

“Did their contact reach out to them?” The same question he’s asked me each time.

“Radio silence,” I huff out. “If it’s what I think it is, the call is going to be coming in after ten, which makes for a long fucking day.”

“You take the next two days off,” he snaps. “I don’t want to see your face in this station.”

“Got it. I’ll check in via text. Enjoy your night.” I hang up and pull up the text thread for Finley, then decide to call her instead.

“City Morgue,” she answers. It annoys me, but at the same time, I can’t help but laugh.

“Now who’s the comedian?”

“I would never steal that title from you. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling, for one, to check in.”

“We are alive and chilling on the couch. Wyatt came over to play for a bit in the tree house. Harmony and I sat on the back deck and had some sweet tea, since we weren’t allowed with the cool kids.”

“I think I should talk to him about maybe bending the rules.”

“No skin off my back. Except . . . if he gets hurt, am I allowed to go in there? Or is it a fend-for-yourself type of situation? Like when you throw a kid in the water, and it’s sink or swim?”

“Finley . . .” I warn. She laughs, and it makes me fucking smile.

“Lincoln,” she sings out my name. This morning when she came to sit with me, I knew I hurt her feelings by not telling her about the job. But I don’t want to say something that could put her in harm’s way.

“Where is Asa now?” I ask her.

“On the couch. We’re going to have dinner and then . . .” Her voice trails. “I said I would make a pillow and blanket fort with him,” she says softly. “Please don’t say no.” I can hear her walking on her end. “We promise we will clean it up, it’s just that I’ve never had a fort and he described it and, well, it sounds like the coolest thing.”

“You’ve never made a blanket fort?” I ask her. Now I want to ask her more about her life, but I know I shouldn’t blur those lines.

“No. What time are you going to be home? I want everything cleaned up before you get here. You’re not going to be a big buzzkill and tell us to

tear it down."

"I have no idea what time I'm going to be home," I admit.

"Oh, are you on a stakeout?" Her voice goes high. "Like *Undercover Boss*?"

"Jesus." I shake my head. "You need to stop watching television." She laughs. "How is your hand?"

"Throbbing a bit and stinging, but Collins says that's normal. So it's all good."

"Okay, I have to go." Johnson is coming outside. "I'll call you later."

"10-4." I can't help but burst out laughing as she disconnects.

"Hey, we just got a call," Johnson reports. "It's going to be tonight between nine and ten."

"I thought the middle of the day was too good to be true."

She smiles at me. "If you want, we could go out and grab something to eat."

"What is everyone else doing?" I ask, looking behind her to the door, hoping one of the guys comes out and saves me from this.

"Not sure. A couple of the guys are going to head home and relax and then come back." She starts walking toward her car. "You sure you don't want to come with me?"

"I think I'm good, but thanks." I head inside, where Martinez is rocking back and forth in his chair. "Are you not going home?"

He shakes his head. "If I go home, I might not come back."

I laugh and grab a seat to join him in more waiting.

We're talking about fatherhood when my phone beeps with a text.

FINLEY:

Question, before I start the fort. Do I have to wash all the blankets after?

I smile.

ME:

If I tell you yes, does that mean you won't do the fort?

FINLEY:

It will seriously hinder the experience if I think about washing a million blankets.

ME:

I don't have a million blankets.

FINLEY:

Is that a yes or a no?

ME:

You don't have to wash them.

FINLEY:

Yes! Later.

ME:

Later.

As the guys start to trickle back in with food, my phone beeps again. She's texted me a picture of the two of them lying on their stomachs with their faces sticking out of the opening of the fort. It's a mix of pillows, sheets, and blankets. The smiles on both of their faces say they're having the best time.

FINLEY:

Best fort ever.

ME:

That looks like a lot of work went into it.

FINLEY:

My wrist is going to get carpal tunnel from folding up all of the sheets.

I don't have a chance to answer her before she texts again.

FINLEY:

Why do you own five sets of sheets for your bed?

ME:

I don’t like to do laundry.

FINLEY:

Five sets is a bit extreme. Don’t you think?

ME:

Agree to disagree.

Martinez’s phone rings, and the whole room goes silent.

“Yeah.” He gets up. “On it.” He hangs up. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. We might be too late.” He runs out, and we all follow him. I get into the back seat of his truck.

“Are you fucking with me?” Johnson says as we ride down to where the meeting is going to be.

Finley:

Okay, he’s in bed, and it was all worth it. He said it was the best night of his life. His whole life!

ME:

Sounds good. I’m going to be in and out.

FINLEY:

Be safe.

We park under a part of the bridge. The truck’s lights are off as we wait. I look around to make sure I have an exit plan in place if shit goes down.

My phone buzzes.

FINLEY:

He’s officially asleep.

ME:

I don’t know what time I’ll be home. It might be best if you just stayed over for the night.

FINLEY:

Do you think I can run to my place and grab my pj’s or is that too risky?

ME:

It’s fine. Go grab your things.

I press send and then follow up.

ME:

You’ll be going back, right?

FINLEY:

I don’t care for you and your attitude most of the time, but I really like Asa, so I would never do anything to endanger him.

ME:

My attitude?

FINLEY:

You’re asking me about your attitude? You should be asking yourself why you have this attitude.

FINLEY:

Okay, I’m going to lock the front door and head out the back.

I put the phone down, and she texts again.

FINLEY:

I don’t know if I’ll go.

ME:

What? Why?

FINLEY:

They always sneak in through the back door.

ME:

Who are they?

FINLEY:

The murderers.

ME:

Stop listening to murder podcasts.

FINLEY:

Never. I wonder if I could FaceTime Collins and leave the phone here so she can watch him while I run over.

ME:

You know, you could have left and come back twice by now.

FINLEY:

. . .

ME:

What does . . . mean?

I look down at my phone and see the bubble never comes up.

ME:

Finley?

The bubble comes up.

FINLEY:

I’m back, and he’s fine. I felt like I was doing a challenge or something. I don’t even know if I locked my door. That is a problem for tomorrow.

ME:

I’ll check the door when I get home.

FINLEY:

I think I’ll sleep on the couch.

ME:

No, sleep in my bed. I’ll just wake you when I get home.

The thought of her sleeping in my bed makes my cock stir in my pants.

ME:

The sheets are clean.

FINLEY:

If they weren’t, I just folded clean ones.

FINLEY:

How clean are we talking?

FINLEY:

You are a bachelor.

ME:

Clean.

I’m about to add that I haven’t had anyone in that bed, but I stop myself.

FINLEY:

Fine, but if I hear you come in, I’ll just go home.

ME:

Sounds good.

FINLEY:

You are a lot nicer when you aren’t in front of me.

ME:

I’m always nice.

FINLEY:

Agree to disagree.

ME:

Don’t you have to go to bed?

FINLEY:

I have to shower first.

ME:

There are clean towels in the hallway closet. You should know, they’re right above the sheets.

FINLEY:

10-4.

ME:

Who taught you that?

FINLEY:

Asa. It means okay.

ME:

I know what it means, Finley.

FINLEY:

Just in case. I don't want you to get fired, but you haven't paid me yet.

ME:

Good night.

FINLEY:

10-7. Oh, wait, I think it's 10-6 I want to use. What's the code for busy unless urgent?

ME:

10-6

FINLEY:

10-6

I look out the window, the minutes ticking by, the frustration of the night getting heavier and heavier. "What time are we calling this?" the guy beside me asks.

"Fuck," Martinez says, "I think we got fucking played."

I shake my head. "How good was your source?"

"Not good enough," Johnson says, "or he got paid to give us the wrong intel."

"Let's call it a night," Martinez says. "We can regroup tomorrow."

We head back to the undercover office. There is a brown box waiting for us, sitting right outside the door.

"Should we call SWAT?" Martinez asks as we approach it. "Has my name on the top."

He decides to open the box. Inside is a bag of potato chips with a note which reads: *Next time, take snacks*.

"I guess this answers our question," I say. "I'm going to head out."

The minute I get in the car, I text Captain.

ME:

They were tipped off and are fucking with us. I'll call in tomorrow for a debrief.

The drive home takes more time than I'd like. I pull into the driveway a little after 2:00 a.m., my eyes burning with fatigue. I check that Finley's door is locked, as promised, then enter the house through the front door, doing my best to make no noise. I slide off my boots and grab a glass of water. The pillows are all back where they belong, and there is a bottle of furniture polish on the living room cabinet, with a rag on top.

I start upstairs to check on Asa and am on the third step when my foot slips on the wood, as if it's been oiled. I grab the railing before my knee smashes into the next step. I move my foot side to side, and it slides far too easily. "Did she polish the fucking stairs?" I cautiously try the next one.

By the time I get to the top, the answer is a definite yes. She used furniture polish to clean the steps. I shake my head as I crack open Asa's door. He's in the middle of his bed, asleep. I bend to kiss his cheek.

My bedroom door is open, and my feet move before my head tells them not to. She's on her side sleeping, her head on my pillow.

"Good night, Finley," I whisper and close the door before making my way to the hallway closet to grab a neatly folded blanket.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FINLEY

I turn over in bed and notice a musky smell right away. When my eyes flutter open, it takes me a second to realize where I am. The long blackout shades on the windows are open, letting light stream in.

When he told me to use his bed since he would be home late, I considered sleeping on the couch instead. But he'd told me not to, and I probably had enough strikes against me already for fucking up. It's only a matter of time before he finally has enough of me, so I decided to pick my battles and came upstairs.

The minute my head hit his pillow, and I smelled the faint scent of him, it was as if a switch went off in me. I drifted off to sleep faster than I've ever fallen asleep before.

His room screams *I'm a bachelor* with the dark tones, from his dresser to his side tables to even his charcoal-gray duvet cover. The only light-colored items are the white sheets. Even the chair in the corner of the room screams *man*, with its rich brown leather. It looks like it belongs in one of those clubhouses where only men can enter. Like you would sit in it after a long day at the office and smoke a cigar.

There are framed photos on the corner of the long dresser facing the bed. There's one of Lincoln and Asa together in front of a Christmas tree. In another, he has his shirt off, and a baby Asa is lying on him, his head bent to

kiss the top of Asa's head. Then there is one of Lincoln when he was younger, in uniform, with an older man beside him who looks exactly like him, so I'm assuming it's his father.

I inhale before I slip out of bed to use his bathroom. In contrast to his bedroom, the bathroom is all white, with a long double sink vanity across from the door. Two single mirrors are above the sinks, each with a black light fixture on top that matches the black handles of the drawers and the cupboards. All of his stuff is gathered around just one of the sinks. His basketball shorts from yesterday are thrown on the light-gray cushion of a built-in bench against the wall.

I check on Asa, and when I see he's still sleeping, I head downstairs. I stop midway when I see Lincoln on the couch. A blanket is on the bottom half of his body, and his chest is bare. One of his hands is over his head while the other rests on his stomach. His face is soft in sleep, and my stomach flutters.

I look from him to the door that has the coffee machine behind it. I take a full second before I make the decision, and instead of going to make a coffee, I head back up to his bedroom. When I ran to my place to get my pj's last night, I couldn't be bothered to grab a new change of clothes for fear that something would happen to Asa. So I make his bed and change into yesterday's shorts and tank top.

I hear Asa get out of his bed and rush to leave his room, and I meet him as he opens the door. He squints in the light coming up the stairs from the kitchen. I put my finger to my lips.

"Morning, buddy," I whisper to him. "Your dad is on the couch sleeping. How about we get dressed and go pick up some breakfast from the bakery and bring it back for him?"

"Okay," he says softly.

"Do you think you can get changed and brush your teeth without waking him?" He nods his head. "Do you think we can sneak out of the

house without him waking?”

Asa’s face fills with a huge smile, and he nods again. “Oh yeah.” He turns and rushes back into his room as I wait for him. He comes out five minutes later in shorts and a T-shirt, wiping his mouth.

“This is the plan,” I tell him. “We walk downstairs and sneak past him to the front door—”

“No.” He shakes his head. “We head to the garage and go out the side door.”

“Oh. That’s better than my idea.” He smiles proudly. “Follow me and hold on to the railing. The steps are slippery.”

“Got it,” he confirms, and I walk to the steps on my tippy-toes.

Going down one step and then the next, I look over my shoulder at Asa, who is copying my every move. We make it to the bottom step and stand there for a second to confirm that Lincoln is still sleeping. Then I point to the front door where our shoes are. Asa creeps silently over to pick up his and mine and comes back to me.

We make our way to the kitchen and the door that leads to the garage. I instinctively close my eyes as I slowly turn the handle all the way before softly pushing it open. It makes a little creak, and I freeze. Asa looks at me with big eyes. We listen intently, but don’t hear anything.

I ease the door open more. Asa slips out, and I follow him, shutting the door as quietly as I can. Asa sits on the step in the garage, tying his sneakers, as I slide my feet into my flip-flops.

“Ready?” I whisper. He nods, and we head outside through the side door.

Only when we are on the sidewalk do I speak in a normal voice. “Look at us,” I hold up my hand. “We are amazing.”

He gives me a high five. “I thought he was going to wake up for sure.”

I suddenly remember I don’t have my car. “It’s a nice day, why don’t we walk to the bakery to give him more time to sleep?” He nods his head, and

we start the ten-minute walk.

The breeze is warm, and I can already tell it's going to be a hot day. The sun is shining, and there are zero clouds giving shade.

When we get to the air-conditioned shop, there are people in line.

"What do you think we should get your dad for breakfast?"

"A bagel. He likes the one with egg and sausage."

We wait for our turn, and Ms. Maddie greets us. "Well, you two are early."

"We snuck out of the house," Asa tells her. "Dad was sleeping on the couch."

"He got in really late last night." I feel the need to defend my decision to leave the house with the child without his father's permission. "We were going to get breakfast and then wake him."

"Aren't you thoughtful?" she states with a huge smile. "What can I get you guys?"

I order two bagel sandwiches for Lincoln and the same for myself, so as not to make a fuss. Asa orders his own bagel with cream cheese, and I get an iced matcha while he gets a chocolate milk for our walk back home. Ms. Maddie comes back and hands us two bags. "I threw in some sweet treats." She winks at me. "Have a nice day, it's going to be a hot one."

"Thank you," I reply.

As we turn to leave, we come face-to-face with an older woman.

"Hey, Cathy," Asa says. She smiles at him and gives him a fist bump, then ruffles his hair before stepping up to the counter to place her order. "She works with my dad," Asa tells me as he pulls the door open for me.

We play I Spy on the way back to the house, a game I learned from Asa just yesterday. I don't know why, but I'm expecting Lincoln to come barreling out of the house the moment we reach the front walk and yell at me for escaping. Asa goes inside first, kicking off his shoes, and I follow, slipping off my flip-flops.

The moment we step into the kitchen, Lincoln sits up on the couch.

“Morning, Dad,” Asa says, rushing to him. “We left and got breakfast.” Lincoln rubs his hands over his face, a confused look on it. “We snuck out of the house while you were sleeping. You were snoring like a bear.”

“I was not,” he mumbles. He grabs Asa around the waist and falls onto his back, Asa laughing on top of him.

“Yes, you were. Ask Finley.” He giggles.

“I’m not confirming nor denying anything.” I put the bags on the kitchen counter and get three plates. “But we did sneak out, and you didn’t hear us. Just saying.”

“I’m hungry,” Asa declares. “Finley said I couldn’t eat my bagel until we got home.”

Lincoln lets him go, and he hops to his feet, running to me. Lincoln gets up more slowly. He’s wearing another pair of shorts, and as he raises his hands in the air and stretches, I can see the muscles ripple in his chest and arms. My mouth instantly waters.

“I’ll be right back,” he mumbles. He grips the railing firmly as he climbs the stairs.

I plate Asa’s breakfast, and he takes it outside to the deck. I’m about to pour my coffee when I hear footsteps. I turn to find Lincoln, still shirtless.

“I’m just making my coffee, and then I’ll get out of your way.”

“Okay.” He looks in the bag at the bagels. “Is one of these mine?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Two of those are yours.” I wish I had my frother here as I pour milk into my mug.

“Did you clean the floor with furniture polish?” I turn to see him standing with his hands outstretched to the side, leaning on the other side of the island.

My eyebrows pinch together. “Yeah, why?”

“I almost broke my neck on the stairs last night. It’s like pouring oil on a tile floor.”

I can actually feel my eyes widen. “I don’t know what that means,” I admit.

“It’s slippery, like dangerously slippery.”

I pick up the bottle from the cabinet. “But it says it’s for wood, right here.” I point to the label.

“Yeah, it’s good for dusting furniture, not the floor.”

“Really?” I examine the bottle. It doesn’t say anywhere on the label not to use it on floors.

“Really.” He gets a mug and pours his coffee.

“Huh. Well, it’s very misleading.” I store the bottle under the sink where I found it. “What time did you get home?”

“A little after two.” I look at the clock on the stove, and it’s just after 9:00 a.m.

“You could have woken me up. I could have just gone to my bed.”

“It’s fine,” he mumbles. “Obviously, I slept fine if I didn’t even hear the two of you leave.”

“Right? I’m not sure how good you are at your job if two people who are not criminals can sneak out right past you, and we made noise.”

“You did not. I would have heard you make noise.”

I walk over to the door of the garage and open it. It makes the exact same sound as before. “You didn’t hear that, or us tippy-toeing down the steps, right past you to the front door, and then out this door. Wait”—I hold up my hand—“does this mean I could be a spy?” He rolls his eyes at me, and I snort. “I’m taking that as a yes.” I pick up my plate. “Think of it this way, it’s better than admitting you suck.” I smile big at him before walking out the door, laughing to myself.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LINCOLN

I watch her walk out, and I can hear her laugh as my cock stirs in my pants.

"Would you knock it off?" I look down at my shorts. It's bad enough that I had to escape this morning when I got a hard-on from her just looking at me when I stood up.

I grab my cup of coffee and the plate and head outside. She and Asa sit at the table laughing about something. Asa holds up his hand, and she gives him a high five.

"The dream team," she cheers to him.

"What are you two laughing about?" I mumble as I put my plate down in front of the chair I always sit in. I wonder if she knew this was my chair from yesterday when we had coffee together.

"That we are sneakier," Asa rephrases, "No, the sneakiest."

In all honesty, I am shocked I didn't hear them. I must have been more tired than I thought. "Where is your car?" I ask Finley.

"I had to take it to Brock's for him to look at a couple of things," she answers quickly. "I want to make sure it's always up to code because of Asa."

"Are you going to work today?" Asa asks me.

I shake my head. "I have the whole day off." He gasps. "What do you want to do?"

“Can we go to the lake?” he asks, and I nod.

“That sounds like fun.” Finley takes a bite of her bagel.

“What are you going to do on your day off?” I ask her, and she shrugs.

“Maybe a mani-pedi.”

“That sounds boring,” Asa declares. “You should come to the lake with us.”

“It’s her day off, buddy. She doesn’t have to come with us.”

“I know she doesn’t have to come with us,” Asa says, taking a bite of his rainbow bagel and continuing with his mouth full, “but she’ll have fun.”

I look at Finley and raise my eyebrows in question.

“You think I’d like the lake?” she asks Asa.

“Yeah.” All I can do is watch the two of them. I’m not sure I want to say one thing or another. “It’s fun, and you can relax there if you want.”

“I don’t know,” Finley hedges, “maybe your dad wants to spend time with you.” She glances at me.

“It’s fine by me if you come,” I say, surprising myself. “I mean, you wouldn’t be working or anything like that. You don’t even have to sit with us.”

“She can’t sit alone,” Asa balks. “That’s not safe.”

“Thanks, little man.” She smiles at him and holds out her fist, and he gives her a fist bump. “If it’s okay with your dad, I would love to come to the beach with you guys.”

“It’s a lake,” I remind her.

“Is there sand?” she asks, and I nod my head. “Then it’s a beach.” She pops the last bite of her bagel into her mouth.

I don’t bother telling her it’s not a beach because she gets up from the table. “What time will we be leaving?” she asks me, and I look back at the clock on top of the stove.

“We should head out soon. Going to stop at the bakery to grab some things to take with us. How long will you need to get ready?”

“About twenty minutes should be good.” She takes her plate with her to her apartment. “Come and knock when you guys are ready to head out.”

“When you finish, you are going to be in charge of packing the beach bag with the Frisbee and the soccer ball,” I tell Asa. “Then go get into your swim trunks and pack a change of clothes for after.”

“Got it.” He gets up, grabs his plate, and heads inside.

When I finish my bagel, I add my plate to the pile in the sink and head upstairs to my walk-in closet for my swim trunks and a T-shirt. Grabbing the black backpack in the corner, I put a pair of shorts and another T-shirt in it. I toss in my deodorant and notice that Finley’s pj’s are on the seat in the bathroom with my shorts. I leave them there and head to Asa’s room.

“Where is your change of clothes?” I ask him as he struggles to put on his shirt properly, turning it around his neck when he sees it’s backward. He slips his arms into the sleeves before finding the change of clothes and handing it to me to add to the backpack. I head downstairs to the bathroom, where I keep the sunscreen, then grab my keys, sunglasses, and phone at the door.

“Where is the beach bag?” I ask Asa as he puts on his sandals.

“I put it in the back, next to the truck. I’m going to go and get Finley.” He rushes out the door, slamming it behind him.

Finley is already walking out of her apartment as I lock the door, wearing white shorts with a blue long-sleeved linen shirt that buttons down the front. Only one side of it is tucked in, and she’s carrying a wicker basket in her hand.

“Who is excited to go to the beach?” she asks Asa.

“It’s a lake, Finley,” he reminds her as I get three beach chairs from the garage.

“What are those?” she asks me.

“Beach chairs for us to sit in. I’m going to grab the umbrella.” I toss my backpack in the back of the truck. “Asa, grab the bag of beach towels.”

“Beach chairs?” she says as if the words are foreign to her. “They don’t have, like, beach cabanas?”

I stare at her. “No.” It’s in this moment that I realize I don’t know anything about her life, besides that she’s getting divorced. “Have you ever been to a lake before?”

She cocks her head to the side. “I’m sure I’ve been to a lake before . . .” She taps her chin, then gasps when she thinks of something. “I’ve been to Lake Como.”

I snort. “Lake Como in Italy?”

“Is there another one?”

“No. But I might as well burst your bubble right now. This is not like Lake Como.”

“I mean, every lake is different,” she states as I put the umbrella in the truck and Asa adds three towels. “But I’m sure this one is just as good.”

“Can’t wait to see what you think,” I mumble. “Get in the truck, everybody.”

She watches Asa get in the back of the extended cab before she gets into the front seat. “This is fun,” she says, reaching for her seat belt, “isn’t it, big guy?”

“Yeah,” I agree, even though I know she was talking to Asa. She grins at me.

AT THE BAKERY, I spot Brock with Everleigh beside the display case, his arm around her shoulder. “Hey,” I say to them.

Brock gives me a nod of his chin and gives Asa a smile. Then his eyes go big when he sees Finley. “Just the girl I was going to call. I got the quote for the damage.”

“What damage?” I ask. Brock’s eyes narrow at me.

“When we went fishing, I had to leave my car on the side of the road, and it must have gotten sideswiped,” Finley says, looking at Brock and not me. I immediately know she’s lying from both of their faces.

“It’ll be ready later this afternoon,” he tells her. “You can come in tomorrow and pay.”

“That sounds great.” She turns to Everleigh. “We’re going to the beach.”

“The lake,” Asa corrects her.

“To a body of water that also has sand,” she retorts, “and we would like to pack a couple of lunches for a picnic.”

Everleigh rolls her lips to keep from laughing. “I have some things I’ve started to prepare.” She moves toward the back. “I’ll be right out.”

I share a look with Brock, letting him know I’ll be calling him sometime to discuss her car. “I’ll see you later,” Brock says. “Have fun at the body of water.” He tries not to laugh as he heads out.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your car?” I know I should wait until we are out of the bakery and sitting on the beach, but I can’t help it.

“It was a hit-and-run, and the damage wasn’t that bad. There was nothing to tell.” She looks around, avoiding eye contact. The worker at the counter finishes with a customer. “Excuse me, can I have a matcha coconut cloud?” She looks at Asa. “Do you want a raspberry iced tea?” He nods his head. “Do you want anything?”

“I’m good,” I reply as the girl goes to make the drinks.

Everleigh comes out from the back with a big basket. “You know the drill, you return the basket tomorrow,” she says to Finley, who just smiles at her. *Why would she know the drill?* I make a mental note to ask her later.

The girl comes back with the green drink that she spilled on me the first day I met her.

“Thank you.” Finley pays for the drinks and turns to us. “Let’s go to the beach.”

I take the basket from her and share a glance with Asa. As we walk out of the bakery, neither of us corrects her.

The drive is about forty-five minutes, and we do it with all the windows down as she gazes out of her window and Asa his. Her hair is tucked behind her ears but still flowing everywhere.

We pull into the parking lot, and there aren't that many cars there. It's probably because it's the middle of the week and most people are at work. We get out, and she stands next to the truck, looking around.

"Okay, I've never been to this kind of beach," she states. "Usually, I just show up, and it's done." She laughs. "So you'll have to tell me what to do."

"I'll grab the chairs and the basket," I start. "You can carry the towel bag and umbrella." She reaches for the two things I told her. "Buddy, you got the rest."

"Okay, Dad," Asa agrees.

"Where do we usually sit?" she asks as we approach the lake. Her shorts pull tighter around her ass as she bends to pick up something from the path, and all words are pulled away from my vocabulary.

Get a fucking grip, I scold myself as I look away. I try to focus on choosing a place to set up, but all I can see are her tanned legs. All my blood has moved down south, leaving nothing in my brain.

"Over there." Asa points and marches to the spot closest to the water. He dumps his bags down, and I put down the chairs as she drops the umbrella.

"Okay, what next?" she asks me.

"Nothing." My voice comes out like there is something stuck inside my throat, and I clear it. "I'll put up the umbrella, and then we can store the food under it." I retrieve the little shovel from the beach bag. "You have to get some of the wet sand so it has a better grip." I squat down and start to dig to get to the sand underneath.

"Can I go touch the water?" Asa asks.

“If you go with Finley.”

I pause to watch them walk to the edge of the water together. She shrieks when the cold touches her feet, making Asa laugh loudly. She runs away from the lake, making everything bounce, and my cock, which is already hard, is somehow harder. It’s like she’s moving in slow motion. Fuck, maybe I’m having a stroke.

I shake my head to stop myself from ogling her openly and work to get things set up. They come back as I finish putting up the umbrella. Finley applies sunscreen to Asa.

He grabs the soccer ball. “Dad, can we kick the ball around?”

“In a sec.” I open the chairs.

Finley starts unbuttoning her shirt, and I grab my sunglasses and put them on. She shrugs it off her shoulders, revealing a white bikini top with light-blue flowers printed on it. She shimmies her hips side to side as she takes off the shorts. The matching bottoms are tied at each hip in bows with long strings. My mouth literally waters when she bends over to pick up the sunscreen. She stretches a leg out as she sprays it, then does the other one, her movements making me stay frozen. She turns around, and I see that her bottoms aren’t a thong. Thank Christ. I would have had to go dive into the water and stay there the rest of the day.

“Can I sit on any chair?” she asks me. I nod my head, not sure I can say anything without drool coming out of my mouth. I watch her like I’ve never watched another human being before as she sits down. But then she quickly gets up to put on sunscreen. I think my mouth hangs open when I watch her rub the cream into her legs.

“Dad,” Asa calls, and my head whips to him as if he caught me staring at her. “Come on.” He motions with his hand.

I take off my shirt and toss it to the side. I’m about to start running to him when she stops me.

“Are you not going to put sunscreen on?” She leans back in her chair. “The sun is hot today.” She bends to grab the sunscreen she tossed on top of the bag. “Do you want me to do your back?” *I do not fucking want you putting your hands on me*, one side of my head screams. *I’ve got something else for you to do*, the other side screams. “Or are you some sort of acrobat that can rub his own back?” She laughs, shaking the sunscreen.

I don’t say a fucking thing, not a thing, as she stands and walks around me to spray my back. I stand there, eyes closed behind my sunglasses, counting sheep and thinking about all my training to stay professional. When she’s finished spraying my back, I quickly turn around, only for her hand to land on my chest. My chest is rising and falling as I look down at her hand resting, palm down, on my pec.

Her eyes also fly to her hand. “Um,” she says nervously, “I was going to rub the sunscreen in.” It takes her a quick minute before she gets her bearings and pulls her hand from me. My chest still feels the heat of her touch. She hands me the sunscreen. “You can do your front.” She avoids looking at me as she returns to her chair.

I try to swallow, but my mouth is so dry you would think I was in the desert for the last ten days without water in the blistering heat. I spray my chest absentmindedly, not even bothering to rub it in, before tossing the sunscreen back on top of the bag and rushing to get away from her.

I’m thankful I have my glasses on, so I can stare at her while I play soccer with my son. She leans back on the chair, and she is fucking perfect in every single way.

“I’m going into the water,” Asa announces when I miss the ball ten times because I’m not paying attention. “You coming?”

I look at him, then at Finley. “Oh yeah, I’m coming.” I hope the lake is full of ice water because it’s the only thing that will cool me down right now.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FINLEY

The sun is slowly creeping over the horizon, warming my face, and I hear birds chirping. I smile, not sure I've ever stopped for a minute when I was back home to listen to the birds. I mean, I don't think I was ever up this early back home. I would sleep in until about eight or nine in the morning, depending on what I did the night before.

"Morning," Lincoln says. He pauses as he closes the side door behind him. "Why are you just standing there?"

"I was taking in the sound of the birds before I had my coffee in the tree house." I hold up my cup topped with a generous amount of frothy milk.

He chuckles. "I won't tell on you if you do." He sits down, stretching out his legs.

"Sleep good?" I ask, not moving from my spot because I don't want to intrude on his private time while he enjoys his coffee.

"Just as good as the couch," he deadpans. I snort. "Are you going to come join me, or stand there debating about going to the tree house?"

"I didn't want to intrude," I tell him the truth, "so I was waiting for you to invite me."

"Finley, do you want to sit down and have your coffee here?" He leans back in his chair, his feet crossing at the ankles.

It’s really a shame that he’s smoking hot. It would be a lot easier to be pissy to him if I hadn’t pictured him naked most of yesterday. It was fine until he came out of the water, and his shorts just clung to him, as if he was wearing nothing. I had to put my hand up to my forehead to block out the sun so I could see everything. Then he bent to pick up the Frisbee. With the way his muscles showed off every single time he tossed it to Asa, I had to get up and step into the ice-cold water. There, I spent most of the time watching him, along with some of the moms. As time went by, I got really annoyed and had no idea why.

“How did you sleep?” he asks.

“You know what they say about fresh air?” I take a sip of my coffee. “It’s true. I was wiped out. I started giving myself a pedicure, then gave up and just went to bed. I fell asleep, and I don’t even think my head was on the pillow.” He laughs. “I swear, I think it was like seven thirty, if not earlier.”

“Asa hit the hay as soon as he got out of the shower. He didn’t even bother coming downstairs. He just went straight to bed.”

“Are you working today?”

“I was supposed to have today off, but I have to go in now. I definitely have the next two days off after that.” He picks up his cup. “So you can have two days off in a row.”

I gasp and cross one leg over the other. “I don’t even know what I’ll do with myself.”

He finishes his coffee as his phone rings. “I have to get this.” He gets up. “I have to leave by eight.”

“I’ll be back by then,” I assure him. My mind spins, wondering if it was his girlfriend calling him. Does he have a girlfriend? Why else would he have to excuse himself? I try not to think about it as I finish my coffee and head inside to get dressed. I choose a pair of jeans that fit me tight around the hips and looser down the legs, with holes in each knee, completing the

outfit with a faded black T-shirt. I tuck the front inside of my jeans before combing my hair and heading back to the house.

He's coming downstairs dressed in his usual cargo pants and T-shirt. "He's still sleeping," he says to me. "I have to get going."

"I'll have him call you when he gets up."

"I might not be able to answer."

"I'll text Harmony and see if we can meet up with her and Wyatt."

"Okay, stay away from fishing, yeah?" he teases, and I lift my hand.

"You don't have to tell me twice." He stands by the door for a bit longer than he should, looking at me, before he puts his head down. He looks back at me once more. "Have a good day, Finley."

"Be safe." Our shared look lingers for a couple of seconds before he walks out.

When I hear his truck start, I look up. "Is this some sort of test? I get divorced, and you send me a smoking-hot dad, who lives about twelve hours away, to tell me everything is going to be okay?"

I wait for an answer, but there is none. I plop down on the couch, putting my hand on my head.

Asa comes down the steps.

"Morning, buddy," I greet him.

He grunts and heads to the chair I usually sit on, curling his legs on the cushion. I reach for the throw blanket he likes and toss it to him. "Thanks," he says, putting his head on the arm of the chair.

"Want breakfast?" I ask, though I'm not ready to move yet.

"Later," he replies.

"Great. You're the best." He returns my smile with a sleepy one of his own. "Don't forget that when I'm gone."

"I won't," he assures me.

WE SPEND a chill morning together until it's time to meet Harmony and Wyatt at the park. They're already waiting for us when we get there, and I join Harmony on the bench while the boys catch up with each other. Harmony tells me about some of the new recipes she's working on, including one for a cherry chocolate cake that has my mouth watering.

"Finley"—Asa runs to me—"Wyatt is going to his uncle's horse farm."

"Okay." I'm not sure why he's telling me this.

"He said I could go with him."

"I don't know, buddy."

"You should come," Harmony says. "Charlie, Wyatt's uncle and my brother-in-law, runs an equestrian therapy farm."

"Oh, wow. If you don't think he would mind, we would love to come."

WE GET IN HER CAR, and she heads to the ranch. As she parks on the gravel road, I take in the sign displaying *Mustang Creek Ranch*.

We get out, and Asa slides his hand in mine. "You okay?" I ask him, and he looks up.

"I've never ridden a horse before," he confides.

"What?" I ask, shocked. "But you live in the South."

He shrugs as Wyatt and Harmony walk ahead of us. A man comes out of the barn, and Wyatt runs over to him. "Uncle Charlie, I brought Asa."

"Did you?" He looks over at us. "Welcome to Mustang Creek Ranch. How are you, Asa?"

"Okay." I can hear the uncertainty in Asa's voice.

"It's okay, buddy." I put my hand over his shoulder. "Hi, I'm Finley." I shake Charlie's hand, then look to the side where the horses are being let out. "You've got some beauties."

He smirks. "You ride?"

“Oh yeah. Twenty something years of equestrian competitions under my belt,” I reply, and Asa gasps.

“You don’t say? Come this way.” Charlie motions with his head to me.

“I’ll watch Asa,” Harmony offers.

I follow Charlie to the back, where a man is sitting on a desk, a clipboard in one hand and a coffee in the other. “Is Rocky saddled?” Charlie asks him.

The man looks from him to me. “He’s pissed.”

“Good. I have someone who I think will tame him.”

“Wait, what?” I say.

“We think he just hates male riders. The only other girl we have is Emmett’s wife, Lilah, and she’s pregnant, so she can’t ride him.”

“So you want me to get on a pissed-off horse?”

Charlie smirks and folds his arms.

The other man leaves, returning with an almost all-black horse with a white blaze to its muzzle.

“He looks like he’s still pissed,” I say as the horse’s tail goes back and forth and his ears go back.

“He is,” the guy confirms. “I’m Emmett, by the way. I run the ranch. I’m Lucy’s dad.” I remember Lucy from when Asa was playing soccer with his friends.

“It’s so nice to meet you. Lucy is an amazing child. I’m Finley,” I introduce myself. “Umm, I don’t know if I’m the right person to help with this guy. I haven’t ridden in over a year.”

“With twenty years of competition experience, you’ll be fine. Let’s go,” Charlie urges.

I follow him out to the fenced area. Asa stands on one of the rails with Wyatt and a girl next to him.

“An audience,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Here we go.”

“Here *you* go,” Charlie corrects, holding the reins in his hand.

I approach Rocky slowly. “Hey, handsome.” I rub his neck, and he shies away from my touch, stepping sideways. “Yeah, I get it.” I take a step toward him and rub him again. “They’ve been trying to tame you, haven’t they?” He doesn’t move this time. “I’m going to ride you, is that okay?” I keep my eyes on Rocky as I mumble to Charlie, “If I get hurt, my boss is going to kill me. And I’m going to blame you.”

I put my foot in the stirrup and mount him. I grab onto the horn as he moves side to side. “If you buck me off, I’m going to be pissed,” I snap at Rocky, who stops moving. “Now, let’s see what you’re like.” Charlie releases the reins, and I nudge Rocky’s side with my foot. The horse grunts. “Yeah.” He walks forward slowly, and Charlie moves out of the way. “That’s a boy,” I praise. We walk around the fenced arena twice. He shies away from the kids when we get to that part of the fence. “No one is going to hurt you,” I assure him. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“You want to open him up?” Charlie says to me. I try to hide my smile. “Go for it.”

“Okay, handsome,” I encourage, “let’s show them what you can do.” I nudge his side a little harder, and he takes off in a trot. When I nudge him again, he canters. I hear the kids cheering as he goes right and left, back and forth. I lose track of everything when I’m on him.

Finally, he stops next to the barn. I grin at Charlie. “Is that what you wanted?”

“Oh yeah,” he says. I look over to where the kids were. When I see they’re not there anymore, I start to panic.

“They’re right there.” Charlie points, and I see the kids on horses. Asa is on a horse, looking back at me with a huge smile on his face.

I move Rocky toward them, and the minute I get close, I hear Asa. “Look, Finley, I’m doing it! I’m riding!”

“I see that,” I say, dismounting and leading Rocky over. “Rocky, this is Asa, and he’s mine,” I warn him, “so we are going to make sure he’s okay.”

“You ride like Lilah,” Lucy says, and it’s clearly a compliment.

“Thank you. Do you like to ride horses?”

“I do,” she confirms. “We’re going on a trail ride. Are you coming?”

“Of course.” I mount up. I want to be with Asa if they’re going to be riding.

She and Wyatt lead the way through the path in the woods. I make sure that I’m beside Asa the whole time, ready to jump off my horse and onto his if he starts to get scared.

When we finally make our way back to the barn, I’m sad the day is over. I dismount, giving Rocky’s neck a pat, then help Asa down.

“How was that?” I ask him, and he smiles big.

“Can we come back?”

I laugh. “You caught the bug.”

“The bug?” he asks me.

“You either ride a horse the first time and you’re just okay about it, or it itches and you can’t wait for the next time you get to ride.”

“It was so much fun,” he declares as Charlie comes out of the barn with a smile on his face.

“How was it?”

“So good I want to come back,” Asa says.

“Well, we’ll see if that stays true. You ride the horse, you get to take care of him after.”

“What?” Asa asks.

“Come this way.” He takes the reins of the horse. “Wyatt will tell you what to do.”

“You going to make him muck the stalls?” I ask, knowing exactly what he’s doing.

“You bet.” I can’t help but laugh. “He throws up, he’ll never come back.” He turns around and walks backward. “By the way, nice ride.”

“I don’t know how to do much, but I know how to ride a horse.” He laughs as he walks inside the barn. “Thanks for not bucking me off.” I rub Rocky’s neck, already wondering when I’ll see him next.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LINCOLN

It’s just past 3:00 p.m., and I’m at my desk when Randy finally calls me. I sit up as I answer. “Burke.”

“Hey, it’s Randy.” His voice is all grumbly like he just woke up.

“No shit. Where the fuck have you been for the last goddamn week?”

“I can explain,” his voice drops low, “but not over the phone.”

“Where?”

“The strip club in one hour.” Without giving me a chance to say anything, he disconnects.

I toss my phone on the desk and get up to go to Captain’s office.

“Hey.” I knock and stick my head in. “Randy called. I have to meet him in an hour.”

“Finally. You think he’s got anything?”

“We won’t know until we meet with him.” I lean against the doorjamb. When I was having coffee with Finley this morning, Martinez scheduled an emergency meeting. I had to rush my ass all the way there to be told that the drug runners were tipped off, and there is a leak somewhere. Something I already knew from the gift they left Martinez.

“Go meet him,” Captain huffs out. “Tomorrow, we have that meeting with the team everyone has to attend. Then you get the whole weekend off, so I don’t want to hear or see your face.”

“Wow.” I put my hand to my chest. “I’m hurt.”

“Get the fuck out of here.” He motions with his chin. I turn to walk away. “I want you checking in with Cathy.”

“Got it.” I grab my things and stop at the front desk. “Hey,” I say to Cathy, “I need a car.”

“It’s always ‘I need something’ and never ‘let me give you something,’” she mumbles as she reaches into the drawer. “Lucky number two today.”

“Do you have four by any chance?”

She rolls her eyes and looks into the drawer. “It’s the same car.”

“It’s not.” I take the key from her. “This one has my ass imprint in the driver’s seat from all the time I’ve spent in it.” I smile big. “Have a great night. I’ll be checking in with you when I’m done.”

“Great,” she quips sarcastically, “I can’t wait.”

I call Finley from the car before I start driving. After four rings, her voicemail picks up.

“Hi, you’ve reached . . . well, I’m not just going to tell you my name. You should know who you called, so that is going to be a test. If you don’t say my name as soon as the beep comes, I’m not calling you back. You’ve been warned.”

I shake my head. “Hey, it’s me. I’m not going to tell you who it is. You should know. Anyway, I don’t know if I’ll be home for dinner. I don’t think I’ll be late, but I can’t confirm what time.” I sigh. “I’ll call you when I can. Bye, Finley.” I disconnect and start my drive out to the strip club.

I’m parking the car when the phone rings, and I see it’s Randy again. “I’m here.”

“Shit,” he hisses. “I was on my way, but I think someone is following me.”

“No one is following you. Where are you now?”

“I’m not telling you,” he hisses. It sounds like he’s under a bush or something.

I let out an aggravated breath. “Okay, how is this. How about I meet you at the diner in town? It’s open, and if anyone is following you, they aren’t going to do anything with all those people around. We’ll go in, and I’ll buy you a burger.”

He takes a second to think about it. “Fine. I’ll be there in an hour.”

“An hour?” He has already disconnected.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I back my vehicle backward in the diner lot, facing the door. I can see through the windows that Randy isn’t there yet.

Time ticks by, and my phone buzzes. I look down to see a text from Finley.

FINLEY:

I think you left me a message, but I didn’t listen to the whole thing because you didn’t follow the rules. By the way, we’re home.

ME:

I said your name. I just said it at the end. Glad you guys are home. I don’t know how long I’ll be.

FINLEY:

We’re going to have a movie night. But I will not let him fall asleep on the couch.

ME:

Sounds good. I’ll call you when I’m on my way.

FINLEY:

10-4

I snort out a chuckle and put my phone down as I continue to watch the door. The hour arrives, no Randy. It turns into an hour and a half, and finally, when it’s closing in on the two-hour mark, I spot Randy walking toward the diner. He’s wearing a black hoodie and black jeans that look like

they have mud caked on them. His head is moving side to side to make sure he isn't being followed. I get out of my car and met him at the door.

"You know, you are bringing more attention to yourself than not," I say. "Who in their right mind wears a sweatshirt in the middle of summer?"

He takes the hood off. "I was trying to blend in." He looks around. "People could be watching us," he whispers. Nothing sticks out to me, but he might not be wrong. "You pissed off a lot of people the other night."

"Let's go inside and get something to eat. If they are watching, they won't know what this is about."

I go in and choose a window booth. He slides in across from me. "What do you want to eat?"

"A burger." He taps his thumb on the table. He's still acting like he expects a whole SWAT team to charge in.

When the waitress arrives, I order us both a burger. When she steps away, I look at Randy.

"Okay, tell me what you heard."

He debates whether he'll talk for half a second before he starts. "They got a tip-off that you guys were going to be there, so they stalled you guys and off-loaded right before you got there."

"Do you know who tipped them off?"

He shakes his head. "Not directly, but from what I heard, it came from inside. They knew that shit was going down. They even knew you were all over at that place on Park Street waiting, and the routes you guys were going to take."

"I'm going to need names, Randy. I can't go in there with this and not have a name."

"I don't have a—" He stops talking when the door opens, and two guys come in. He leans closer, lowering his voice even more. "I heard it from a friend, who heard it from another friend, who knows one of the runners."

“When do you think their next drop will be?” I ask him, matching his volume.

The waitress comes with our burgers. Once she’s gone, he shrugs.

“They’re waiting to hear what you guys are up to next.” He dives into his burger as if he hasn’t eaten in a month.

“You think if I gave you some intel, you could get it to them?” I’m thinking we might be able to trip them up. I take a casual bite of my burger.

“No way, man. I don’t want to be any more involved in this than I am already.”

“Fine, but you need to keep your eyes and ears open. I want to know if you hear anything else.”

He groans. “Man, this is fucked up. I don’t want to be in this. Can’t you just take what I gave you and move on?”

I think about pushing him, but I don’t want to burn my bridges. “For now.” I grab a napkin and clean my hands before tossing it on the table. “But if I need anything else—”

“Don’t call me.” He gets out of the booth. “Forget that we even had this conversation.”

“I’ll be in touch,” I tell him as he puts his hood back on. He escapes through the door.

I pay the bill, leave the diner, and call Cathy right away. “I’m on my way back to the station.”

“Everything good?” she asks. “You sound pissed.”

“This meeting was supposed to happen three hours ago.” It’s a little past 8:00 p.m. now. “We’ll have a debrief tomorrow with Captain.”

“I can’t wait,” she deadpans. “See you then.”

She hangs up, and I make my way to the station, dumping off my keys and then getting into my truck to go home.

Finley’s car is parked at the curb when I get home. I want to kick myself for forgetting to call Brock today to find out exactly what was wrong with

it.

The lights are all off in the front, but I see a glow out back. I open the front door and wait a couple of minutes before I say something, just in case Asa's sleeping. I take off my boots and walk to the kitchen. It's empty. The television is playing, and no one is in the room.

I find Asa upstairs, lying in the middle of his bed, turned on his side.

"Hey, Dad." He gets up on his elbow.

"Hey, buddy." I walk into the room and look around. "Where's Finley?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "She was downstairs when I came to bed." Just then, I hear the toilet flush and the downstairs bathroom door open. The TV cuts off, and I hear her footsteps moving to the kitchen.

I sit on the side of his bed. "Did you have a good day?"

He smiles big and nods. "We went to the barn."

My eyebrows pinch together. "What?"

"We went to Mr. Charlie's barn, and he let us ride horses." My blood freezes. "It was really cool and Finley—"

"She was there?" I try not to let him know how pissed I am.

"Yeah, she rode a black horse. Dad, she was racing with him. It was so cool!" He goes on in detail about how they both went on a trail ride, and the horse he rode.

"That sounds like fun." I kiss his head. "Go to sleep now. I have to work tomorrow, but then I'm off for the weekend."

"Cool. Maybe we can go back there?"

"We'll see."

I leave his door open a bit and head back downstairs. I'm pissed that she did something she didn't run by me, again.

She's in the kitchen putting away the plates.

"Hey," she smiles at me over her shoulder. "I thought I heard voices."

I glare at her, and her smile fades. Since I know Asa isn't sleeping yet, I point to the glass door that leads outside, then walk over and open it.

“Do you want me to follow you?” she asks with a confused frown.

“Yes,” I hiss and go outside, continuing down the four steps to the yard.

She joins me.

I should maybe calm down a bit, count to ten or something. But just like always with her, I jump the gun. “What the fuck were you thinking?” The words come out of my mouth before I get a chance to stop them.

“Excuse me?” She steps off the last step, and I see she’s barefoot.

My hands go to my hips. “You took him horseback riding.” I lean forward.

“Umm, yeah,” she says, like she’s not getting why I’m so pissed.

“Are you out of your mind? Why the hell would you take him to ride horses?”

“Are you seriously pissed about this?”

“Did you race?”

“With Asa? Of course not.”

“I asked if *you* raced.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Does it matter?”

“It fucking matters to me.” My voice is raised, and I tone it down, not wanting the neighbors to hear. “You did something stupid and irresponsible today, and you did it with my kid.”

“Okay, first of all . . .” She takes a step toward me. “I would never, ever do anything to endanger Asa.” Her voice is tight, and she folds her arms over her chest. “I was next to him the whole time he was riding. I wasn’t racing him. I was seeing what he could do. He never went faster than a trot.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” I mimic her stance with my arms folded over my chest. “He could have fallen off the horse and gotten hurt. He could have freaked out and spooked a horse and been stepped on. He could have—”

“Wow,” she cuts me off. “You think I would ever . . . ever do anything to let him get hurt?” She shakes her head. “He was fine. He was wearing a riding helmet. Not that you even care, but horses are masters of reading body language. They can pick up fear, and when they do that, they increase their vigilance in protecting their rider.” She looks down. “It’s never going to be good enough for you. I’ll always do something you are going to be pissed off about.” She throws her hands up. “Not everyone can be as perfect as you, Lincoln. Good night.” She spins on her heel and starts toward her apartment.

I know I should just let her go. I know that nothing good will come from continuing this conversation. I know this, my head knows this, but my actions? My actions have a mind of their own. My hand reaches out to grab hers, not letting her get away from me.

“What are you—” She glares at me. “What else do you have to say?”

“This,” I hiss out, one hand wrapping around her waist, the other going to her jaw. Her eyes bore into mine, and I wish there was more light outside so I could see how they shine. “Just, fuck this.” I wait for her to snap back at me.

She doesn’t say a word.

She moves her head toward me at the same time I move my head toward her. My lips part for her. Her tongue slides into my mouth. My head screams *let her go* while my body molds to her. The anger I was feeling two seconds ago is translated into this kiss, a kiss I’ve probably wanted since the first time I saw her. A kiss I secretly thought about all day. A kiss I knew could change everything.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FINLEY

My hands come up, and I'm thinking about pushing him away from me. Part of me feels like I should be shoving him back, but instead I grip his T-shirt in my palms. Our tongues slide, fighting each other. Our mouths are hungry for more. He angles his head to the side and takes the kiss deeper. My hands move up from his chest to around his neck, as his hand moves from my face toward my hair.

I don't know how long we spend kissing. I think I could kiss him all fucking night long, and it still would not be enough.

He lets go of my hair first, and I open my hands, releasing the back of his head and his shirt. Our lips separate as I take a step back.

"Finley—"

"Nope," I clip, shaking my head, not wanting to hear anything else. He said enough bullshit before the kiss, and it's a good thing his mouth covered mine. I forgot for a split second how I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself.

I need space from him, or else I think I might jump him and wrap my legs around him as he kisses the ever-loving shit out of me.

"You said what you had to say and, for the record, that shit was fucked up to the ends of the earth and back." I don't even know if that makes sense, but I'm angry about what he said to me. I'm even angrier that the kiss he gave me was the best fucking kiss I think I've had in my life. "I would

never ever do anything to hurt Asa, and it's insulting that you would think that. You"—I point to him—"I'd happily send you into the darkness of the night and leave you to fend for yourself." I turn back to my quest to stomp away from him.

"You can't just walk away from me," he declares.

Only when I'm at the door of my apartment do I turn and face him. "Watch me." I turn the handle, step inside, and close the door behind me. I lock it and then run into the bedroom to peek through the curtain, ready for him. My heart hammers in my chest so hard, and my lips still tingle from his kiss. I see him watching my door, his hands hanging at his sides. The same hands that were letting me plaster myself to him. He looks up at the sky, probably sending out a secret prayer that I disappear in a puff of smoke, or maybe trying to take back time and not kiss me.

His head comes back down, and he looks my way. I swear our eyes lock. I move away from the window, put my back against the wall, and slide down to my ass. I hear movement coming from outside, and I hold my breath, but then I hear his footsteps on the stairs to the back door.

My phone buzzes, and I look down to see it's him.

LINCOLN:

Can you come outside and talk to me?

ME:

Nope.

I hold the phone in my lap and close my eyes, the kiss playing over in my head.

The phone buzzes again.

LINCOLN:

We need to talk.

ME:

Nope.

“We do not need to talk,” I declare to my phone. “We need to do the opposite of that.”

The three dots come up on the screen.

LINCOLN:

You really think we don’t need to talk about what just happened?

ME:

Correct.

“Why do you even want to talk to me to begin with, Lincoln?” I have this conversation with the phone instead of him. “You already spewed bullshit at me, offended me, thinking I would do something to hurt Asa.”

LINCOLN:

I need to be out of the house tomorrow at eight.

ME:

Okay.

LINCOLN:

Are you just going to give me one-word answers?

ME:

Yes.

LINCOLN:

Finley.

ME:

Lincoln.

LINCOLN:

You are acting like a child.

“I’m acting like a child?” I tell the phone. “*I’m* acting like a child?” My voice goes higher. “We’ll see.”

ME:

Okay.

LINCOLN:

You can’t just stop talking to me.

“Want to bet?” I glare at the phone, thinking of a one-word answer to not let him win. I snort. “Actually, you know what is better than one word?” I ask the phone. “Zero words.”

The bubble with the three dots comes up again.

LINCOLN:

Finley.

I think about answering him, but instead I get up and head to my room. I toss the phone on the bed before I take off my top, throw it in the basket, and add the shorts and panties. I take a shower, exfoliating my skin and doing all the things I can to pamper myself in this tiny bathroom. Wrapping the towel around me and then my hair, I make my way over to my phone and see that he texted me two more times.

LINCOLN:

Finley, this is ridiculous.

LINCOLN:

How am I supposed to apologize if you won’t talk to me?

ME:

That is a you problem, Lincoln, not a me problem.

LINCOLN:

Good night, we’ll talk tomorrow.

“Oh no, we won’t,” I tell the phone and not him. Sitting on the bed, I wonder what he’s doing in the house right now.

I toss my phone aside, going back to the bathroom to comb out my hair, then slide into bed. I lay on my side and close my eyes, seeing his face right before he kissed me, remembering the feel of his hand on my face. I think

my whole body felt his heat. It was like an electric shock pulsed my body awake.

I SLEEP like the dead and only wake up when my alarm rings. I grab the phone and shut it off before lying back on the pillow. I would usually get out of bed and make my coffee now and go sit outside where Lincoln might be waiting for me. Instead, I linger in bed until the very last minute.

I make the bed and look outside, seeing it's a gloomy day. The rain is a welcome escape after two weeks of summer heat. I dress in a pair of loose-fitting ivory cashmere pants—the soft fabric is perfect for this weather. I tie a bow at the waist and grab the matching tank top, slipping it on over my bra. The top hits right above my belly button, so I put on a brown zip sweater, letting it hang open.

I make my coffee, and when it's 8:00 a.m. on the nose, I walk out of the apartment to the house barefoot, since I left my flip-flops there yesterday.

Lincoln is in the kitchen, dressed in his uniform. He's leaning against the counter, his phone in his hand.

My phone buzzes when I get to the door.

LINCOLN:

Are you coming to work today?

I open the door, and his eyes fly up to me.

"Good morning," he says, and I see him do a slow sweep of my outfit. My chest starts to feel heavy under his gaze.

"Morning," I mumble, sticking to one-word answers.

"I have to get going." He doesn't move from his spot. "It's going to rain all day today."

I take a sip of coffee to stop myself from saying *I know*. That would be two words, and he doesn't get that from me. Instead, I nod at him.

"Do you think you can do the laundry today?"

“Sure.” I walk to the farthest part of the kitchen from him. It’s the opposite of what I want to do. I want to go stand in front of him, put my hand on his chest, get up on my tippy-toes, and kiss him.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can.” He moves away from the counter. I don’t know why I hold my breath, wondering if he’s going to come to me. He walks around the kitchen island and stands there. “I’m off this weekend.” I don’t know why that makes me a bit sad. I should be rejoicing that I’ll have two days off, and I can do what I want. “Finley, you’re going to have to talk to me.” I can hear the frustration in his voice. “We have to talk about what happened last night.”

I’m about to tell him we do not when the sound of footsteps makes us both swing our heads toward the stairs. Asa comes into view, barefoot, his hair all over the place. I smile at him.

“Morning, buddy, how did you sleep?” My many words and upbeat tone earn me a glare from Lincoln.

“Good,” Asa says, oblivious to the tension.

“Hey, buddy.” Lincoln opens his arms, and Asa jumps into them and buries his face in his neck. Lincoln kisses the side of his head, and I’m mesmerized by this. “I’m going to work,” he tells him, “but I have the whole weekend off, so we can do something fun.”

“Can we go ride horses?” Asa asks me, not Lincoln. I want to smirk and say something, but stop myself.

Lincoln smiles at his son. “I’ll call Charlie, and we can see.”

“Cool.” He wiggles out of his father’s arms to rush over to me. “You want to come with us? You can show Dad how you race the horses.”

I smile at him. “It’s not racing, buddy. It’s working the horse, and we’ll see.” I now know, as someone who has been with kids, that means no.

“I’m heading out,” Lincoln announces. “I’ll call you guys later.” He stares at me one more time, and I look back but don’t speak.

As soon as he’s gone, Asa goes to the couch, picking up his tablet.

“It’s a relax day,” I tell him. “We can maybe do some crafts and stuff.” I put my coffee on the table. “But first I have to go do the laundry.”

“Okay,” he mumbles, “I’m going to make myself cereal.”

In the laundry room, there are two baskets full of clothes. I study the buttons on the machine. “How hard could this be?” I ask myself, taking out my phone and typing in the model of his washing machine, and *How do I start a load of laundry?*

Sure enough, a thoughtful woman has posted a video. “Step one, sort laundry by color,” she says. “I usually do my lights together and then do the darks in another load.” I pause the video and sort the laundry, separating the lights from the darks. Lincoln wears a lot of black, so it’s pretty easy.

“That’s easy enough.” I press play on the video again.

“For standard washing, add detergent first and then add the right amount of color-safe bleach to the dispenser, diluting as needed, or add it directly to the wash, before adding clothes.” I stop listening as I look around for the detergent and find it on top of the shelf, with the scoop inside. There’s a bottle of bleach beside it.

I look over at the load. “That looks like a max load,” I decide. I dump the soap in and wonder how to dilute the bleach. “It’s fine, it’ll probably dilute itself.” I can’t find a dispenser, so I just add it to the machine like she said. She didn’t say how much, so I eyeball it, pouring for about five seconds. “That looks right.”

“Finley,” Asa yells, “I spilled the milk.”

“Fuck,” I mumble. “I’ll be right there,” I shout back as I pick up the pile of dark pants and shirts, tossing them inside and shutting the lid.

I follow the woman’s instructions on how to start the wash, and in a couple of seconds, the water is pouring. I smile big. “Add laundry to my list of things I know how to do.” I dust off my hands. “In fifty-five minutes, I’ll find a video on how to use the dryer.”

I take care of the spill on the kitchen counter, then eat cereal with Asa while we watch a television show. My phone rings, and I see it's Davis calling from his office number. Of course, I'm not going to answer. And of course, he calls again immediately.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Asa asks.

"It's a telemarketer," I lie, turning my phone to silent mode and slipping it into my pocket.

When the washer buzzes, I open the front loader and start pulling out wet clothes. When I see a black shirt now has patches of brown and orange, I know I fucked up.

"No-no-no-no-no," I chant, grabbing Lincoln's cargo pants that are now a deep, uneven brown. "No-no-no." The next item has white spots on it. "This can't be happening." Every single piece of clothing is ruined. I close my eyes. "I am so fucked."

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

LINCOLN

I'm sitting in Captain's office with him and Cathy. Captain and I brought Cathy in since I have to check in with her all the time. The phone on Captain's desk is on speaker, with Martinez and Johnson on the other end. I just finished filling them in on what I got from Randy.

"You think he's lying to you?" Johnson asks.

"No, he has no reason to lie to me. He also knew things that no one but us would have known, including where our operation base was."

"We need to find out when the next shipment is," Martinez states, "and this time not say anything to anyone. I'll check in with my contacts at other jurisdictions and see if there's anything happening we should be aware of."

"I'll do the same locally," I tell him. "I'm going to hit up the fire station and talk to a couple of the paramedics and see if there have been any calls that may have been drug-related."

"Okay, we'll meet Monday morning at ten," Johnson announces. "If anything comes up before then, I'll reach out."

"Sounds good," I say, and Captain presses the button to end the call.

He looks up at me. "I want you to tread lightly with this," he cautions, worry in his voice. "If they suspect you're involved, they'll come to town and see what's up. It leaves us vulnerable."

I nod, getting up from the chair and looking at Cathy. “Can I take car number four?”

She huffs as she gets up and follows me out. “One of these days, I’m going to say no, and then what?” She unlocks the drawer and dangles the key on her finger.

I snatch it up and head toward the car.

I call Finley and when it goes straight to voicemail, I try the house phone.

“Hey, Dad,” Asa answers.

I don’t know why I’m pissed that she didn’t answer. “Hey, buddy, you guys still home?”

“Yeah, we’re playing cards.”

“Okay. I’ll be home for dinner.”

“Cool,” he says and hangs up.

I want to call back and tell Asa to put Finley on the phone so she has to talk to me. But I know I’m going to have to wait until it’s just the two of us. If I have to lock her in a room for her to listen to me, I’ll do it. I imagine that room having a bed, how we’ll get over whatever this problem is, and then we’ll make out before I slide my cock into her.

Fuck, I need another cold shower. Not that it will help.

After she walked away from me last night, I thought about going after her, but I knew if I did, I’d want to kiss her again. So I took a cold shower instead. But I was still hard, and for the first time in a long while, I fisted my cock. With one hand on the tiled wall and the other hand on me, all I could think of was her. With my eyes closed, I pictured her lying on my bed, spread-eagle, then sitting backward on my face, riding it, or even my cock sliding between her tits. The one that threw me over the ledge was of her on her knees, taking my cock in her mouth as she looked up at me. I was happy the shower was on so it could drown out my moans as I came on the fucking floor.

I inhale deeply, forcing my mind back to my work before driving over to the fire station. I find Scooter, the fire chief, is out today. But Hudson is outside with a couple of the guys, shooting the shit. I motion with my head as I pass, and he joins me by my cruiser.

“What’s up?” he asks. “Stopping by to visit, or are you here for official business?”

“A bit of both.” He tilts his head to the side, knowing I’m lying to him. I chuckle. “Fine. I was wondering how your calls have been lately?”

His eyebrows pinch together, but before he answers, Collins arrives with her partner, Roman. She gets out of the rig, her baby bump noticeable now. I smile at her and hold up my hand, and she holds up her hand in response.

“Hey, you two,” I call before they go inside. They come over to us.

“What’s up?” Roman asks.

“I’m working on a case and was wondering if there has been an uptick in any calls that involve drugs.”

“No more than usual,” Roman replies.

“There were a couple of calls last week that were a little strange,” Collins cuts in. She looks at Roman. “Those two women from out of town who woke up dazed and confused.”

“Oh yeah. I remember. They were here for work. They had dinner at Thatcher’s, and when they went back to the hotel, both of them passed out. Called us at four in the morning, dizzy and confused. We treated them at the scene and then brought them in for dehydration.”

“Hmm.” I make a note of this. “What about you guys?” I look at Hudson, and he shakes his head.

“No, pretty much the same calls as always. Collins and Roman handle those kinds of calls more than we do.”

“Okay, well, if you guys will keep a lookout for anything that’s suspicious or feels a little off, it could help me out. Call me directly, or you

can call Cathy. And keep this confidential. It's on a need-to-know basis."

"Got it," Roman confirms. "I'm going to head in and get something to eat."

"I should do that too. I'll be on the lookout," Collins assures me, "and I'll try to go through the old cases to see if anything sticks out."

"That would be good."

"This is a bigger deal than you are letting on," Hudson says as they head inside. I don't confirm or deny it. He inhales deeply. "I'll ask Scooter if he heard anything."

"That would be appreciated." I shake his hand.

I'm pulling out of the parking lot when my phone rings. I press the green button as it connects to the car. "Hello?"

"Hey, Burke, it's Harmony."

"Hey, Harmony, what's up?"

"I'm calling to invite you and Asa to a barbecue at our place on Saturday afternoon. It's been a while since we've done one, and the weather is going to be almost tolerable." She laughs.

"Sounds good," I reply, thinking I could chat with her husband, Brady, who owns Thatcher's. "Do you need me to bring anything?"

"No, we'll have everything taken care of."

"Okay, sounds good. See you there."

I hit the hospital next and speak to a doctor I went to high school with to see if he's noticed anything that doesn't jive. He hasn't, but he tells me he'll ask around and let me know.

I return the car and write my report, then text Finley to let her know I'm on my way home.

It's after 6:00 p.m., and the smell of burnt food hits me the moment I open the front door.

"Hello?" I find Finley at the kitchen counter. Her hair, which she had loose this morning, is now piled on top of her head. The sweater is long

gone, leaving her in a tank top that hugs her chest and shows off the smoothness of her stomach. Her face looks like she's about to cry or throw something at me. "Everything okay?"

"Probably not." She puts her hands on the counter.

"Where's Asa?" I look around.

"I sent him to the tree house. I didn't want him to be here when, well, when I tell you what I need to tell you, and you fire me." My eyebrows go up. "This is me saving face. At least in Asa's eyes."

"Is this about last night?" I ask her nervously. I never for one second thought she would quit because of it.

"No," she scoffs. "You give yourself a bit too much credit. It was a kiss. It was nothing to write home about." I tilt my head to the side. I can tell she's lying. "No, this is bigger than that."

"You want to sit down?" Her chest is rising and falling as if she's two seconds away from having a panic attack.

"No. I'm going to have a clear exit path when I tell you what happened."

"Okay. Is it because you burned dinner?"

"That would be one part of it, but the big part," she moves to the side toward one of the chairs, "is more about this." She lifts something from the chair and holds it up. It takes me a moment to register that it's a pair of my pants with orange splotches. "I don't know how to do laundry," she confesses. "I've never done laundry in my life."

"What?" I'm not sure I heard her. "You've never done laundry?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I have a laundry service. But I said I would do laundry, so here I was trying to do laundry. She didn't say don't put bleach with black clothes."

"Who?"

"The woman on the video. She said it was color-safe, so I thought laundry bleach was OK with colors. I mean, 'color-safe.'"

“You watched a video on how to do laundry?” I’m trying really hard not to laugh. She’s obviously been trying not to freak out and probably spent all day trying to fix it.

“Yeah. I even rewashed everything, in case somehow that would make it better, but it just made it worse. So now you know I can’t do laundry and that I can’t cook either.”

“You can’t cook?”

“No. I’ve been taking Asa to lunch at the bakery every day, and we’ve been having frozen pizza at night.” She holds up her hands. “But I also bought frozen veggies, and I steamed them to go as a side for the pizza.”

“What were you cooking for dinner tonight?”

“One of those frozen lasagna trays. The box said to bake at 350 degrees, but it was going to take like over an hour. I thought if I turned up the temperature, it would be ready sooner, so I put it to five hundred and well —” she points to the garbage, “you can see for yourself.” She takes a big, deep breath. “So now you know I can’t cook, I can’t clean, and I can’t do laundry. I’m completely incompetent to do this job. So I’ll leave now and you can call Mrs. Larue, and she can take care of Asa the way you like”—she puts her hand to her stomach—“even though I still stand by my decision to take him fishing and horseback riding.” She glares as I roll my eyes. “I don’t care if it pissed you off. He’s been safe this whole time. I would never let anything happen to him.”

“Are you done?” I ask her, and she nods her head. “Anything else you would like to get off your chest? Now is the time.”

“Okay, fine, but this one is minor. One of Asa’s red shirts got caught in the white towels, and well . . . his shirt is now pink, and some of the towels have a nice tint to them. But it’s hardly noticeable.”

I walk closer to her and see the heap of clothes in the chair, all splotched in different shades of brown, not one black item in the bunch. “So did you wash all my dark things?”

“Pretty much,” she says. “I mean, I heard tie-dye is making a comeback.”

It’s then that the dam bursts, and I start laughing.

The back door opens, and Asa sticks his head in. “Is it safe to come in?”

“Safe?” I ask.

“I may have told him that breathing in burnt food was poisonous,” she mumbles, eyes closed. “I panicked.”

I wave him inside.

“Hey, Dad.” He joins me by the chair. “Those are all yours.” He’s doing a better job of not laughing than I did, but I can see it’s a struggle. “She was not happy. We need a new machine.” I whip my head to Finley.

She rolls her eyes. “Obviously, it’s the machine’s fault this happened.”

“Are we going to eat dinner?” Asa asks. “I’m starving.”

“Yeah, buddy.” I put my hands on his shoulder. “We are going to eat dinner, and I’m going to cook it.”

“Yes!” he cheers. “I’m going back to the tree house, so I don’t have to help.” He rushes off to the backyard, and I look at Finley.

“Did you teach him that?”

“Please, I wish I were that clever. I would have done it before he did,” she retorts.

With her hair up on top of her head, her neck is exposed, and my hand itches to hold her and feel her pulse with my thumb.

“I’ll help you cook dinner if you tell me what to do,” she says. “Since I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Finley,” I say softly. “If anything, I’m the one who owes you an apology.”

“Yeah, you do.” She crosses her arms over her chest, pushing her tits up, the lace of her bra peeking out.

“I’m glad you’re willing to talk to me again.” I really want to kiss her right now, something I know has to be the stupidest thing I could do. “I

admit I went a little too far yesterday."

"You don't say?" she tilts her head to the side.

"You have to understand—"

"I do," she confirms. "I may not have a child, but Asa is pretty fucking cool and one of the best kids I know. I would never ever put him in harm's way. I rode by him the whole time to make sure he was okay," she tells me. "I've been around horses my whole life." The statement surprises me. "I was ready to jump onto his horse if I felt he was going to be in danger."

I stare into her eyes. "You just keep surprising me, Finley," I admit. "More than anyone I've ever known."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

FINLEY

He gazes into my eyes, and I almost reach out to touch him, but everything in me stills when he says, “You just keep surprising me, Finley.” The soft voice directed at me is not one I’ve heard before. “More than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“I mean, I’m not going to say I like keeping you on your toes”—I smile big—“but I’m not *not* saying it.” I’m trying to make a joke out of it before falling forward and doing what we did last night in the yard. I know we shouldn’t cross that line again.

He laughs, and I look down at his clothes that I ruined on the chair. “I’m going to replace the clothes. I’m sure they sell these in town.” I pick up the pants. “But since you own about a hundred pairs, you may have already bought them all.”

“I get them for work,” he says, defending his closet choices. “I’m starving.”

“Same,” I admit. “I was so nervous about your clothes that the only thing I ate today was a bowl of cereal. I was going to have dinner ready and then break it to you, but then . . .” I shrug.

He walks past me and opens the fridge. “Okay, what do you know how to cook?”

“Nothing. I did learn how to make a grilled cheese this week. The first one ended up in the garbage, but that wasn’t my fault. The video didn’t say you had to do it on medium heat and not high, and that it takes literally two minutes before it’s done. I went to the bathroom, came back, and poof, a big ball of smoke was waiting for me.”

He shakes his head and pulls out a container of chicken breasts he picked up at the grocery store when we stopped on the way back from the beach.

“What are you doing with that?” I ask.

“Fifteen-minute honey garlic chicken bites.”

I tilt my head to the side. “No way can you cook that in fifteen minutes.”

He shrugs and smirks at me. “Want to bet?”

“Isn’t betting against the law?” I ask, even though I would love to bet on a make-out session with him, and I would do anything to make sure I won the bet.

“Okay, first thing we’re going to do is start the rice.” He disappears inside the pantry and comes back with a white thing under his arm.

“This is a rice cooker. All you do is put water and rice in, and it cooks by itself.”

I gawk at him. “Are you fucking with me?”

“Trust me, when I’m fucking with you, you’ll know.” He smirks again, and my pussy feels like it is going to burst open. I look down, afraid that my heated cheeks are going to give me away. “Okay, so the first step to rice is that you have to wash it.”

“What?” I ask him as he takes out a stainless steel measuring cup and a glass bowl. He pours the rice into the bowl and then adds water.

“You have to get all the starch out of it,” he explains, washing his hands before putting them in the bowl and moving them around in a circle. “See the color of the water? It’s becoming cloudy. Next, we drain it and then add

it to the rice cooker. Always add double the water." He closes the top and presses a button. "Okay, it'll beep when it's ready."

"That's it? I could definitely do that. Wash, drain, double water, press start."

He chuckles. "Yeah." He takes out a cutting board and a knife. "Now we do the chicken." He starts cutting the chicken into bite-size cubes.

"Who taught you how to cook?" I ask him as I watch.

"Not sure, really. When Maggie and I got married, we would take turns cooking. I get most of my recipe ideas from social media."

"Really?" I'm not sure I believe him. "Like scrolling, you see recipes?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm. I usually just have clothes or shoes." He snorts. "I also have vacations."

"I guess we have different algorithms. You never cooked for your husband?"

"God, no." I laugh. "We usually ate out, or he was gone, so I would just order in."

"You never sat in bed and wanted to eat something and then made it?"

"No. I've sat in bed and wanted to eat something, and then ordered it. You should try it. It's really fun. You don't have to clean up after. It's a whole new world."

He laughs. "I don't know, cooking relaxes some people."

"Who? Say their names because I can tell you right now, after trying to cook for a week, it doesn't relax me at all. In fact, it stresses me out. Every single day, it was like we were entering *Jumanji*, and it was a guess if we were going to make it."

He chuckles. "Okay, come here and try cutting the chicken."

I edge closer. "Is that such a good idea? You're doing a great job."

He puts the knife down on the cutting board. "Just cut strips and then in the middle."

I pick up the knife and look at the chicken. I feel him behind me. “Here.” His arms circle around me, one hand wrapping over mine, holding the knife, and the other holding the chicken in place. As he moves the knife with me to cut the chicken, I can’t focus on anything but the way my hand fits under his. I can feel his breath right next to my ear.

When we’ve finished the task, I look at him over my shoulder. “Is that it?” My chest is almost heaving; his face is closer than I thought it would be. “That seems easy enough.” I bite my lower lip.

He moves his head slowly, and I feel his lips graze mine. He’s so close I can taste the kiss. My nipples tingle, and I move my head to the side to give him better access to me.

I’m about to turn in his arms when the door swings open.

He jumps back away from me.

“Is it almost done?” Asa asks. “And if not, can I have a snack?”

“It’ll be done soon,” Lincoln assures him, not taking his eyes off me. “Go grab a snack.”

Asa skips to the pantry and comes back with cookies. “What are we having?” He gets on the stool in front of us.

“Honey chicken,” Lincoln answers.

“Your dad says it can be done in fifteen minutes or less. I say it can’t be.”

“Why don’t you and Asa go relax, and I’ll finish here?”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” I wash my hands in the sink. “I’ll just start the timer.”

His eyes fill with mischief, and a big grin spreads across his face.

Asa sprawls in the chair with his tablet, and I sit on the couch, my body humming. Every single fiber of my being is pulled to Lincoln.

I get up and go back into the kitchen. “I feel guilty not doing anything,” I admit.

“Is that so?” His brown eyes are almost a warm amber color.

“That’s so. I’ll set the table.”

“Not with the plates. It’s easier to fill the plates here.”

“Okay.” I take out the place mats and silverware.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m holding rice and pieces of golden chicken with a honey sauce.

“It smells so good,” I compliment, sitting down at the table beside Asa and waiting for Lincoln to join us.

“So,” Lincoln starts as he sits down, “you know how to ride horses?”

I nod my head, taking a bite. My eyes widen as the honey chicken hits my tongue. “This is so good.”

“Thank you.”

“She rides horses like the rodeo,” Asa cuts in.

“Not really,” I say. “I just . . . It was my sport when I was growing up. My grandparents had a farm. A ranch, really, and I started riding horses then.” I don’t want to say too much. “When my grandfather saw how good I was, he got me lessons.” I smile when I think of the memory. “From that day on, I lived and breathed horses.”

“Why did you stop riding?” Lincoln asks.

“Someone told me that I didn’t smell good and he’d prefer it if I stopped,” I admit softly.

“If you’re as good as Asa says you are, I’d go back.”

I can feel his eyes on me, and I make the mistake of looking up. I give him a smile. “Thanks, I was thinking I should.” I look at Asa. “You have to take your dad riding someday. And have him send me pictures.”

For the first time in my life, I feel sadness about leaving. All my life, I’ve been shuffled from place to place, from my parents to my grandparents, to boarding school and back. I’m used to temporary living, which is why this job that’s just for a month seemed like a perfect fit. But I’ve never gotten used to a place like I have here.

We finish dinner, and I get up to clean. Lincoln puts a hand on mine. “I’ve got this. You’ve worked like crazy this week. Why don’t you clock out and go relax?”

“Okay.” I walk over to Asa and give him a hug. “Be good to your dad, or not.” I ruffle his hair. “I’ll see you on the flip side.”

“Later,” Lincoln says, and I have to wonder how much later he was talking about.

I spend that night in my apartment on the couch, wishing Lincoln would come knock on my door. At 8:00 p.m., my phone beeps, and I rush to it, thinking it’s him texting me, but it’s from Collins.

COLLINS:

Want to go out for breakfast tomorrow, my treat?

ME:

I thought you would never ask.

COLLINS:

Bahahaha, it’s a date.

ME:

Are you going to the barbecue at Harmony’s?

COLLINS:

I just heard about it from Theo. I’m off, so we’ll be going, are you?

ME:

I told her I would drop in.

COLLINS:

Amazing, okay, see you tomorrow at nine?

ME:

Ohh and then maybe we can go shopping after.

COLLINS:

Great, my most favorite thing to do.

I laugh because she’s told me numerous times that she hates it.

ME:

I can’t wait.

At 11:00 p.m., I turn off the television and head to bed.

He does not come and knock on my door.

I SLEEP in until 8:00 a.m., then shower and put on my white tank top bodysuit and a jean skort that fits me better than it has in years, the two silver buttons on the side buttoning with ease.

I walk outside and look over to see if the boys are up, but it’s quiet. Since we’re going shopping, I take my car. Brock did a good job repairing the damage; the windshield is as good as new. I’m still pissed at Davis, but my lawyer said if I can’t prove it was him, there’s nothing I can do about it. At this point, the only thing I really care about is being free from him and going on my merry way. He can do whatever and whoever he wants.

I make it to the bakery before Collins. While I wait, I sip my coconut matcha. When my best friend walks in wearing a tight baby-blue sundress that shows off her baby bump, I can’t help but smile.

“You are glowing,” I tell her as she comes over and kisses my cheek.

She sits down. “I have to say, the first trimester I was not a fan of, but now this”—she rubs her stomach—“this trimester is great.”

“What do you want to eat? I’ll go and get it for us.” She tells me she’s craving chocolate, gives me her order, and I put it in, then come back with it. “So tell me”—she takes a bite of her cake—“what has been up with you?”

“I feel like I’ve lived nine lives since I saw you last.” I spread cream cheese on my blueberry bagel. “Let’s see, after I took Asa fishing, I almost got fired.” Her eyes widen. “Then I took him riding at Charlie’s, and that almost got me fired. Then I polished the stairs, and apparently Lincoln almost broke his face—which he didn’t, by the way, so he may have been

exaggerating. Then I bleached his clothes, and they're basically ruined, so I tried to quit. Because quitting would be better than being fired." I think I'm just rambling now. "That was after I burned dinner, and he kissed me, and I kissed him back."

"I'm sorry, what? Finley . . ." she says my name softly.

"I know it's dumb. It was a dumb thing to do. But we talked about it," I lie to her, and I hate it. "It was a kiss of hatred, so it meant nothing. In no time, I'll be gone, and this will all be just a blip in my life."

"Right." She picks up her orange juice. "Now try to convince yourself of that."

I laugh. "You read through that, huh? He's a good dad . . . and he's smoking hot." I shake my head. "And man, can that man kiss. If there were courses on how to kiss a woman, he should be teaching them." She laughs. "It's fine, Collins," I assure her when she stops and looks at me. "Besides, it's not like I could fall in love with someone in two weeks." I scoff at my words as Finley just watches me. "Learned my lesson the hard way with Davis."

"It's not always like that. You shouldn't judge one person for the other person's faults."

"I'm not judging anyone. I'm just stating a fact that I went too fast with Davis. He said all the right things. All the things I craved to ever hear. It was an illusion of the man he really was. He made me see what I wanted to see, and I was so blinded by the fact that he was so into me that I didn't ask all the questions that I needed to ask him, or maybe I did, and he lied. I don't know. I mean, I've had superficial friendships and relationships my whole life. So, to me, it was normal."

"Well, the good news is that you know what you did wrong with Davis, so you won't repeat your mistakes."

"Yes." I point my finger at her. "Exactly. So, I stand by my previous statement. It's not like I could fall in love with someone in two weeks."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LINCOLN

“Dad.” I feel Asa’s hot breath on my neck. “Dad.” He lays his whole upper body across my back. “Dad, are you up?” His face is now in front of mine. “Dad.” He pauses for a couple of seconds. “I’m starving.”

I wait a beat, and when he’s about to say something else, I roar, turning my back and bringing him to his knees and burying my face in his neck. He screams first, then his laughter fills the room.

“Gotcha,” I tell him, and he tries to wiggle out of my arms. “What do you say?”

“I surrender.” He tries to buck me off, and I let him. He sighs. “Now, can I have breakfast?”

I laugh at him as he rolls off my bed and heads for the door. “Yeah, you can have breakfast.” I rub my hands over my face. “What do you want to eat?”

“Eggs, bacon, and sausage.”

I look at him. “How long has it been since you ate?” I laugh at him as I toss the covers off me and get up, noticing we’re dressed the same in black boxers and nothing else. “Has it been a week or eight hours?”

“It feels like a week.” I follow him out, snatching up my shorts and slipping them on along the way.

In the kitchen, I see it’s after 9:30 a.m.

“It’s late,” I say, starting the coffee before opening the blinds. I half expect to see Finley outside with her coffee like she always is in the morning. Well, not always, only the days I haven’t pissed her off. She isn’t there.

The television starts to make sound, and I look over to see that Asa has started his show as he lies on the couch. I head to the front and open the blinds in the office. Finley’s SUV isn’t parked on the road in its usual spot. I look right and left to see if maybe she moved it during the night. “Where the hell is she?” I ask the window quietly.

“Dad, are we going to eat?” Asa yells from the couch.

“Yeah, we’re going to eat,” I assure him, returning to the kitchen to grab the bacon and sausage. I take a pan out from the drawer. “What do you eat when I’m not here?”

“Cereal, but then we go to the bakery, and I have a bagel.” I shake my head and smile, even though I don’t want to smile. “Finley doesn’t know how to make eggs. She tried once, and they tasted like plastic.”

I put the pan on the stove and think about texting her, asking her to come over. “Don’t be dumb,” I tell myself as I put the bacon in the pan and then prepare the sausages in a smaller pan, filling it with water and putting a lid on it. I grab a bowl and start whisking the eggs. The whole time, I keep checking out the window to see if she’s gotten back. I make extra eggs, just in case she does and she’s hungry.

“Come on, buddy,” I call, walking to the back door with our full plates.

“Why are we eating breakfast outside?”

“It’s a nice day.” I’m not about to tell him we’re eating outside so that if Finley comes back, I’ll see her. I put his plate before the chair that faces away from her door.

“You don’t sit there,” he points out as I pull out the chair that faces the street.

“I’m sitting here today,” I mumble to him. “Is that okay with you?”

“I guess.” He starts to eat. “Can we go ride horses today?”

“No.” A truck drives by, and my head snaps up. “We’re going over to Wyatt’s today for a barbecue.”

“Cool.” He picks up a piece of bacon and bites it in half. “What about tomorrow?”

“We’ll see. I’ll check with Charlie if he’s there today and ask him.”

“Yes,” he hisses out as he chews. “I hope they give me Skittles again.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Maybe Finley can come with us, and she can show you how she rides. It’s really cool.” I just nod at him.

“You two have done a lot in a week.”

“Yeah. I like Finley. She even waits until Mom calls before we go out.” He takes a bite of his sandwich. “I miss Mom a little.” He holds up his fingers as he chews, pinching them together.

“It’s normal to miss her, buddy. You’re used to seeing her every day.” Even though we split custody, she is the one who usually gets him after school most days.

“What’s going to happen when she gets back?” His tone is one I don’t think I’ve ever heard before. It’s like he’s unsure of having this conversation with me.

“What do you mean?” I try to keep my tone light so he doesn’t feel like he did something wrong.

“Like, is it still going to be you or Mom coming to get me after school, or will Tim also be there?”

I swallow and think of my words before I reply. “It could be any of us. Do you not like him?”

He shrugs. “He’s okay. I heard you once on the phone with Mom talking about him.”

I take a huge sigh. “Asa, the only thing that matters is that he treats you right.” I reach over and put my hand on his shoulder. “I shouldn’t have said

what I said, and you shouldn't have heard any of that. Tim loves your mom, and he really likes you. It's okay if you like him."

"He's goofy sometimes, and he doesn't know how to catch a ball, but he tries."

"Then maybe you need to practice with him more." He nods his head. "Your mom will be back before you know it, and it'll be like she was never gone."

"I'm going to go and try to call her." He picks up his plate.

"You know you can talk to me about anything," I tell him as he makes his way to the back door. "Anything."

"That's what Finley said." He smirks before going inside.

I stay out longer than I have to, my head turning at every single sound. *Get up and go inside,* I tell myself, and obey.

I clean the dishes, then call for Asa. He looks up from his tablet. "Upstairs, get your teeth brushed, and make your bed."

"Do I have to? It's the weekend."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Weekends are for chilling." My eyebrows pinch together. "Like sit and chill."

"Who told you that?" I ask him, even though I know exactly who told him that.

"Finley. Sunday is Sunday Funday, but also Sunday Reset."

"Teeth." I point to the stairs. "Bed."

"Ugh," he grumbles, "this is not a chill day."

"You can 'chill'"—I use my fingers for quotations—"after you brush your teeth, make your bed, and get dressed."

"So, half chill." He drags his feet up the steps. "One day, can we do full chill?"

"One day," I agree. I look out the front window, somehow expecting to see Finley's car, but her spot sits empty.

I go upstairs to make my own bed; the scent of her perfume from when she slept there is gone. I pull off the sheets and put them in the wash right away, not wanting her to do laundry experiments with them. I make my bed while Asa plays with LEGOs in his room instead of making his. “Asa, are you dressed?”

“Ugh, no.”

“You going to go to the barbecue in your boxers?”

He mumbles something, and I want to laugh because he’s been with Finley for a week and a half, and he is starting to sound like her.

“I’m going to shower,” I tell him. “Dressed and room fixed when I get out.” He doesn’t say anything. “Did you hear me?”

“10-4.”

I look up at the ceiling. “Good God,” I mumble.

I take a shower and pull on a pair of blue boxers and blue shorts. I take a green polo from the top of the stack of folded shirts and put it on, leaving the buttons open. I spray two shots of cologne on before running my hands through my hair.

“You ready?” I ask, walking out of the bedroom, expecting to find Asa in his room. But all I see is his bed, which is finally made. A pair of shorts are shoved in his dresser in a ball so they stop the drawer from being shut.

I discover Asa downstairs on the couch, wearing a pair of blue shorts and a beige shirt. “You ready?”

He puts his tablet down on the table and jumps up. “I need socks.” He rushes past me to the stairs as I put on my sneakers. He comes back, hopping on one foot as he tries to put on his socks while walking, but fails.

“Can you sit down and do that so you don’t fall and hurt yourself?”

He only stops when he’s next to me, sitting on the floor, and putting on his socks and shoes. He jumps up and hops three times. “Ready, Freddy.” Another thing that Finley taught him.

“Let’s go.” We walk out, and again I look up at her parking spot and see that it’s still empty.

We get in the truck, and I put on my sunglasses and wait for Asa to be buckled in before I pull out. As I drive down Main Street, my eyes survey the parking spots, but I don’t spot her SUV.

At Harmony and Brady’s house, the street is lined with cars, and I park behind the last one. Asa is out of the back seat at the same time I open my door. We walk side by side as we approach the house. I can hear the voices coming from the backyard. When I turn the corner, it’s as if my body knows Finley’s near, because my heart starts to beat a bit faster.

“Wyatt!” Asa shouts, running away from me and toward his best friend at the end of the yard. Wyatt looks over and waves. Lucy and Sage are with him, too.

My eyes flit around until I see Finley sitting with Collins and Everleigh. She’s saying something, and she throws her head back, and all I can hear now is her laughter. Two things happen at the same time: my heart stutters and my cock twitches.

“Hey.” Brady is coming toward me, a beer in one hand. “Glad you finally got here.” He holds out his free hand for me to shake. “If I heard ‘Is Asa here yet?’ one more time, I would have had to call you.”

I laugh and look over at Asa, who has just spotted Finley. He ditches Wyatt in a split second.

“Finley!” he calls. She looks over, and the smile on her face is radiant as Asa runs to her, his arms windmilling.

“Asa!” she says, and he flies into her arms. His head goes to her shoulder as if he’s been hugging her like that since he was born. She kisses his head. He stands up in front of her, and she holds his hand in hers as he tells her some sort of story. She nods the whole time, as if he’s telling her state secrets, and she’s hanging on to his every single word.

“I see he likes her,” Brady comments from beside me.

“Yeah.” I put my hands in my pockets. I’m glad I have my sunglasses on, so she doesn’t see me gawking at her. My eyes roam slowly from her crossed legs to her top to her hair, tucked behind one ear and draped over the other shoulder, leaving her neck bare. Perfect for me to lean over and kiss.

“Not going to lie, we were taking bets on how long it was going to take you to figure it out,” Brady teases, bringing his beer to his lips. I glance at him. “She was telling Harmony that she’s never had a job before in her life.” My head swivels back to her. “You knew that, right?”

I exhale. “It was either her or Mrs. Larue.”

“Yikes.” He cringes.

“Exactly.” I shake my head. “She destroyed all my laundry. My dark work clothes are now either mustard-colored or tie-dyed. My towels are pink.”

He spits out the beer he just sipped and starts to choke as Theo comes up to us.

“What are you two laughing about?” he asks me. I tell him what I just told Brady, who is still coughing as he tries to catch his breath.

“I mean, I knew she was a trust fund girl, but I thought for sure she had some experience,” Theo says. Trust fund? I don’t give away that I had no idea, but everything makes sense now. How she never cooked, cleaned, or did laundry. She probably grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth. Now she’s living in a space that is probably the size of her closet at home, and I wonder why. “Her ex is a dick.”

“No shit,” I say, finally adding something to the conversation.

“He refuses to divorce her unless she gives him half of her trust fund. Even after cheating on her.” My hands form fists in my pockets. I have to bite down hard so as not to roar out or stomp over and ask her about it. I hate knowing nothing about that side of her.

“He cheated on her?” Brady questions.

“Oh yeah, constantly,” Theo confirms.

For the first time, I feel guilty about giving her a hard time. I know what it’s like to have been cheated on. She must have come here to escape whatever was happening at her house. And all I’ve done is be an asshole to her.

“She tried to kick him out, and he refused to leave,” Theo continues. “So she asked to come and stay here. She’s hoping that he just leaves. She said her lawyer is working on it.” He shrugs. “She’s going to go back home when everything’s settled.” My chest gets tight.

“Well, good thing I only needed a temporary nanny. Worked out for both of us,” I say, as if the world isn’t shifting under my feet.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FINLEY

Sitting at the barbecue, I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin. My stomach has been a mess since Asa came over to me. Kissing his head, I could feel eyes on me. When he walked away, I made the silly mistake of looking around and seeing Lincoln standing with Brady and Theo.

His hands are in the pockets of his blue shorts, and his green polo pulls tight on his broad shoulders. His hair looks like he just ran his hands through it, and I can attest that it feels like silk. His stupid sunglasses are on, so I don't know what he's looking at, but his head is facing this direction, so maybe he is looking at me. *Or maybe he's not*, the other side of my brain counters. I force myself not to hold up my hand to say hello to him. I imagine he really isn't looking at me, and then I'm holding up my hand to no one. Talk about dying of embarrassment.

I turn my attention back to the conversation Collins and Everleigh are having about their pregnancies. There's nothing I can add, so I just try to listen and not focus on the way that I can feel eyes on me.

"I'm going to go and get something to drink." I get up. "Do you two need anything?"

"No, I'm good," Collins says with a smile, and then Everleigh says the same thing.

I zigzag my way through the throng of people who have shown up. When Harmony called and told me about a barbecue, I thought it was going to be a small gathering. Instead, it feels like the whole town is here. I stop by one of the coolers, bending over to open the top. It is all beer, surrounded by ice. I move sideways, still bent over, to the other one, and it's all soda. "What are you looking for?" I hear Lincoln's voice and look over my shoulder. He's right behind me.

"I'm looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow," I tell him. "Fingers crossed I find it." I hold up one of my hands with my fingers crossed. He shakes his head. "Do you want something to drink while I'm down here? There's beer, soda, and water."

He doesn't answer. Instead, he reaches over me to grab two bottles. "You can stop bending over now," I hear him mumble, but he covers it up. "Don't want you to find that pot of gold. I still need you to watch Asa for the next couple weeks."

I snort and take a bottle of water from him. "Some days he watches me." I unscrew the top of the bottle and stop talking when Wyatt's uncle, Charlie, comes over to us.

"There you guys are." I smile at him. "Burke." They shake hands. I look at Lincoln, who I've never once called Burke, and wonder if he's irritated by that. "Asa told me that you guys want to go riding." I laugh and look to the side. "He said something about doing it tomorrow."

"Not sure about that," Lincoln replies.

I know I should keep my mouth shut, but my mouth has a mind of its own. And its main focus is to piss Lincoln off. "That means no," I interject. "He doesn't trust the process."

"I never said that," Lincoln says, defending himself. "How was I supposed to know you were a rodeo queen?"

"*Rodeo queen*," I scoff at him. "For your information, I won a silver medal at the Olympics for equestrian show jumping." His mouth opens.

“Yeah, so shove it, Mr.—” Charlie looks like he is fighting a smile. “I would love to ride more,” I tell him. “I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed it.”

“We’d be honored.”

Lincoln rips his sunglasses off, and I can see his brown-amber eyes. “You won a silver medal *at the Olympics*?” The shock in his voice is so evident. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

I look casually around before meeting his stare. “Trust me, when I’m fucking with you, you’ll know,” I repeat the words he told me yesterday, and wonder if his body has the same reaction mine did.

“Well, this is so much fun,” Charlie says. “I’m going to go”—he points over his shoulder with a thumb—“because I don’t know what is going on right now. And I want to be anywhere but here.” He chuckles. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He looks at me. “And I hope to see you too.”

“We’ll be there,” Lincoln says, shocking all of us, I think, including himself.

“I look forward to it,” Charlie replies before walking away, shaking his head and laughing.

“Did you really win a medal?” Lincoln asks me.

I roll my eyes. “Today is my day off. It’s a rest day, and you know what you aren’t supposed to do on rest days?” I wait a beat. “Get irritated. It defeats the ‘rest day’ title.”

“I thought weekends were for chilling.” He smirks. “Sit and chill.”

“It’s all the same process. Anyway, this was a lot of fun.” I need to get away from him because, sadly, the more he irritates me, the more I kind of like him. It doesn’t make sense, but it’s true.

“There you two are.” Just before I escape, a man with blue-gray eyes wearing jeans and a white T-shirt joins us. His brown hair is short in the back and longer in the front. He has stubble on his cheeks, and you can tell he works out. “I was wondering if I would be seeing you here.” He slaps

Lincoln on the shoulder. “I’m Hudson.” He extends his hand to me. “You must be Finley.”

“That would be me.” I smile as I shake his hand.

“I’ve heard all about you.”

My eyebrows go up, and I look over at Lincoln, who shakes his head. “Not from me.” He holds out his hands.

“That’s a good thing,” I say. “He would probably exaggerate things.”

Hudson laughs. “You know him well.”

“Well, I have to get back to the girls. It was very nice meeting you, Hudson. I’ll see you around.”

“Oh, you definitely will,” he replies, earning himself a glare from Lincoln.

Before I get two steps away, Asa comes running to us. “Hey, Uncle Hudson.” He gives him a high five.

“Uncle?” I look between them to see if there’s a resemblance I missed.

“Best friends,” Lincoln informs me.

“Wow, color me shocked,” I retort. “I didn’t think you had friends. This is very, very surprising for me.”

He chuckles, and it hits me in places it should not hit me.

“Dad, we’re going riding tomorrow,” Asa shrieks, holding my hand in both of his and jumping up and down.

“We are?” I look at Lincoln, who shrugs.

“Yeah! Charlie just told Wyatt,” Asa informs us.

“Well, then we’re going to have to show your dad how good you are at riding,” I tell him, “so he can take you all the time.”

“Yes,” Asa hisses. “Let’s go grab a burger.” He pulls my hand, and I look over my shoulder at Lincoln, who follows us. Hudson gives us a chin-up and walks off to talk to Theo.

We each help ourselves to a burger from a large plate before finding a table and sitting down as a group.

“I’m starving,” Asa declares.

“Did you not eat today?” I take a bite of my burger.

“Yeah, Dad made eggs and bacon. He made some for you too, but you left.”

Lincoln stops mid-bite and meets my eyes. He finishes chewing and swallows. “I didn’t make them specifically for you. I just made extra.” He slides a look at Asa to tell him to shut up, but Asa isn’t paying attention to him.

“I went out to have breakfast with Collins, and then we went shopping for baby stuff.” I look at Asa. “Did you chill?”

“I tried to,” he huffs, “but Dad didn’t understand the chill part and made me clean my room and make my bed.”

I look down and roll my lips so I don’t burst out laughing. “I mean, you should still do those things, and then you can chill without having to get up.”

We eat side by side as he tells me about the new video he saw that I have to watch with him when we get home. We finish the burgers and Asa runs off to play with the other kids, leaving Lincoln sitting next to me. He slides closer when Collins and Theo join us, followed by Caleb, Theo’s cousin and business partner, and his fiancée, Sierra. The sun starts to set, the little string lights flicking on across the yard. It looks magical.

“You should get lights like this,” I tell Lincoln.

“I have lights.”

“Yeah, in the tree house and on the deck, but not across the yard like this. It’s like fairy lights.” I smile big, wondering how I could put these up in my house. I mean, it would be hard since I live in a penthouse on the fifty-fourth floor. “It would make the house look nicer.”

He laughs as he gets up. “How you getting home? I didn’t see your car out front.”

“I left it at Collins’s house.”

“Do you want to come home with us, and we’ll drive by to get your car tomorrow after the horse-riding lesson?”

“Is that okay?” I ask Collins.

“Of course,” she says, leaning into Theo, his arm around her.

I walk to the truck with Asa between Lincoln and me. He gets into the truck first, and I get in as soon as he closes his door, sitting next to Lincoln. He looks over at me, and there is a softness on his face. So soft that my hand itches to come up to touch his beard. Instead, I clear my throat and look out the window. “I’m exhausted.”

“Must be all that chilling you did today,” Lincoln teases, looking out his window, but I can see a smile on his face.

“Thanks for driving me home,” I say when we stop in his driveway and get out of the truck.

“Why is your door open?” Asa asks. I look over to the apartment to see the door swinging in the wind.

“When you left, was my door open?” I ask Lincoln, about to take a step toward it. He grabs my hand and pulls me behind him.

“Let me go in first,” he orders.

I put Asa behind me. My heart is hammering as he pushes open the door the rest of the way. I gasp and put my hand to my mouth. Even from the driveway, I can see that the place is trashed. “Stay here,” I tell Asa as I move inside. The couch looks like someone came in with a knife and sliced right down the middle. The small kitchen is unharmed.

“Stay outside,” Lincoln snaps at us, and I realize Asa is right behind me. “Don’t touch anything.”

“It’s fine,” I assure him. “It was probably some kids from the neighborhood.” I know exactly who the fuck is behind this. I feel so guilty for not telling him, but I don’t want to drag him into my personal mess. I especially don’t want him to think I did anything to put Asa in danger. And I didn’t. I know Davis is only interested in messing with me. Not because I

think he has any moral standards, I just know he cares too much about his reputation to risk it.

His phone is to his ear. “This is Burke. Send a squad over. Someone broke into my house.” He disconnects. “Finley, go stand on the sidewalk with Asa while I check the house.”

I’m about to argue with him when I see the scared look on Asa’s face. “Come on, buddy, let’s do what your dad said.” I hold his hand and walk to the sidewalk. We watch Lincoln go to his truck and come out with his gun. I don’t know why I gasp since I see him leave with it every single morning.

He walks up the steps to the front door and tries the handle before unlocking it. He moves through the doorway, his gun drawn.

“It’s okay,” Asa comforts. “Dad’s the best cop on the force.”

“You bet he is.” I wrap my arm around his chest and pull him to me.

Lincoln comes out and motions us to him as a squad car pulls up.

“Let’s go.” I pull Asa with me up the stairs.

“Stay inside,” Lincoln tells me, “and close the door.” I nod and walk into the house.

“Go upstairs and get in the shower,” I tell Asa, and for once, he doesn’t argue with me. I wait until he’s in his bathroom, then check that the squad car is still there. I rush into the kitchen and take out my phone, unblocking Davis’s number and putting the phone to my ear.

Through the kitchen window, I see an older gentleman arrive. He walks into the little apartment with Lincoln.

“Hello, darling,” Davis answers, his arrogant voice making me cringe. Once I would get butterflies from it, but now I feel like I’m going to be sick.

“Don’t fucking ‘Hello, darling’ me,” I hiss. “Are you out of your mind messing with someone else’s stuff? Like, what the fuck are you even doing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, my darling wife.”

“Why?” I watch out the window, making sure Lincoln won’t catch me on the phone. “Why are you even doing this?”

“Come back home and let’s talk about things.” I close my eyes.

“Davis, there are not enough years in a lifetime for me to get to the point of forgiving you,” I tell him softly. “It’s over. We both need to move on. Sign the papers.” I take a deep breath. “You’re just prolonging the inevitable. If you keep dragging this out, I’ll make sure everyone at the country club knows you are begging me to stay married to you. And we’ll still get divorced. Is that what you want?”

“You fucking cunt.” I knew the minute I mentioned the club he clings to, he’d be pissed. “Get your fucking ass home where you fucking belong.”

Lincoln is coming to the back door. I disconnect the phone. It immediately rings in my hand. It’s Davis again. I don’t have time to block him, so I just shut down the phone, then unlock the door for Lincoln.

“You need to come and pack your things. You aren’t staying in there.”

“I’m sure the person is long gone.” I avoid looking at him, worried the guilt will show in my face.

“Get your things,” he orders, his voice feral.

“Fine.” I throw up my hands. “But I’m sleeping on the couch.” He just stares down at me. “That look doesn’t scare me, by the way,” I lie.

I swear I hear him growl as I put my head down and go to pack my things.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LINCOLN

I’m hanging on by a very fine thread, and in about two seconds, it’s going to fucking snap. Finley walks past me, and I’m waiting for her to turn around and give me shit. Instead, she disappears inside the apartment without another word.

My phone rings, and my hand is holding it so tight that I feel like it’s going to shatter.

“Hey.” I put the phone to my ear, pacing to the driveway. “Thanks for returning my call. I need to ask you something.” I’m sure Brock can tell from my tone that I’m not in the mood to chitchat and shoot the shit.

“Sure thing.”

“Finley brought her car in the other day, and you mentioned some damage.”

“Yeah,” he says, as if he’s waiting for more of a question.

“What happened to it?”

“Can’t be certain. Pretty bad scrape all down the side, and the side mirror was almost completely broken off.” I close my eyes. “I would have thought it got sideswiped while parked, maybe a drunk driver. But the windshield was cracked, too, on the opposite side, which is weird.”

“Thanks,” I respond.

“Should I have called you?” It’s a loaded question.

“Probably. I have to go.” Captain’s car is coming down the street.

“Later.” For once, he doesn’t give me any shit.

Finley steps out of her apartment with a bag in one hand and a black square thing under her opposite arm.

“I’m bringing my frother.” She nods to the black thing. “I’m guessing you want me to go back into the house and not ask you questions. I will say, before I do, I don’t think it’s that big of a deal. It’s just the couch. The bed was tossed around, but nothing else was messed up.”

“Captain just got here. I have to debrief with him. Put your things in Asa’s bedroom. He’ll sleep with me tonight.”

“I can tell from your tone that this isn’t a two-way conversation, and it’s really just you telling me what to do.”

“You would be right.” Captain is walking up to the officer on the scene. “Save the sass for another night. Knowing you, I’m sure you’ll have enough for tomorrow too.”

She snorts as she walks up the steps. I wait for her to be inside before joining Captain.

“What the fuck happened?” he asks. I can see from his clothes that he was home, sitting in his recliner. When we step inside the apartment, he sees the couch and releases a breath through his teeth. “Did they do this in your house, too, or just here?”

“Just here.” In the bedroom, the mattress is flipped over. Two officers are dusting for prints. “Could be they tried to get into the house and saw the camera at the front door.” I pull up the video footage from today on my phone, something I should have done already.

It’s black. Everything after I left the house has been deleted.

“What the fuck?” I toss my phone to Captain, who catches it.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” His jaw is as hard as mine.

“That this has to do with the case? Yeah, I’m fucking thinking it.” I shake my head. “Last week, they vandalized my nanny’s car. Didn’t know

until today. She didn’t want to tell me.”

“We’re going to get some officers to patrol more in the area. Monday, we sit down with the team.”

“They know where I live and that I’m in this,” I say tightly. “It’s not undercover at this point.”

“They came to your house. They left that box at our undercover office.” He hands me back my phone. “They’re either very brazen and this is a random targeting of an officer, they have cops on their payroll, or you in particular are fucking shit up for them.” I want to throw the fucking phone across the room, but I stop myself.

“It better be one or fucking three,” I growl as the guys come out of the bedroom, avoiding looking at me. “Anything?”

“Wiped clean,” the officer replies. “Not even her prints anywhere.”

“Send us the video, and we’ll see if maybe we can figure out what happened with it,” Captain says. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Yeah.” I walk them out, shutting the door. The lock is busted from what they said was most likely a screwdriver.

Inside the house, Asa is sitting on the couch, and Finley is in the kitchen pacing back and forth. “And?”

“And for tonight, you stay here. Asa, you’re sleeping with me, and Finley will have your bed.”

“Okay, Daddy.” He gets up and goes to the stairs. “Are you coming soon?”

“I’m coming up,” Finley answers, and he nods, walking up the steps. She takes a step toward the stairs, and my hand reaches out to hold her back.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I assure her softly.

She smiles at me sadly. “I know you won’t. Good night, Lincoln.”

Both of us stay still. Her fingers slide into mine, squeezing briefly before she pulls away from me. I watch her walk up the steps, and all I can

do is hang my head.

"YOU READY?" Finley asks me. It's Sunday morning, and we've arrived at Mustang Creek Ranch.

I just glare at her, even though she can't see my eyes because of my sunglasses.

She snorts and looks over her shoulder. "How about you?" she asks Asa. He's been ready since he woke me up at sunrise.

Finley unbuckles her seat belt and gets out. She's wearing jeans that mold to her fucking body like she painted them on, with a black T-shirt that fits her just right.

"There's your horse." Asa points to a black horse walking in the middle of the fenced arena, a saddle already on.

"There he is," she confirms and holds her hands up over her eyes to block the sun. "Isn't he gorgeous?"

"Come on, Dad." Asa grabs my hand and pulls me toward the barn. I'm happy that the break-in last night hasn't affected him that much. He had a couple of questions for me last night when we went to bed. He seemed worried that whoever broke into Finley's space would come back and do it again. I reassured him that he was safe and that I would not let anything happen to him. I also told him that the station was going to send some cars during the night to make sure we were okay. I am not going to admit this out loud, especially not to Finley, but riding today is the perfect distraction from last night. Hopefully, it keeps his mind preoccupied

When I look behind me, I see she isn't following us but instead is walking to the middle of the arena. Her mouth forms into a smile as she gets closer to the horse, and I'm mesmerized by it.

"Watch her," Asa urges in a whisper. We join Charlie at the fence around the arena, and he folds his arms over his chest.

“You going to let me ride you again?” I hear her ask the horse. “You buck me off and make me look bad in front of my boss, and I’m going to be pissed.” She sticks her foot in the stirrup, and in one swift move, she’s sitting on the horse, leaning forward, and rubbing its neck.

“Open him up!” Charlie shouts from beside me, hands around his mouth. All she does is smirk.

It takes one word from her, and the horse takes off. Her hair flies behind her as she crouches down, and the horse picks up speed.

“Isn’t that too fast?” I ask, trying not to freak out. “Should she be going that fast?”

Charlie ignores me and motions to Asa to follow him. They climb up to sit on the fence. My eyes are trained on her as she goes around the arena, as casual as if she’s in my kitchen having coffee and not sprinting on a horse. I watch in awe as she makes the horse change direction and then go back. She takes him through a gate and way out into the field.

“If she was living here, I would hire her in a heartbeat,” Charlie says.

“I don’t think you could afford her,” I joke. “She’s a silver medalist, you know. Olympics.” He laughs.

She’s coming back toward us. Her body is moving up and down, her face lighting up so much. If she were mine, I would make sure she did this every single day.

“Whoa,” I hear from behind me and see Wyatt and Brady. “She’s going so fast.”

“Yeah,” Asa says, and I can hear how proud he is.

We watch as she slows the horse, natural as can be.

“Let’s get you guys on some horses,” Charlie suggests, clapping his hands. “You riding, Burke?”

“Maybe next time,” I say.

“Oh come on,” Finley says from not too far away, “get out of your comfort zone, Lincoln. I can teach you. Payback for you teaching me how

to use the rice cooker."

"Fine," I say. "But just so you know, I rode a horse in high school once."

"And he didn't like you?"

"I just like my feet on the ground, is all." I turn to Charlie, who is trying not to laugh at the exchange. "I guess I'm riding."

"We'll get you on a calm horse." He slaps my shoulder. "I'll run through the basics, and Finley can teach you the rest while I go with the boys."

We all follow him to the barn. Charlie gets a horse ready for me, while Brady takes care of the boys. Charlie leads the animal, reins in his hands, until we are in the middle of the fenced area. Finley is at the side, trotting on her horse. Charlie explains how to get up into the saddle and some other things. I have one eye on Charlie and the other on Finley and her ass going up and down.

"Okay, just get on the horse," Charlie finally snaps.

I stick one foot in the stirrup and hoist myself up onto the horse.

"He's all yours," Charlie tells Finley.

"So, did you get all that stuff that Charlie just taught you?" she asks me when she gets close enough.

"You know I didn't." I wasn't listening to a word of it, and we all know it. "You're fucking with me."

"You'll know when I'm fucking with you, Lincoln," she assures me with a wink. "You ready to go for a little ride?"

"Not really, but here we are." I hold on to the horn with both hands.

"The first thing you need to do is relax," she says softly. "The horse can smell your fear, and it might make him uneasy."

"Easy for you to say." I try to relax, but the horse moves, and I tense up immediately.

“We’re just going to walk around the arena.” Her voice is calm as she leans over and holds one of my reins. “Nice and slow.” The horse starts to move, slowly taking one step at a time. “See?” she says as we make our way along the fence.

I look over and see Asa, Wyatt, Brady, and Charlie riding outside of the arena toward an open field and the woods beyond.

“Where are they going?”

“That’s the advanced class. You’re still in the beginning phase,” she jokes with me. “You need to trust that your horse isn’t going to hurt you. Your horse has to trust you aren’t going to lead him astray or do something that is going to hurt him.” The horse continues to move slowly, and I start to relax. “See? You can do it.” I meet her eyes, which dance with joy and affection. “Aren’t you happy that you can now cross this off your list of new things to try this year?”

“Sure.” She releases the reins, and my horse shifts. I return my attention to him, waiting for him to bolt and for me to go flying. She laughs. “Don’t startle my horse,” I hiss at her.

“I promise I won’t let anything happen to you or the horse.”

“Promises, promises,” I mumble.

We continue to ride side by side around the arena, even after the others return from their trail ride. By the end, I am happy that I did it.

She slides off her horse with ease, and I follow her lead clumsily as she instructs me on what to do. We lead the horses back toward the barn.

“Dad!” Asa shouts, his voice animated as he comes running to me. “Dad, Wyatt is sleeping here tonight, and he asked me if I could sleep here too.” He jumps up. “Can I?”

“I don’t know, buddy,” I say, glancing at Finley. “Let me talk to Charlie.”

AN HOUR LATER, Finley and I are in the truck, waving bye to Asa and Wyatt as I pull out of the parking lot and head to the house.

"So let me have it," she says. *Oh, I'll let you have it all right*. My cock stirs in my pants, and all I can think about are her words, slow and steady. Images of her on her back in my bed and me doing her slow and steady fill my mind. I push them away fast. "You still think it's dangerous."

"The way you ride, one thousand percent." She rolls her eyes. "But if you ride the way everyone else rides, it's fine if you take him back."

She snorts. "You know the saying, 'Better to ask for forgiveness than permission'?" She scrunches up her nose. "That's what I'm going with."

"You would go with that." I look over at her but don't say anything else because I'm afraid of what I'd say.

"I need a shower," she announces as we pull into the driveway. I have to bite down on my tongue as we get out, immediately picturing her in said shower. "Do you think I could go back to my place?"

"No. They'll be here tomorrow to put in the cameras and stuff. But until then, I'd prefer you stay in the house."

She walks up the steps in front of me, and my eyes go to her ass. "Fine," she huffs out, "but I think it's a waste."

"Humor me."

"I want to do a lot of things to you," she retorts, "and humoring you isn't one of them." My body freezes, and my cock goes solid.

On the porch, she kicks off her sneakers, which are pretty much ruined, and goes inside.

"Yeah, I want to do a lot of things to you too," I counter, closing the front door behind me.

She stops at the stairs, and her eyes meet mine. "Really? And what would those things be?"

"How about I take a shower, and you take a shower." *Together*, I almost add, but I stop myself. "Then we can order pizza and compare lists of what

we would do to each other.”

“That sounds like a chill evening,” she says, and I roll my eyes. “Sunday Funday at its best.” She starts up the steps. “I can’t wait.”

When I hear the bathroom door close, I look down at my cock. “It’s not going to happen, buddy. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to be firm on this. She’s not for you. You are not for her.” My cock just gets harder when it hears the shower running. “Stop thinking about her naked.”

I run my hands over my face. “You are getting a shower”—I march up the steps—“an ice-cold shower.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FINLEY

I slip into a dark-blue lace bra with little red flowers and matching panties, then put on a pair of shorts and a tank top. I brush out my wet hair, and when I open the bathroom door, I see Lincoln's bedroom door is open, and there is noise coming from the kitchen. My stomach is doing all sorts of things I've never felt before.

When I join him in the kitchen, I of course notice his bare chest right away. My eyes roam up, not down, since the counter unfortunately blocks my view. His eyes meet mine. "I ordered pizza. It should be here any minute."

"How long was I in the shower?"

He chuckles. "I ordered it before *I* went in the shower. Do you want a beer?"

"Sure." I pull out a stool and sit down. He takes two beers out of the fridge, twisting one open and handing it to me before twisting his own.

"To being played." He holds up his beer bottle.

"Who played you?" I'm not sure I want to cheers to that. He tilts his head to the side, looking straight at me, his expression slightly amused. "How did I play you?" I ask.

"You left a few things out when I interviewed you."

“To not asking the right questions,” I say, holding up my bottle for a toast. He glares but clinks my bottle. I take a pull. The cold hits my tongue right away, followed by the bubbles. “That’s good.”

“I didn’t think you would drink a beer.”

I put my bottle down as he takes another sip of his own. “And why is that?”

“You won a silver medal and you, from what I heard—”

“Oh, so you’re listening to tales. You know, you should only believe a third of what people say.”

“A third?”

“Yes, my side is one-third, his side is another third, so the truth lies in the middle third.”

“So you wouldn’t tell me the truth?” He walks around me to the couch and sits down. I grab my beer and follow him, but sit at the other end, turning to face him.

“Of course, I would tell you the truth. I wouldn’t lie about it. But my truth and his truth are two different versions.” I take a sip of my beer. “You have to decide which version you’re going to believe.”

He turns to face me, stretching his arm on the back of the couch, and suddenly, the couch is feeling very fucking small. “I would always believe you,” he says, his voice soft. “You wouldn’t have a reason to lie to me. Even though you’ve been lying to me about other things since the beginning.”

“I didn’t lie,” I say, defending myself. “I cooked dinner, and I did laundry and cleaned. It’s not my fault things were ruined in the process.”

He looks down, trying to hide his smile. “So you bent the truth.”

“Um.” I take a long pull of my beer. “I had faith in myself. That isn’t bending the truth, that is believing in yourself.”

He throws his head back, and his laughter fills the room. “So tell me . . .” He brings the beer to his lips, and I see his tongue touch the

opening of the bottle. My body shivers and pulls taut. My finger taps the head of my bottle. “You said there were a lot of things you wanted to do to me.” I raise my eyebrows. “Care to tell me what they are?”

“Not particularly.” I can feel the back of my neck getting warm. “I don’t know my laws too well, but isn’t there one against threatening a police officer?”

He snorts. “It’s against the law to threaten anyone.”

I roll my eyes. “Then I can’t tell you.” I point my beer at him. “What would you like to do to me?”

He takes a full minute to think about it. I literally hold my breath. It feels like we’re having a staredown, or even better, circling each other until we inevitably meet in the middle.

“I’d really like to kiss you again,” he admits finally, and the air leaves my body. “Fuck, what I would do to kiss you again.” His amber eyes turn a dark brown.

“So then kiss me.” I don’t even know that my mouth is moving as the words come out.

He leans forward, and all I can hear is my heart hammering in my chest. He takes my bottle of beer and places it with his on the coffee table. My breathing is coming out in quiet pants. He cradles my face in his hands, and my own hands go to his wrists. He bends his head to the side, and there’s an aching pause. His tongue comes out to lick my bottom lip before it slides into my mouth, and then his lips are finally on mine.

I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole fucking life for this. I shift so I’m on my knees, moving closer to him. Putting my hand on the back of the couch, my other hand goes to his chest to feel his heart beating just as quickly as mine. I move my hand up on his chest as one of his hands leaves the side of my face and wraps around my waist and then moves to my ass. My back arches, and I press into his chest. I can feel myself getting wet just from his touch.

“Fuck,” he groans as his mouth releases mine to trail down my neck. His hand roams from my ass up and under my shirt. His fingertips on my bare back make me shiver. “You feel like silk.” His lips return to kiss my mouth, and now my hands itch to touch him.

The tips of my fingers roam down the front of his chest, my nails raking his abs, which contract at my touch. My fingers encounter the little bit of hair he has at the base of his stomach. My lips slowly disengage from his as I look down at my hand, right at the waistband of his shorts. His chest rises and falls as fast as mine did before. My other hand is on his face as I look into his eyes. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

“Then kiss me, baby,” he encourages softly. My stomach tightens while my heart throbs in my chest. I’ve never been called *baby* before. I’ve never had that endearment directed at me. I never knew I wanted it as much as I did until this moment.

I bend to kiss him. At the same time, my hand moves down to his cock, gripping it. I push down the elastic of his shorts, and his cock springs free.

He lets go of my lips, and we both look down at his cock. I bite my lower lip, seeing how big he is. I grip the base and move my hand up and down, mesmerized by the feel of him, at the sight of my hand around his length. He cups my jaw as he turns my face toward him.

“Finley,” he groans my name in a way I’ve never heard it. With need, with want, with lust. He pulls me in to kiss him, my tongue playing with his as my hand keeps stroking his cock.

I let go of his lips, kissing down his chest, my tongue coming out to trail all the way down. I look up at him when my hand reaches the bottom of his stomach again. His eyes are so dark they look black, turning heavy-lidded right before I take his cock in my mouth. The taste of precum hits my tongue, and it makes me moan. I move my mouth off the top and lick up the back of his shaft, my tongue twirling around the tip and then going to the

other side. I lick from the base, all the way to the top, before I take him as far as I can in my mouth.

“Fuck, baby,” he groans, his tone tight as if he’s hanging on to the edge by the ends of his fingertips. I look up at him as my hand works his cock in tandem with my mouth. His hand moves to my ass. I try to take as much as I can, but he’s too thick for me. I move my mouth to his shaft and use my tongue to lick all the way to his balls, then move up to kiss his lips, my hand still stroking him.

He leans on his hip, taking one of my legs and putting it over his lap as the other one falls to the floor. He sucks my neck before his hands move in one motion to rip my shirt over my head. My nipples tighten.

“I’ve been thinking about this”—he moves one bra cup down, my nipple pebbled and waiting to be sucked—“since the beach.” He sucks it into his mouth as his hand moves my shorts to the side with my panties. I’m so wet his fingers slide right into me, as my elbow keeps me up. “Been fucking torture.” He moves to the other nipple while his fingers fuck me. I’m so fucking gone for this man that it’s not going to take me long before I’m coming.

He comes up to kiss my lips for a split second before his fingers are out of me and he’s gone. His knees are on the floor as he grabs my legs, pulling me to him. “If I don’t taste you right now,” he declares, pushing my knees back, “I’m going to regret it for the rest of my life.”

“Wait,” I tell him as he pushes my shorts again to the side and licks his lips as if I’m his main meal. His eyes come up to look into mine. “Just so you know, I can’t when . . .” I fumble with my words. “I don’t hit the finish line.”

“Are you telling me that you’ve never come when someone has eaten your pussy?” His eyes light up.

“Yes, I just don’t want you to feel bad.”

“Baby. I could never feel bad when my face is in your pretty pussy.” He leans down and his tongue comes out and he licks me up and down. “I need you to watch me. Make sure your eyes never leave me,” he instructs me. “The minute you stop watching”—a finger slides into me—“is when I stop moving.”

“Okay, but—” I stop speaking when he bites down on my clit, and I moan.

“She likes a little bit of pain.” I don’t know if he’s asking me or telling me as he kisses my inner thigh before sucking my clit. “Tastes like fucking heaven.” His tongue slides into me with his fingers. “Look at how your pussy is taking my fingers.” I look between my legs, my eyes going to his hand as he pulls his fingers out of me and then moves them up to my clit, where he rubs in a circle. “Tell me what you feel,” he urges when he turns his wrist and slips two fingers in me.

“I feel . . .” I put my hands behind my legs. “. . . like I need more.”

“Like my cock?” I nod. “You only get my cock when you come on my tongue.” I groan out in frustration when he curls his fingers up, and my hips buck. “Found the spot.” He smirks before he sucks my clit and then continues fingering me. My eyes close as I take in the feeling.

My hand flies to his head. “Lincoln,” I breathe out his name through my teeth.

His hand and mouth stop moving at the same time. “I said watch me,” he reminds me, and my eyes fly open. “What do you feel now?”

“Feeling tight,” I answer him honestly. “It’s like it’s right there.”

“Look at my fingers.” He pulls them out of me to the tips. “See how wet you are.” He slides them back in. “Your pussy contracts every single time.” He sucks my clit as I watch him, feeling like I’m there, knowing it’s coming, and afraid it’ll go away. “So wet.” His tongue slides into me with his fingers. “So tight.”

“Don’t stop,” I beg him as he moves faster and, for the first time ever like this, I come. I can’t help but close my eyes. “Lincoln,” I moan out his name and try to close my legs to make sure he doesn’t move his mouth off me. I can feel my pussy contracting over and over again on his tongue. I’m panting, not sure what the fuck to do. He pulls his fingers out of me, and they go into his mouth as he leisurely sucks them clean.

I’m about to say something when the doorbell rings. I jump up and cover myself. He smirks, gets up, and pulls his shorts over his cock. “That’s the pizza. I’ll be right back.”

The minute he walks away from me, I grab my shirt and pull it back on and make sure that no one can see anything.

The orgasm that was supposed to leave me mellow instead has me wound up tight. I have to admit this isn’t the best idea I’ve ever had. Getting involved with my boss is not something that I should be doing. But Lincoln makes me do and say things that push me out of my comfort zone.

He comes back in with the box of pizza in his hand, the smile on his face fading. He stops in his tracks. “What’s wrong?”

He has to be the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. Like a prince in those fairy-tale cartoons, figments of our imaginations. I learned a long time ago that fairy tales are not real.

“We need to talk about this.” I point to the couch where the scene of the crime happened.

“What is there to talk about?” He walks to the island and puts the pizza box on it, then turns to me.

“Well, I’ve never had a job before,” I start, still trying to calm down, “but I’m pretty sure my boss is not supposed to have his hand down my pants. And I don’t think I’m supposed to give my boss a blow job.” He smirks. “It’s not a good idea.”

“I don’t know about that. Although I’ve never had my hands down the pants of anyone who worked for me, nor has someone I’ve worked with had

my dick in their mouth”—he comes to me and puts his hands on my hips—“I think it was fucking phenomenal.”

“I’m not here for long. If you annoy me—which, let’s face it, with your track record, the chances are pretty high—then it’ll be more awkward than it has to be. Plus, Asa will be in the middle of it.” I look down, and he moves his hands from my hips to my face.

“I think we can both make sure not to drag him into this.”

“You would think.” I sigh. “But that is what my nanny said right after she was caught sleeping with my father.” I close my eyes. “I was sent off to boarding school, and she ended up having my baby brother. And then my father stopped speaking to me when I was in college, after he slept with my brother’s nanny, who also happened to be my now-ex-best friend.”

“Finley,” he says, “breathe.”

“I am breathing.”

“We’re two adults who understand what is going on. I appreciate that you are concerned about Asa, but what goes on between us is about us and has nothing to do with him. It has nothing to do with our working relationship either. Yes, I probably will annoy you, and you can call me on it anytime. But this isn’t about Lincoln the dad and Finley the nanny. This is all about Lincoln, the man who wants and is pretty fucking attracted to Finley, the woman.” He kisses my lips. “Now, how about we have some pizza and then go upstairs and get you naked and in my bed, where I’ve been picturing you since last night?” He trails. “Unless you don’t want that.”

I look into his eyes and think about what he just said. “I’m leaving town when this is all over,” I remind him, “so this is a fling, of sorts.” He doesn’t say anything, and I push away the way my chest tightens, telling myself it’s just the nerves about having sex with him. “But I would like to be naked and in your bed.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LINCOLN

“How hungry are you right now?” I ask her, and a smirk takes over her face.

“On a scale of zero to a hundred?” She puts her hand on my chest, and I wonder if she can feel how frantic my heart is beating. “Minus five.”

I grin as I slide an arm around her and pick her up. She wraps her legs around my waist, and her arms go around my neck as I turn and walk up the steps.

In my bedroom, I place her down on her feet. “First woman I’ve ever brought to this room,” I admit to her. Why? I have no idea.

“I don’t believe you.” She smiles up at me, and I hold her face between my hands.

“I would never lie to you.” I tilt my head to the side and kiss her. I feel like I’ve been kissing her my whole life and, at the same time, feel like it’s the first time.

My hands go to the hem of her shirt, and I bunch it up before pulling it over her head. Her bra is sexy as fuck. I move my feet forward, and she walks backward until the backs of her knees hit the bed. She sits on the bed and moves back up into the middle of it with her elbows. I plant my fists on the bed before one knee hits the mattress and then the other. I hover over her, my mouth finding hers for a moment before I move the kiss to her neck. She tilts her head back, giving me full access.

“Fucking thought about doing this when I saw you with your hair up. Every single fucking day, I’ve thought about doing this.” I reach behind her and unhook her bra. She moves her shoulders to slide the straps off her, and I toss it over my shoulder. I fit myself between her legs, my tongue sliding into her mouth. One of her hands is on the back of my head, the other on my neck as I trail the kiss to the side of her mouth and then back again.

I move to her ear, sucking her lobe in my mouth and feeling her shiver under my touch.

“Lincoln,” she says.

“Never had someone say my name where it shoots straight to my cock.” I move down her neck and suck her nipple into my mouth, wanting to savor every fucking moment with her. I bite down on her nipple, and her hips buck. My hand moves to her other breast, and she slips her head from the pillow, putting her hand on my face. “Beautiful,” I say before she slides her tongue into my mouth.

I kiss her until her head falls back, and then I move down, my hands going to her hips. “Lift, baby,” I urge her, and when she does, I peel her shorts and underwear off.

She’s now, finally, naked in the middle of my bed. She sits up as I bend forward, needing to taste her again. “Just a taste,” I tell her, and she opens her legs. I lick up her slit. She sighs, and when I look up, she’s biting her lower lip. The tip of my tongue flicks over her clit, her hand at the back of my head. “Want to come on my tongue again?” I ask. All she does is sigh.

Her legs move back as I continue licking her. “Lincoln,” she begs, “please.”

She puts her hand under my jaw and drags my mouth back to hers. She sucks my tongue into her mouth, tasting both of us. “I’ve never felt like this before,” she admits. “Never felt like I was going to come out of my skin. Never had the need to be touched so badly before.”

She moves her legs away from me as I lie beside her, and she pushes me onto my back. Her mouth goes to my neck and then skims down my chest.

“Watch *me* this time.” She looks up at me as she grips my shorts and moves them down. I lift my hips so she can take them off, kicking them down my legs. She tosses them to the side.

She grips my cock in her hand and then licks the tip like it’s a lollipop. My hips fight to buck up as she swallows half of me. Her hand works with her mouth as I try not to come right down her throat. She moves faster and faster, my breath coming out in pants now, and I pull her up. “Don’t want to come down your throat the first time.”

“No?” she asks me. “Where do you want to come the first time?”

“Your pussy,” I tell her. “Want to come right in your pussy.”

“Condom?” I motion to the bedside table. She reaches over, and her tit dangles over my face, so I suck it into my mouth as she grabs a condom. “I’m not on birth control,” she tells me, and my cock gets even harder, “but I was tested after the last time with my ex.”

“Same,” I reply, not wanting to talk about them in this moment. I want her and only her. “I’ve been with one person after my ex. I’m negative.” I push her hair away from her face. “Put the condom on me, baby.” She tears it with her teeth, then takes it out, rolling it down my length before tossing the packet to the side.

She reaches between us as she grabs my cock and places it at her entrance. She slides down me slowly, and I have to close my eyes.

“Fucking perfect,” I declare as she puts her hand near my head to hold herself up, and I grab her face. She kisses me as she moves up and down my cock, my hand rubbing her ass.

“It’s so good.” I move my hips with hers. My hands go to her tits. “Not sure how much longer this is going to last.”

“Are you that close?” she asks me, and I smirk.

“No, I’m not close at all.” I move with her. “There is only so much more I can keep at bay before I snap, and I have to have you on your back. Take what you want, baby, but then I’m taking over.”

She pants as she moves over me, my face in her neck. She shifts and puts her feet on the bed, her hips moving up and down on my cock. Her hand is on my stomach. “I feel so full,” she groans as she rides me fast, and I watch her take what she needs. Her mouth opens as she gasps out her orgasm. “Lincoln,” she calls out. I put my hands under her ass to help lift her up and down on my cock as she moves faster and faster, until she slams down on me. Her pussy tightens on my cock, and she moves her hips back and forth, riding out the orgasm.

“Gosh, that was—” She can’t seem to find the words. She moves to the side of me and gets on her back. “Now I’m ready for you.” She smirks, and I get between her legs. She throws one on my shoulder, and I kiss her calf. Her pussy glistens from her orgasm.

I rub my cock up and down her slit once before it slides into her. Both of us moan in unison. “Going to fuck you slow.” I hold her leg with one hand as I move in and out of her slowly, making her moan. “Fuck, watching your pussy take my cock might be my undoing,” I admit to her.

“Fuck me harder,” she urges. “Make me feel you all night long.”

I move my hand to her tit, playing with her nipple as she puts her hand on mine. I pull out to the tip of my cock and then slam into her, taking my time, not wanting this to end. “So fucking wet,” I tell her, feeling her drip onto my balls.

“I’ve never been this wet in my life.” She moves her hips up. “Never wanted someone so much.” I bend to kiss her, her tongue sliding into my mouth, and then sucking my tongue. “Stop going so slow,” she hisses, “and fuck me like you mean it.”

Her leg falls off my shoulder and to the side. “Please, Lincoln,” she begs, and I snap. I push her legs back, holding down the back of her thighs

before I pull out, then slam into her. “Yes,” she cries. “More.”

Over and over again, I fuck her. The sound of my balls hitting her ass fills the room. She moves her hand between us.

“What are you doing?” I ask her when she seems unsure.

“My clit feels achy, like I need to touch it.”

“Then touch it, baby,” I urge, transfixed by the sight as she moves two fingers down her slit and then back up to her clit. “Is that what you needed?”

“Yes! Yes!” She moves it side to side, faster and faster. “I’m there,” she barely gets out before she yells out my name.

I watch her come apart for me again, and this time I can’t fight it anymore. I plant myself deep inside her and empty myself in the condom.

“Every time your pussy contracts, it’s pulling the cum from me.” Her eyes flash with lust. “Taking it all.”

“Give it to me.” She does it again, knowing what she’s doing to me. I fall on top of her, my cock still inside, and I want to keep it in her until it goes soft.

She wraps all her limbs around me.

“I thought I was going to pass out,” I admit to her. “Never came so hard in my life.”

“Lincoln,” she says softly as she plays with my hair, “that was the best sex I’ve ever had.” I smirk and get up on my elbows. “I’ve never had an orgasm from sex before.” My mouth drops open in shock. “I’ve had orgasms before, but they were always self-induced. I’ve never let go like that before,” she admits to me. “I was always too shy to open up, I guess.” She runs her finger down my chest. “But with you, I just . . . Something about you just lets me be me.” I close my eyes. “Also, I hate to be that person, but I really fucking hope I put that condom on right.” I put my forehead on hers, and all I can do is burst out laughing. “If it’s not like ruining the moment, can you take it out of me?”

“*Take it out of me*,” I mock her.

“Well, for now. Later, when you put on the condom, and you want to leave your cock in me, I’ll let you.” I pull out of her and roll on the bed. “Why don’t we get cleaned up and then—”

“Then you can do me again.” She gets up with me. “And next time I won’t be shy.”

I put my hand on her face. “With me, you can always be you.” I kiss her. “I want to see the real you.”

“Okay,” she sings, “but don’t forget you asked for it.” She giggles as she walks to the bathroom, and I watch her ass move side to side.

My stomach tightens as I try to get my heart to slow itself down. “She’s going to be yours for a short time,” I mumble to myself, the back of my neck burning at the reality of it. “You get her until she leaves town and this job is over.” It’s better than nothing.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

FINLEY

I turn on the faucet and look into the mirror, expecting Lincoln to be right behind me. I reach for a face towel and then walk back to the door. He's lying in bed on his back, where I left him.

"Are you okay in there?" My mouth waters when he looks over at me, and my chest tightens. "Did I kill you?" I lean against the doorframe and fold my arms over my chest. "Not going to lie, it'll be great for my ego if I killed you during sex."

He laughs as he curls up from his bed and walks toward me. My eyes give him a once-over. His cock, still in the condom but at half-mast now, is still bigger than anyone else I've ever had. My eyes fixate on it.

"You see something you like?" His voice comes out gruff. A cocky grin stretches across his face.

"I mean, it's right in front of me."

He leans down and kisses my lips. "It's good to know you like what you see."

I roll my eyes as he walks to the bathroom to dispose of the condom. I grab another hand towel, and he comes to stand behind me. He puts his hands on the counter by my hips. "You good?" he asks. I nod, looking down at the sink. "What's on your mind?"

"In general?" I try to sound like I'm okay.

“Finley . . .”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t use your father voice on me.” I turn in his arms. “It doesn’t scare me as much as it does Asa.” He tries to hide a smirk. “You have a different set of voices that you use with me, and news flash, none of them are scary. The irritated one is my favorite, I think. I do my best to make sure you’re always irritated.”

He grips my hip as he throws his head back and laughs. His neck is open for me to get on my tippy-toes and kiss him on the side.

“Don’t do that,” he says, his voice thick.

My body locks. “Okay.” I avoid looking at him, my pulse speeding up as I turn. I fold the towel in my hands to have something to do and put it on the counter. I try not to let the hurt set in.

“Finley.” I hum a response. “Look at me.”

“It’s fine,” I duck under his arm. “I’m sorry.” I move to the bedroom, looking for my shorts. I want to get the fuck out of here as fast as I can.

“Finley,” he says again, still soft. I pick up my top and then find my shorts.

“I’m hungry.” I ignore the way my stomach clenches.

“Finley,” he repeats my name again, just like the last two times. I finally look up at him. “I think you misunderstood what I was saying when I said, ‘Don’t do that.’”

“It’s fine. Are you not hungry?” I slip on the shorts without the panties. “I feel like I just did a two-hour workout session. I’m going to go and warm up the pizza.” I step toward the door.

He closes the distance between us, blocking my path. I could get around him, but it would be awkward. So I just stand there as if my feet were poured into cement boots.

“The reason I said, ‘Don’t do that’. . .” His hands come up to rest against my cheeks, but I just stare at his chest. “It’s because the minute you

touch me, I forget everything. I was less than a split second away from placing you on that counter and fucking you raw."

"Oh." I bite my lower lip to stop smiling like a kid on Christmas Day.

"Yeah, *oh*." I peek up to find him smirking. He kisses me gently on the lips. "You kiss me when you want to kiss me, where you want to kiss me. Certain places love your mouth." He winks at me.

I lean back, and now I'm the one bursting out laughing.

He tilts my head to the side and bends to kiss my neck in the exact spot I kissed his, and my body comes alive. "You see how much it affects you?"

"I've never—" I start to say. "It's never gotten to me before." I wrap my hands around his wrists. "I know it might seem like I'm experienced because I was married"—I look down—"but that isn't the case."

"So we're going to have a conversation about our exes." He lets go of my face, and my hands fall to my sides. He turns and grabs his shorts, putting them on and then sliding his hand into mine to pull me out of the room. "Let's talk while we eat. Then after that, we're going back to bed." I follow him down the stairs. "Or the couch." He looks over his shoulder. "We could actually do both." I can't help but giggle. He stops on the step and turns to face me. "I like how that sounds. You don't do it enough."

"I mean, if you stop annoying me so much, I might laugh more," I tease.

He turns and continues to the kitchen.

He puts his hand on top of the pizza box. "It's still warm," he says as I pull out a stool.

"Wow, that doesn't speak well of you if the pizza didn't even get cold." He glares, and I laugh. "It should be ice-cold."

"It's not my fault that the moment I sank my cock into you, it was just too much for me."

I point at him as he gets two plates out of the cupboard. "That's a good comeback, very good."

"Glad you like it, baby." He hands me a plate and opens the box.

“I don’t need a plate.” I rip a piece out and take a bite. “So, let’s talk.”

“Okay.” He takes his own piece and forgoes the plate too. “I don’t want you to think I sleep around.”

I raise my eyebrows. “That’s what I was going to say.” I swallow. “You’re like the third guy I’ve ever slept with.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“No, really. Why would I lie? First guy I slept with, it was just to lose my virginity.” I take another bite. “And it was meh, so I was like, *What is the big deal about sex?*” I pull off a piece of the thick crust and pop it in my mouth. “Then one of my friends had one of those vibrator parties.”

“I’m sorry, what kind of party?” He looks at me.

“You know, a pleasure party.” I help myself to another piece. “They bring in some sample vibrators, and you order them.” His eyes look like they are about to come out of his head. “Anyway, I got one, and then, well, I did some research.”

He throws his slice of pizza down. “You did research?”

“Well, yeah.” I take a bite. “I’m not saying I was very good at it, but I was very good at it.” His mouth opens. “Then I met my soon-to-be ex, and I thought it was going to be good, but well . . .” I turn my hand upside down and do a thumbs-down. “He couldn’t find my clit if it came with flashing lights and an arrow that says, *Over Here*. I don’t know how he gets so many women to sleep with him.” I shrug. “Hey, who knows, maybe it’s me.”

“It’s not you,” he snaps. “As you pointed out, the pizza is still hot because I came so fast.”

I snort. “High five, then.” I hold up my hand, and he gives me a high five, then takes my hand and kisses the back of it. “So you are the third person I’ve ever slept with, and the only one who I’ve had an orgasm with during sex.”

“How long were you married?”

“Three months before I filed for divorce, but we’ve been together for two years,” I groan. “Seven hundred and thirty days. Do you know how many times I had to have orgasms by myself?”

“I don’t want to know.”

“I almost got carpal tunnel”—I hold up my hand—“in this hand.” He barks out laughing. “So how many women have you slept with?”

“More than three,” he admits, and I roll my eyes as the back of my neck tingles. I tell myself it’s fine.

“I mean, obviously, you have a child. So it has to be more than one.”

“I slept with someone a week after I left.”

I hold up my pointer finger. “I kind of don’t want to know,” I say. “Not that it doesn’t matter, it’s just—”

“You’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous,” I scoff at him and take another bite of my pizza.

“There is no reason for you to be jealous.”

“I’m glad,” I retort, annoyed. “I’ll be able to sleep tonight.”

“Oh, please. You know you’re beautiful.” I look down because I’ve never been told I’m beautiful by anyone besides my grandfather. “Your body is on another fucking level, and when we were at the beach, I had to stay in the water longer than I wanted.”

I laugh at him. “You said it was relaxing.”

“You know what wasn’t relaxed? My cock. So that’s why you shouldn’t be jealous. I don’t think I have ever been that hard before in my life. I came home and had to jerk off in my shower. Actually”—he cocks his hip—“since you’ve been in town, I’ve jerked off every single night.”

I can’t help but burst out laughing. “I don’t think I’ve laughed with someone more than I have with you,” I admit to him. “I really haven’t had much to laugh about.” My chuckle ends. “Orgasms and laughter.” I clap my hands together. “If that doesn’t scream the perfect guy, I don’t know what does.”

His eyes go a dark brown as he stares at me. “You done eating?”

“That depends on what I’m going to be doing with my time.”

He walks around the island as I try to think of flirty things to say, but nothing comes out because he ducks down and, in one smooth motion, pulls me onto his back and then up over his shoulder.

“Ohh,” I say, reaching down to grab the waistband of his shorts, “if you lower me, I could probably suck your cock.” He reaches behind him to slap my ass. I kiss his chest. “I’ve never done it upside down before, but I have watched a couple of—” He changes his route midway to the steps and instead walks to the couch and throws me over the back so I land on the cushions with a bounce. He climbs after me and starts kissing my neck, at the same time grabbing my shirt and pulling it off me.

“Yes,” I pant when he holds my tits in his hands, his fingers rolling my nipples. I open my legs, about to put my hand in my shorts, when one of his hands beats me to it. I turn my head to the side as his tongue slips into my mouth and his fingers slide into me. “Yes,” I hiss.

“Fuck, I’m going to need a condom.”

I groan. “Now,” I order as his fingers move out of me.

“Don’t move.” He points at me. “I’ll be right back.” He sprints, taking three stairs at a time. “If you want to start without me . . .”

I can’t help but laugh as I hear him rush to his bedroom, the drawer slamming shut, and then he’s back on the stairs. “I got three, just in case.”

I look up at him, grinning. “Three? That’s a lot, don’t you think?”

“It is.” He stops in front of me, and I sit up, my hands going to his shorts. “But—” He stops talking when I push his shorts down, my hand gripping the base of his cock. “Good God,” he groans when I take half of him in my mouth. His hips move to push even more into me. “Fuck, I can’t decide if I love my cock more in your mouth or your pussy.” His hands move to my nipples and play with them. I move my mouth off him and lick from the base to his head. My hand moves with my mouth, working him.

“Take it, baby.” He thrusts as much as he can, fucking my mouth slowly as he pulls out and then pushes in until he hits the back of my throat. “So fucking beautiful,” he hisses. “Those lips around my cock. Your eyes staring into mine.” He swallows. “It’s taking everything in me right now not to paint your mouth with my cum.”

I let go of his cock long enough to say, “I want it. I don’t want you to hold back.” I take him back into my mouth.

His hips move more frantically, and he pulls my nipples, making me groan and move my hips on the couch. “You want to touch yourself?” he asks me, and I nod my head. “Show me how you make yourself come with my cock in your mouth.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. My hands go into my shorts and slide into me, moaning around his cock. “Next time,” he grits, his teeth clenched together, “I’ll have you sit on my face while you suck my cock.” I close my eyes as he pinches my nipples and pulls, making me come on my fingers at the same time that I feel his cum hit the back of my throat.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LINCOLN

I lift her hips up, and she moans when I slide two fingers into her. “Morning,” I mumble, and she just moves her ass side to side. I bend to bite her ass cheek before grabbing my cock in my hand and sliding it into her from behind.

“Yes,” she hisses out, pushing her ass back into me. She gets up on her elbow and looks over her shoulder. Sleep is still on her face, but she’s been up for the last five minutes as I feasted on her pussy. She stirred awake when I opened her legs and licked up her slit to her clit. We don’t say anything to each other as I hold her hips and she fucks me back. Both of us are on the cusp of orgasm with just a couple of touches from the other person. She grips the sheets in her hands. “I’m right—”

“I know, baby,” I cut her off, feeling her pussy getting tighter around my cock. It’s as if I’ve spent years getting to know her, yet this is the first day she’s woken up in my bed. The first of many. “Let go,” I urge her, trying to hold off until she comes, but she’s got the tightest, wettest, juiciest pussy I’ve ever had. It’s like it’s always the first time with her.

She comes on my cock in less than a minute, then thrusts, and when she does, I finally plant myself in her and come in the condom.

I pull out of her and slap her ass as she falls to the side. Her hair tousled on my sheet, she grips the cover and pulls it up over herself as I get off the

bed. “You aren’t going to shower with me?”

“What time is it?”

I chuckle. “It’s five thirty,” I report, and she gasps.

“There is no reason I have to be up at this ungodly hour.”

“I have to be at work at seven.”

She cuddles into my bed. “Love that journey for you,” she deadpans. “I don’t have to pick up Asa until nine, so bye.” She raises a lazy hand and gives me a finger wave, and I turn to head to my bathroom.

“The shower isn’t going to be the same without you.” I hold on to the doorjamb.

“The bed is not going to be the same without you,” she grumbles. “I slept with a hard cock pressed up against me all night long.” She sighs. “Felt like a bat.”

I push away from the doorjamb and head into the bathroom to get rid of the condom before starting the shower. I see the empty condom wrapper from last night on the floor and smirk. I finish up in the shower, grab the packet, and put it in the garbage before heading to my closet to get dressed.

I’m tucking my shirt in when I look up and see her sleeping in my bed. A smile fills my face while my shirt feels like it’s tightening around my neck. I walk to her side of the bed—which is my side, actually, but I would have her on any side she wants to be on as long as she stays in my bed. I sit on the edge of the mattress, and she turns her head my way.

“Hey,” she mumbles, one eye opening for a second before closing again. I kiss her shoulder. “Are you leaving?”

“Yes,” I reply softly. She gets up on her elbow and puts her head back for me to kiss her. “I don’t know what time I’ll be home.” I kiss her again. “But I can let you know.”

“Okay.” She smiles. “I’ll pick up Asa, and then I think we’re going to go and do something you probably won’t approve of.”

I laugh and grab her jaw with my hand. She opens her eyes. “I—” My mouth shuts before the word comes out.

“I?” she says, waiting.

“I really like your eyes.”

She smiles big. “I really like your eyes, and other parts of you that I shouldn’t know about.” She leans in and kisses my neck, and I wonder if she can feel how fast and hard my heart is beating. “One certain part I really like.” She lies back down. “I’m going to lie here for a bit and dream about that part.”

“Are you going to play with yourself?” I ask her.

“I mean”—she turns on her back—“I have the time.”

I look over at the clock. “I have to go,” I groan. “I can’t stay here all day and fuck you.”

She laughs. “Who’s stopping you from leaving?”

“If I fuck you with my pants on, I’m going to have your pussy juice all over me.”

“Get out.” She points to the door. “I promise I won’t play with myself in your bed. Happy now?”

I get up, not wanting to leave her. “Yes. Call me later.”

I’m almost to the door when she calls me. “Lincoln.” I turn and see she’s up on her elbows. “I never said anything about the shower.” She winks at me.

“You’re fucking with me.”

“You’ll know when I’m fucking with you.” She falls back down. “Now go away and let me sleep.”

I shake my head and jog down the stairs and out the door before I do something I’ve never done in my life: not show up for my shift.

Instead, I force myself to drive straight to the station.

Cathy’s desk sits empty since she starts at 8:00 a.m., and all calls are forwarded to the fire station. I toss my phone and keys on my desk before

walking over to the coffee machine.

“How old is this coffee?” I ask one of the guys.

“We made it around two in the morning,” he says. I empty it in the sink and start a fresh pot. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I have a meeting with Captain,” I tell him, “and I want to see the evidence from the break-in at my house.”

“They were just talking about it.” He motions with his head toward two uniforms, Brian and Nik, who are sitting at one of the desks. I wait for the coffee to finish, pour myself some, and join them.

“Hey.” They look up from the screen in front of them. “What are you looking at?”

“Stills from that Ring cam you have,” Brian says as I put my coffee cup down and pull up a chair.

“It’s pretty quiet, and then it goes black for a second.” He points to the picture. “Then it comes back again for a split second, and you see something on the side.” He motions to a hooded figure. “Then it goes black for good.”

“So they fucked with the wires?” I ask.

He nods. “I’m going to swing by your house today and check. Other than that, we got nothing. You don’t even see the apartment in the frame, so we can’t see how they got in there.”

“Used a screwdriver,” I tell him. “Busted the lock. I’m going to ask Theo if he can fix it today.” I get my phone from my desk to do that now and see that I missed a text.

FINLEY:

Since I was up at the ass crack of dawn because of you, I’ve decided to nap and let Asa tend to himself.

I try not to smile as I answer her.

ME:

You would never leave him alone.

Then I pull up the text thread for Theo.

ME:

Hey, when you're up, can you give me a call?

I put my phone in my pocket and see Captain walking in.

"Morning," he says, a to-go cup of coffee in his hand, "you're here bright and early."

"Well, if your house was broken into, you would be too," I mumble, and he nods. "We got nothing."

"Yeah, that's what they said." He sighs. "We have a meeting with the team in an hour."

"Good, I want names." I grit my teeth. "They fucked with my house. If I don't pay anyone a visit, they are going to think they got the upper hand."

"We have to go in smart," he advises. "Ask the right people."

I nod as my phone rings, and I check the screen. "I have to take this." He continues to his office as I put the phone to my ear.

"Hey."

"Hey," Theo replies, "how you doing?"

"Could be better. Someone broke into Finley's place two days ago."

"What?" he asks, confused.

"Yeah, I can't get into it. But it has to do with a case I'm working."

"Fuck. What did they take?"

"Nothing as far as we could tell, but they did some damage. Broke the lock to get in. Can you drop by today and see if you can fix it?"

"Yeah, I'll go by this morning, around ten. I'm assuming Finley is there."

"Where the fuck else would she be?" It comes out more aggressive than I intended, but he just laughs.

"Well, considering she's got shit happening to her at home, and now shit here, who knows? Maybe she'll take off." I feel the blood drain from my body. "Hello, you still there?"

“I’m here.” I look out the window. “She’s there now, but she’s going to get Asa at nine.”

“No problem. If the lock is broken, she won’t need to be there to let me in. I’ll pick up a more secure lock and get it installed.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” I hang up the phone, then head down the stairs and outside for some privacy. I call Finley.

“Whoa. Calling so soon? Either I did something you really don’t like”—she laughs—“or you just pocket-dialed me.”

“Just checking in,” I lie as I try to calm myself down. “Seeing if you are okay.” I can hear birds in the background.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay? I’m sitting outside, having a cup of coffee. I had a very good night and an even better morning. I would say I’m more than okay, but the last thing we need is to feed your ego.”

I chuckle. “Okay, good. Theo is going to stop by this morning and fix the door.”

“Oh,” she says, her voice going low, “okay.”

The phone rings, and I see it’s Maggie. “I have to go, baby. Call you later.”

“I’ll text you when I get Asa,” she says, and I press a button to accept the call from Maggie.

“Hello.”

“Oh, good,” she says, “I didn’t know if you would answer or not.”

“Well, I have our son, so I sort of have to answer.” I look around. “But if you’re calling to talk to Asa, you’re out of luck. I’m already at work, and he’s at a sleepover, but he should be home soon.” I’m mostly not there when she calls Asa. Although from the conversation that I had with him, he misses his mom, so I’m going to make sure that she knows when he’s going to be back home.

“I’m calling to talk to you.” I can hear voices coming from her end of the phone.

“Okay.” I’m not sure why she would have to talk to me on her honeymoon.

“There was an accident,” she starts, and then I hear her sniffle. “We were hiking in Greece, and Tim fell.” My eyebrows pinch together.

“To his death?”

She gasps. “Burke!” For the first time, I wonder why she’s never called me Lincoln. Did she ever? “Of course not,” she hisses.

“So then why are you calling me?”

“He broke his leg and had to have surgery.”

“So he’s fine.” I honestly don’t know what to say.

“You’re incredible. You could try to care, you know.”

“You want me to care for a man who came in and fucked my wife when we were married?” I laugh. “It’s not going to happen.”

“You are incredible,” she repeats. “I’m calling to tell you I’ll be back early, by the end of the week, and I can take Asa.” I swallow. “We arrive on Friday, so I’ll come and get him on Monday.”

“Um, I already hired someone to watch him for the whole month.”

“So just pay her for her time and be done with it. I’ll call you when we get home.” She disconnects, and all I can do is look down at the phone.

“One week,” I say, unsure of how I feel. I knew it was going to come to an end. I just thought we had more time.

I turn to head back inside, and the phone beeps. It’s a text from Finley.

I open it and see a picture of her. She’s sitting in the tree house with a smile on her face. I see she’s wearing one of my shirts that she ruined with bleach.

FINLEY:

When the cat’s away, the mice will play.

“Fuck me,” I inhale deeply, “this is going to be harder than I thought.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

FINLEY

I’m slipping on my shoes when my phone rings. Davis has been calling every thirty minutes from different numbers. I picked up once, and when I heard his voice, I hung up and blocked the number, but he just called from another number. I finally put my phone on Do Not Disturb and added three numbers to my safe list: Lincoln’s, Collins’s, and my lawyer’s. Yesterday I had to add in Charlie because he had Asa. Then I added Harmony in case she called me for a playdate. It’s been one thing after another.

At least this call is from someone on the list.

“Homicide,” I joke when I put it on speaker, snickering at myself.

“That’s not fucking funny,” Collins retorts. “Shit, sorry I swore.”

Taking her off speaker, I put the phone to my ear. “You know that until the baby is like two, I don’t think they understand what words are, right?”

“Um, you would be wrong, that starts at six months.”

“You’re kidding.” I check the kitchen, making sure I turned everything off.

“I am not. Hey, why didn’t you tell me that your place was broken into?”

I sigh. “It was nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing,” she says softly. I close my eyes, not sure I should tell her about Davis. “Why didn’t you call me or come over here?”

“It’s fine. I stayed in the house, Asa slept with Lincoln, and I took his bed.”

I hear talking on her side. “Shit, I have to go on a call.” I can hear her rushing now. “Can you promise me that you will call me if you need anything?”

“I promise,” I agree quickly to get her off the phone so she can do her job. “Be safe.” I hear a siren as she disconnects.

I tuck my phone in the back pocket of my jeans as I walk out of the house and lock the door behind me. The sun is already shining, and the only shade on the front steps comes from the trees. Two birds soar in the sky, and I give them a little smile.

I notice the neighbor sitting out on his porch. “Good morning.” I smile and wave, and he smiles back.

“Going to be a good one indeed.” He rocks in his chair.

I don’t think I even know who my neighbors are back home. I mean, my penthouse is the whole floor, and no one else can access it. I barely see anyone in the elevator, and when I do, we usually just nod and look away.

I get in my SUV and make my way over to the ranch. The little butterflies in my stomach take flight as soon as I see the horse I’ve fallen in love with in the arena.

“Finley!” Asa barrels toward me, swinging his arms in the air, around and around like a windmill.

“Hey.” I wait for him to crash into me, then wrap my arms around him. “Good morning.”

He looks up at me, and I smile when I see his warm brown eyes, just like his father’s. “Good morning.” He moves out of my arms. “I mucked the stalls and didn’t vomit.”

I laugh, looking over at Wyatt, who is standing with Charlie, looking at us. “Is that so?”

“Yeah.” He nods his head furiously. “And I gave them breakfast and water.”

“Look at you.” I ruffle his hair. “Get you some boots and a cowboy hat, and you’ll be a proper cowboy.”

He jumps up and down as I walk toward Charlie. “Good morning.”

“Hey,” he says, smiling at me. “He’s been waiting to tell you all about his morning.” He motions to Asa with his chin. “He was also asking if you guys are going riding.”

I try to bite my lower lip to stop myself from smiling, but he can see me fighting it. “Twist a girl’s arm, why don’t you?”

The four of us take the horses on a trail ride. When we’re almost back, Charlie looks over at me. “You can open him up, if you want.”

I lean down and whisper in Rocky’s ear. “Want to run free?”

He neighs before I nudge his side, and he starts to take off. I give him his lead, and he turns away from the trail into the field, as the others continue on toward the barn. I crouch down on him, feeling the wind blow through my hair. Like always, when I’m riding, I feel a sense of peace, but this time it’s different. I have never felt like I belonged anywhere. But here, right now, I feel it, like I belong here.

When we arrive at the barn, I dismount and dust off my hands. I take care of Rocky, then find Asa and Wyatt perched on the arena fence, talking and watching Charlie work with one of the horses.

“Okay, buddy, it’s time to go and get lunch.” I look at Wyatt. “Do you want to come with us?”

“Can I go with them, Uncle Charlie?” Wyatt asks, and Charlie nods.

“I’ll bring him back in a bit,” I tell him as the two kids run to my SUV.

We drive to the bakery, and they are out of the car before I turn the engine off. I laugh at them, each trying to be first in the shop. By the time I step inside, the boys are already at a table with Brock and Everleigh’s daughter, Sage, and her friend Lucy.

“Well, well, well,” Everleigh says, coming from the back, “you’re here right on time.”

“Was I supposed to be here?” I try to remember if I made plans with her and forgot.

“Not really, but I assumed you would be dropping in for lunch as usual, so I got the girls to come in so we can”—she looks at me super excited, clapping her hands—“have an impromptu baking lesson.”

“Oh. I don’t think you want me in the back, near an oven. I burned frozen pizza,” I tell her. “Then I remembered reading somewhere that you can microwave eggs, and well, news flash, you can’t. Or maybe you can, but you have to take off the shell.” I throw up my hands. “They should have put that warning on the carton. It took me two hours to get the smell out of the kitchen.”

“I promise you that you can do this,” she says. “Go and sit. I’ll bring out something to eat, and then we’ll get started.”

“Fine,” I give in, “but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I sit with the kids, and Everleigh comes out with some sandwiches for us. The kids eat as fast as they can, so we can get started on this baking adventure. I clean up the table and follow them to the back, where Everleigh has the long wooden table all set up for five bakers.

“Okay, first things first,” she starts, “wash your hands and put on a hairnet.”

“I can do that.” The kids and I wash our hands, and I help the boys with their hairnets before I put on my own. “Now you each get your own Maddie’s apron.” She hands us each a black apron with the shop’s logo on it. “Okay, aprons are on, now step in front of one of the big bowls.”

“Here we go.” I stand in front of a bowl and take a look at the smaller bowls surrounding it—the ingredients are practically already ready for me.

“This is called one-bowl chocolate cake.” Everleigh walks to her own spot and picks up one of the small bowls. “I need you guys to put the sugar

in the big bowl. It's the white one that looks like sand." She looks at me and I snort. "Then the flour, also white but looks fluffier." I watch Asa add his flour before adding mine. "Then the cocoa." She puts it in the glass bowl in front of her. "Then you have this little guy." She picks up a small stainless steel cup. "It has salt, baking powder, and baking soda." She adds it to the bowl. "Now pick up your spoon."

I'm following her directions like my life depends on it, focused so hard on my own bowl that I don't even look over at Asa anymore. We add the eggs, milk, oil, vanilla, and boiling water—all measured by Everleigh—mix, and then pour the batter into small cake pans that are pre-greased, whatever that means. While the cakes bake in the oven, she has us make the frosting.

I'm amazed when, an hour later, the cakes are out of the oven and the frosting is ready to be placed on the cakes, after they cool on a wire rack for fifteen minutes.

I look over at her as I carefully frost my cake. "I can't believe I did this," I admit to her as she boxes Asa's cake for him. "Like, never in a million years would I think I would be able to make this." I point to the cake. "I not only made it, but it looks so good I'm going to actually eat this."

She laughs at me.

WHEN WE GET HOME, I place Asa's cake in the fridge with mine next to his. The front door opens, and I peek up at the clock, noticing it's just after three in the afternoon.

"Hey," I hear Lincoln say, and my heart skips a beat. I try not to show how happy I am that he's here.

"Dad!" Asa shouts and runs to the front door. "Dad, guess what?"

"What, buddy?"

I hear them both coming my way. I think I hold my breath while I wait for him to come into view. His eyes meet mine and then quickly shift back to Asa, without saying anything to me.

I get a sick feeling.

“We went riding today, and then we baked a cake,” Asa tells him.

Lincoln’s eyes dart to me and then to the stove.

“We didn’t do it here,” I tell him. “We took a class with Everleigh. So all parts of your kitchen are unscathed.” I’m joking, but he doesn’t laugh.

“It’s chocolate, and I tasted the icing, and it’s so good.” Asa jumps up and down. “Can I have a piece now?”

“No, I have to talk to Finley first, and then I’m going to start on dinner,” he says. “Why don’t you go play in the tree house, and I’ll call you when it’s ready?”

“Okay.”

Asa heads for the door, and I want to drag him back here and not let him leave the room. I know what that tone means. I can hear the words already in my head: *It was a mistake. We have to forget what happened*. Well, the joke is on him because there is no way I’ll ever be able to forget what happened.

Lincoln stands across from me, his hand on the island. Now that I’ve seen him naked, all I can do is picture him naked, which isn’t helping me right now. He waits for the door to close before he looks back at me. “I got some news today.”

My heartbeat echoes in my ears. He found out about Davis and now wants me to get the fuck away from him and his son. Who could blame him? Not me. “I can—” I stop talking when he walks around the island to me.

“Maggie called today. Her trip got cut short.”

“Oh no, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Tim fell and broke his leg.” My eyes widen. “So she’ll be back on Friday, and she wants Asa on Monday.”

“Oh.” I know now where this is going, and my heart sinks all the way to my feet. “So—”

“So I won’t need you anymore.” The words I thought I wanted to hear a week ago now feel like they have sliced my heart in two. Actually, more than two. It feels shattered.

“I—” I start to say, and then stop when he puts his hand on my hip, and all my words are gone with his touch.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly.

“Hey.” I take a step closer to him. “I have to get back home anyway.” The meaning of the word hits so differently now.

“We still have one week.”

I look out the window toward the tree house, knowing I’m going to miss this more than I can put into words. “We have one week,” I agree, looking up at him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me”—I move away from him to the fridge and pull out my box—“I’m going to go sit in bed and eat my cake.”

“Um . . .” I grab a fork out of the drawer. “I told Asa I’m going to make dinner.”

“Yes, but”—I point my fork at him—“I’m allowed to do what I want.”

I start toward the door. “Save some of that cake,” he commands. “I’m going to want to eat it off of you later.” I can’t help but smirk. “I’ll call you when dinner is ready.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

LINCOLN

I walk out of the bathroom, naked, and take in Finley sitting in my bed. Her hair is tousled from my hands. The sheet is tucked around her front, her leg sticking out, curled on top of it.

“Are you going to go and check on Asa?” she whispers to me, and I shake my head.

We had dinner together, and she left for her place. I waited a full forty-five minutes after Asa was asleep to go to her door. She answered, and all I did was slip my hand in hers and pull her toward the house. She only stopped me to go back and get the cake before following me to my bedroom.

“He’s been a deep sleeper since he was born,” I tell her. “The house could fall down, and he’ll barely stir.”

“I don’t know,” she teases, reaching for the box of cake on her nightstand, “you did get loud there at the end.”

I slide into bed beside her. “I had to cover your moan with my mouth,” I remind her as I put the pillows up against the headboard. “So was I the one who was loud, or were you the one who was loud?”

She laughs. “Okay, I’m going to have some cake, and then I’m going to go back to my bed.”

“No, you aren’t. You’re staying here.”

“But what if he wakes up in the night and wants to come sleep with you?”

“Then you hide in the bathroom and go out through the laundry room.” I put my arm around her hips.

Her mouth opens. “Did you build it that way on purpose?”

I chuckle as she opens the top of the box. “I wish I was that clever. We gutted the house when I took it over.”

“Wait, you lived in this house?” She looks at me, fork in hand.

“Grew up in this house.” Her face shines with amazement. “My sister and I inherited the house when my dad passed away and then rented it out. But then, when Maggie and I got divorced, I bought out her half.”

“That”—she looks down at the cake and then back at me—“is so fucking special that you can have Asa grow up in the same house you did.” Her voice is soft. “I don’t even know the address of the house I lived in when I was younger.”

“Why?” I ask her as she holds a bite of cake out for me. I lean forward, taking it, and my eyebrows shoot up. “This is actually really good.” I point to my mouth.

“I know, right?” She takes her own bite. “And I made it. That, in itself, is a miracle.”

“So where did you grow up?” I want to know more about her, even though I know I shouldn’t go there. I’m already more involved than I care to admit.

“Well, we had different houses.” She feeds me another piece. “My parents met in high school, fell in love, got married, blah-blah-blah.” She licks a spot of frosting off her lip. “Then my mom had me, and my father, well, he never really grew up. I mean, neither did my mother, in his defense. They had me when they were both twenty-one, and they stayed twenty-one. My father had affair after affair. So my mother would move from house to house, just to fuck with him or to get back at him. I don’t really know. I was

in boarding school and never knew where she would be living when a holiday or summer break came." My blood pressure starts to rise. "During the summers, whenever they got bored of using me against each other, whoever had me would ship me off to my grandparents' house, or my grandparents would feel sorry for me and come take me away for a while." She shrugs. "Either way, I spent a lot of time with them."

"Which side?"

"My dad's parents. I don't think my mom's parents lived close to us, or if they did, they didn't seem to care. I only remember visiting them once. After that, I never saw them again."

"Where did you learn to ride?" She gives me another piece of cake.

"At my grandparents'. It was my favorite thing to do. It *is* my favorite thing to do. Getting on the horse and just pushing it." A smile breaks across her face, lighting her up. "It's like all the problems you have are gone, and you are all alone. The voices turn off in your head. The bickering that you spend all day listening to is gone, and it's just you and the horse. I would escape the craziness of my childhood and just ride. I mean, whenever I could. I started boarding school when I was five, and there wasn't a stable there, so I only got to ride when I was at my grandparents'."

"At five?" I'm shocked. I couldn't imagine sending Asa away at any age.

"Well, my parents had just divorced, and my father was more interested in spreading his seed than being a dad. My grandparents loved me, but they weren't looking to raise another child at that point in their lives. I guess I was too much of a handful." She laughs, but it's not a real laugh, it's a nervous, embarrassed laugh. "My nanny was pregnant with my father's baby. Not long after, someone else claimed she had had his baby too. My mother would call and rant about it to me when she had hit the liquor a bit too much.

“Of course, after my father, she had her own string of men. Boarding school really was the right place for me. I found out later that Mom had breast cancer and refused to treat it. She was afraid she would go bald. I think she was trying to get as much as she could out of life, but you can’t exactly gallivant around the world with a child. By the time she passed away, she had been married five times . . .” Her voice trails off. “She died at thirty-six.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” I say softly.

“Me too.” She exhales. “When my mom died, my grandparents decided to take me in, and I didn’t have to go back to boarding school. It was as normal a childhood as I’d had, even though by then I was fifteen, almost grown. My father died in a car accident four years later. He’d stopped speaking with me the year before. My brother went to live with his mother full-time. To be honest, we barely know each other. We didn’t really grow up together like typical siblings, but our grandparents tried to get us together for holidays when they could. He’s in college now. I haven’t seen him since our grandparents died.

“Our grandmother went first, not long after I turned twenty-two, and then my grandfather . . . I think he just gave up. Two months to the day after she passed away, he died in his sleep . . .” Her voice trails off, and I have to wonder if anyone ever fought for her, fought to keep her safe. Fought to protect her, fought to put her fucking first. “I have pictures of my mother in my baby books as well as some photo albums that I have in storage, and I look a lot like her.”

“You are your own kind of beautiful, baby.”

She smiles at me. “You know, you’re the only one who has ever told me I’m beautiful.” She blinks away tears, and I want to take her in my arms, but something tells me she wouldn’t want that. “I’ve been called hot and sexy, obviously.” She rolls her eyes, making a joke out of it, and it’s then that I make the decision to push her boundaries.

I sit up and cup her cheek in my hand. “You are those, too, but you are more than just that.”

“Yeah? Tell me.” Her smile beams on her face.

“You are kind and smart.” She turns and puts the box on the bedside table before straddling me. The covers fall to my legs. “You make one of the best chocolate cakes I’ve ever had in my life.” I put my hand to the side of her neck. “You are truthful and don’t take my shit.”

“What fun would that be?” She leans in to kiss my neck.

“You also make me laugh like no one else.”

“A day without laughter is a day wasted,” she states softly. “I’m going to miss this. I mean, not *this* this, but the getting under your skin.” She’s trying to make a joke out of it and not let me see her vulnerable side.

“I thought I was the one getting under your skin.” I turn her to her back before leaning over and grabbing a condom from the side table.

“I think you’re about to be in my skin in just a second.” She grins as I put the condom on, waiting, her legs open for me. She takes my cock in her hand and guides it to her, and then I slide inside of her. “Yes.” She arches her back.

THE NEXT MORNING, she’s curled up against me as if she were made to be in my bed when the alarm rings.

“Morning,” she mumbles, getting up with me and dressing in her clothes from yesterday. She peeks out of the room and then comes quickly back inside. “Oh, I guess you should have checked instead of me.” She puts her hand on her mouth to stop herself from laughing. “That would have been better.”

I go out and confirm Asa is still sleeping, and we head downstairs together. She starts to make the coffee, and I stand behind her, making sure I touch her. The ticking of the clock is in the back of my head.

“Are you going to make breakfast?” she asks me as the coffee machine starts to brew.

“You want me to make breakfast, baby?” I bend down to kiss her neck.

“I’m not much of a breakfast person, and I still have cake.”

I laugh. “What are you going to do today?”

“Well, we have big plans.” She turns in my arms. “Asa is taking me toad fishing.”

“You mean toad hunting.”

“Hunting? No, I’m not going to let him shoot a gun.”

I chuckle. “It’s called toad hunting because you have to hunt in the mud for them.”

Her face looks like she’s going to be sick. “Hunt in the mud?”

“Yes, baby.”

“Eww. No way.” We hear footsteps, and I move away from her. “Good morning,” she says when she sees Asa. “Your father was just explaining to me what toad hunting is.”

“Yeah.” He rubs his eyes.

“Sounds gross.”

“It’s not gross, Finley.” He smiles at her. “And you don’t have to hunt them. You can just hold the box.”

“Hold the box?”

“Well, we have to put them in the box when we catch them. Then we let them free again.” She looks from him to me, waiting for me to say she can’t do it. I press my lips together and raise my eyebrows. “It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“Fine,” she gives in. It’s at that moment I know she would do anything to keep my child safe and make him happy. “But the minute I say, ‘Enough—’”

“It’s enough,” he finishes for her. I smile at her, nodding my head.

I get dressed for work, and when I come back downstairs, the two of them are on the couch watching his television show. I kiss him on the top of his head and motion to her to follow me to the front door.

She puts her coffee cup down. “I’m going to go lock the door.” It’s a lame excuse.

“Okay,” Asa responds, not caring in the least.

At the front door, I slip my hand in hers as I pull her into the office out of Asa’s line of sight. “I’ll be home as soon as I can.” I bend to kiss her lips.

“Okay.” She sighs in my arms, and I have to force myself to walk out of there.

I FOLLOW up on a couple of leads, trying to pinpoint Randy, but it’s like he’s deep, deep into hiding. Ever since the break-in at my house, he’s been MIA. He hasn’t shown up for work. He did meet with his parole officer, but after that, it’s like he disappeared. I don’t find him at any of the places where he usually hangs out. After checking his home and finding no sign of him, I call him. I’m not surprised when it goes straight to voicemail. “You need to keep your eyes and ears open. I want to know if you hear anything else.” I look out the window. “I’ll be in touch.”

Disconnecting the call, I head back to the office early.

I’m walking to my desk when my phone rings.

“Hey, we got a tip that shit is going to go down next Friday,” Johnson tells me.

“How good is your tip?” I ask her.

“We caught him this morning with enough drugs to take out a small town. He snitched for a lesser charge.”

“Okay, I’ll ask around and still pretend that we don’t know anything. I’m just afraid that if I keep leaning hard on my source, he’s going to skip town, and that will leave us with nothing.”

“Yeah, you should back off a bit, let us work on our other sources. I’ll touch base next week,” she says and disconnects.

I knock on the doorjamb to Captain’s office. “Got a call,” I announce, and fill him in.

“Okay, stay on top of it,” he instructs.

“Listen, Asa’s mother is going to be back earlier than I expected. I’m going to need the weekend off,” I tell him.

“That’s fine. If the drop is next Friday, you’ll have a busy week. In fact, been a while since you took time off. Why don’t you just be on call this week?”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he confirms. “Get out of here.”

I turn around, not giving him a chance to take the offer back, and head home.

I’m pulling into the driveway when I see Asa in the back with Finley. She has the hose directed right at him.

“What is going on?” I ask as I step into the yard.

“Mr. Let’s-Go-Toad-Fighting—” she mutters.

“Hunting,” Asa corrects, holding out his hands at the water. He’s caked in mud.

“Whatever.” She glances at me. “Fell into a puddle of mud. Not just a small puddle.” She motions with her hand for him to turn around. “It was a lake-size puddle.”

“That’s where all the toads hide,” Asa defends himself.

“He had mud up his nose.” She turns off the water. “I think that got the worst of it off. Now get undressed and go take a shower,” she orders.

He peels off the soaked clothes and leaves them on the grass, running inside in his wet boxers.

“You’re going to have to throw those out.” She points to the clothes. “You don’t know what animal—” She stops talking because my mouth is on

hers. My tongue is sliding into her mouth, and she drops the hose at our feet. “Asa,” she reminds me breathlessly when I let go of her mouth, “he could—” I stop her from talking by giving her another kiss.

When I finally let her go, I smile at her. “Hey, baby.”

“Hey.” She smirks at me. “You’re home early.”

“I’m going to be on call the rest of the week. So you still have to stay here just in case, but I’ll be here with you.”

“Oh, goodie, you get to do all the gross things, and I get to watch.”

“Whatever you want.” I would agree to just about anything as long as she’s there with me. The ticking of the clock is getting louder and louder. “Whatever you want.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

FINLEY

His heat moves away from me the second before I feel butterfly kisses on my shoulder, and I want to sink deeper into the bed. I want to turn back time. To stop the clock. I want today not to happen. I stayed awake as much as my eyes let me, not wanting to close them and be away from him. I hum as I feel him reach over me for the drawer that holds the condoms.

He moves away from me, and I turn to watch him over my shoulder. His eyes are filled with exhaustion since we were both up all night long. This whole week, it was as if we were trying to fit it all in. Every single touch has been embedded in my memory. Every single sound is going to be stored for replay. My eyes burn as I turn onto my back and open my legs for him. He crawls in between them, and our eyes lock. Not a word is said as he rubs his cock up and down my slit before sliding into me.

My back arches as my legs wrap around his hips, one hand roaming up his arm and toward the side of his neck as he pulls out of me, then thrusts back inside. I close my eyes, making sure I remember fucking everything in this moment. He puts his forehead on mine, and I lift my hips back to get him deeper.

“Baby,” he says my nickname softly, and it hits me right in the chest. Right in the middle, where the pain I’ve had most of the week has gotten

worse and worse. No matter how much pressure I put on my chest to dull it, it was still there.

“Lincoln,” I whisper as his face buries in my neck, sucking my skin into his mouth. “Yes.” My hand grips the back of his neck, pulling him even closer to me. “It’s so good.” He pulls out and kisses my lips before moving to my jaw, thrusting longer and harder. When he looks into my eyes, emotion shining in them, his mouth slams down on mine. My other hand moves up to hold his face as I feel his heat all around me. He moves his mouth away and buries his face in my neck. I lock my legs around his back, and my arms wrap around him. My orgasm rocks through me at the same time he grunts my name.

I turn my head to kiss the side of his neck that I love kissing. The side of his neck where I can feel his heartbeat. The side of his neck that is always open for my kisses. His body collapses on mine, and I take his weight, tightening my hold on him.

I hear him inhale and then turn on his side, his hold just as tight on me. “Good morning.” I try to sound peppy, instead of how I really feel, which is like I’m losing a fucking piece of me. The last morning that I’ll wake up in his arms. The last morning that I’ll feel his kisses. The last morning that I’ll be happy to start the day.

“Good morning,” he mumbles, his arms locking together against my back as he kisses my neck.

“It’s late.” I look over at the clock and see it’s just a little past 7:00 a.m. “I should get out of here or at least go downstairs so Asa doesn’t catch me.”

“Five more minutes,” he negotiates, sounding very much like his son and making me laugh.

“Okay.” I don’t want this moment to end either.

This whole week has been different since he came home and told me he was on call. We spent the days doing activities together. We even went fishing, and it was so different from the first time. We ate every meal

together. Last night, while we drank wine, sitting outside, I looked over at him, and I was this close to telling him how I felt about him. That I had gone and fallen in love with him.

But something stopped me. The fear that he would turn around and tell me it was just a fling. The fear that, for the first time in my life, it would bother me that someone didn't pick me. The fear that the one person who I never thought could hurt me, in reality, could destroy me.

My hands play in his hair as he gives me soft kisses until he slips out of me, and I immediately turn my back to him and slide out of bed. I pick up my pj's on the way to the bathroom and clean up at the same time that he gets rid of the condom, then he comes to stand behind me. The smile on his face isn't like it has been the other days.

"I need coffee." I turn and put my hand on his chest. "Meet you downstairs."

"Yeah." His voice is monotone, and I put my head down and walk out through the laundry room, just in case Asa is up. I tiptoe down to the kitchen and open the shades before starting the coffee.

I pour myself a cup of coffee. I need just a minute to myself, so I go out the back door and sit on a chair, watching the breeze move the leaves of the trees softly side to side.

The door opens behind me, and he steps out, pulling out the chair beside me and kissing my neck before sitting down. He's not wearing a shirt, only shorts.

"It's going to be a nice day."

He picks up his cup of coffee, not saying a word in reply.

The door opens again, and Asa comes outside. "Morning." He comes to stand next to my chair and puts his arm around my shoulders. I wrap my arm around his waist and pull him to me.

"Did you sleep good?"

"Yeah." He goes to Lincoln and collapses on him.

Lincoln moves away from the table to pull Asa onto his lap. “Are you hungry?” He kisses his neck, and I want a picture of this right here. But I can’t look away to find my phone.

“Yeah, can we have pancakes?” he asks him softly, and I smile.

“I can make them,” I volunteer. They both look at me. “What? It’s literally adding water to the dry mix.”

“You would think,” Lincoln deadpans, making Asa laugh.

“Fine, then I’m going to go pack, and I’ll come when it’s all ready.” I grab my cup of coffee and stand up. “See you two later.”

I walk down the steps and toward the little apartment that was mine for the last three weeks. Someone made the bed neatly after the break-in. It hasn’t been touched by me since.

I shower and slip on my yoga pants and a tank top before packing my clothes and toiletries. Zipping my bag, I feel heat rush through my body, the dread following it next. Tomorrow I’m going to wake up not here. It’s something I didn’t think about until this very moment, and it hurts more than I could ever put into words. What kind of psycho chick moves across the country, upending her whole life just to date a man she’s known for three weeks? I mean, sure, I really, really like him, but I need to get home and deal with Davis. I need to close that chapter in my life before I start another one.

The knock at the door makes me look over and then shout, “Come in!”

Asa opens the door. He’s dressed, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. “Dad says breakfast is ready, even though I already ate.” He comes to the bedroom, looking at my bag. “I’m going to miss you, Finley,” he states softly.

I blink away the tears, but one of them slips out and down my cheek. “I’m going to miss you so much more, Asa.” I hug him, his arms wrapping around my waist. “This has been the best summer I’ve ever had.” I kiss the top of his head. “There is no one who is cooler than you are, Asa Burke.”

He looks up at me. “Don’t forget that, ever.” Another tear slips out, and I smile through it.

A car door slamming has Asa moving away from me and to the door.

“Mom!” he shouts out, already running to her.

By the time I reach the driveway, he’s hugging Maggie. They swing side to side as she bends to kiss his head.

“Did you get taller?” she asks him, and I smile as I see Lincoln come out of the house with a T-shirt on. Walking down the back steps, he stops to stand next to me.

“You ready to go?” Maggie asks Asa, and he nods his head. “Go and say bye to your dad.” She looks up and spots me, giving me a tight smile.

“Bye, Dad.” Asa gives Lincoln a hug. “I’ll call you later.”

He turns to me next, and I can see him fighting tears. “Bye, Finley.”

I bend to look him in the eyes. “You be good,” I say, trying to fight my own tears, “and keep going riding.”

“I will.” He hugs me, and I close my eyes, taking in his hug.

“Asa,” Maggie calls. He lets go of me.

“I had the best time with you,” he whispers. “You are the best babysitter ever.”

I laugh and hold up my hand for him to give me a high five. “You bet I am.” Lincoln laughs beside me as we watch Asa turn and walk away from us.

I wave as the car drives away and then turn to Lincoln. “I should get going,” I tell him. “I have a long two days ahead of me.” He doesn’t reply as I walk back into the apartment to gather my things. When I come back out, Lincoln still stands in the same spot.

His hand comes out to grab my bag as he turns to walk to my SUV parked at the curb. He puts the bag in the back and shuts it. The lump in my throat makes it hard to even fucking breathe.

His hands come up to cup my cheeks, and he bends to kiss me. His tongue slides into mine as I hold on to the side of his T-shirt. It's a kiss to end all kisses. He lets go of my lips sooner than I want him to and presses his forehead on mine as his hands drop from my face.

"Thank you for the best three weeks I've ever had," I say.

He smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Thank you for taking care of Asa."

I swallow now and silently beg him to give me a sign that he wants me, wants me to stay. Give me even a glimmer that it's not just me who fell in love.

"I should go," I tell him.

He nods and softly kisses my lips one more time before walking to the side of my car and opening the door for me.

I exhale and put my head down, telling myself this is the sign he doesn't want me like I want him. "You be good, Lincoln." I put my hand on his chest, just for a split second, afraid to feel his heart, afraid it's not going to be beating as fast as mine. Afraid it's going to show me this meant nothing.

I get behind the wheel and start the engine as he steps away, holding my hand up with a watery smile. I make the mistake of looking in the rearview mirror at the end of the driveway, finding him already looking away from me.

"You'll be fine," I tell myself as I let the tears roll down my face.

IT TAKES me less time to get home than I thought. I stop at a hotel, a nicer place than before. But I only stay four hours instead of eight. I give up when I wake up at 3:00 a.m. and can't fall back asleep.

When I pull into the entrance of my building, the doorman greets me.

"Ms. Westbook, welcome home."

"Thank you. I'm sorry, I've never gotten your name."

“It’s Taylor,” he answers with a smile. “Do you have any bags?”

“I do, but I can get it.” I open the back and take the bag out. “Is Mr. Lawrence at home?”

“I don’t think so. But I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you. He asked me to let him know when you arrive.”

“Thank you, but please don’t.” I force a smile, which he returns. “Actually, could you call me when he arrives instead?”

“Of course.” I should ask him right now about changing the elevator code, but something stops me.

Walking into the lobby, I suddenly hate everything about this building. It’s wall-to-wall granite and screams fancy rich. I step into one of the elevators, press *PH1*, and enter my code on the number pad.

When the doors open at my penthouse, cool air greets me. The floor-to-ceiling windows show off the city skyline, not a fucking tree in sight. I check all the rooms. The whole place feels sterile and dry. It doesn’t look like Davis has been here in a while, but that could be because of the cleaning service that comes in twice a week.

The phone rings as I put my bag in the bedroom, and I answer.

“Finley, glad I caught you.” It’s my lawyer, Clyde.

“Not as glad as I am that you called me back. It’s been two days.” His father was my grandfather’s attorney, and a good one, so when he recently retired, I stayed with the same firm. But I am beginning to regret that decision.

“Sorry about that. Listen, I just got off the phone with Davis.”

I sit down on the king-size bed. “Why are you talking to Davis? You should be talking to his lawyer about him signing the divorce papers.”

“He called to tell me he is contesting the divorce based on the unfair division of assets. He would like to meet and discuss the matter. I’ll schedule a meeting at your earliest convenience.”

“No.” I close my eyes. “You have the report from the investigator. You’ve assured me the terms in the prenup are clear. Yes?”

“Yes. I just think you might want to try talking this over with him.”

“There is nothing to talk over. Tell Davis, again, that I will not negotiate and sign the papers, or he can see us in court.” I know the last thing Davis wants is a messy public trial.

“Very well, young lady, but I really think you should reconsider—”

“I’m not a *young lady*,” I snap. “I’ve told you how I want to proceed. Now do your job, Clyde.” I hang up, tossing the phone to the side.

I feel like I really need a shower. Not only have I been on the road for two days, but I also need to calm down. The anger is still rushing through me as I undress and step into the big glass shower. I let the water wash over me. Getting out, I wrap my hair in a plush white towel before grabbing my white robe.

I’m walking toward the kitchen when I freeze.

Davis is sitting in one of my chairs. His blond hair is pushed to the side. He’s wearing a white polo shirt, his leg crossed over the other one.

“Welcome home, wife.” He gets up and starts toward me.

“You need to leave.” I try to show that I’m not scared of him. But something in his eyes makes my blood run cold.

“Is that any way to treat your husband after being away for three weeks?”

“Is fucking your secretary any way to treat your wife?” I fold my arms over my chest. I hate that I’m naked under my robe. “Is fucking anything with two legs and big tits any way to treat your wife?”

“You know it means nothing. I come home to you.”

“I don’t want you to come home to me. I don’t want you coming here at all. You need to sign the divorce papers and go on your way.”

“I told you I’ll sign them as soon as you agree to give me half your assets.”

“Have your lawyer read the prenup to you again. That is never going to happen.”

He moves so quickly, I don’t even have time to protect myself.

He grips my jaw in his hand, his fingertips pressing in so tight that I wince. “You are going to give me my share, even if you have to sign it over half dead.” He pushes my face away. “I’ve tried to be nice, but I’m over it now. Call your lawyer and tell him to tear up that fucking prenup or else.” He glares at me, and I can see his eyes are bloodshot. His pupils are so dilated that his blue eyes look almost black.

“No.”

“Now you’ve pissed me off.” I hold my breath as I stare him down.

Finally, he spins away and storms toward the elevator door. I don’t know if he’s going to stop me from trying to leave until he stabs the button. “You’ve made a big fucking mistake.” The door opens, and he steps inside.

“The biggest mistake I made,” I tell him as the door slowly starts to close, “was marrying your sorry ass.”

The moment he’s gone, I release the breath I was holding, then run to my bedroom and grab the phone. I see the missed call from the doorman and immediately call back.

“Taylor? This is Finley Westbook. I need my code changed on the elevator immediately.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

LINCOLN

“We’ve been here twelve fucking hours,” Martinez hisses from his spot in the front seat, binoculars to his eyes, “and not a single fucking movement.”

“They were tipped off again,” I say from the back seat. It was pretty clear when the sun came up that we were fucked. This is the third time this has happened—Johnson’s tip about the drop last Friday was false, too.

“There has to be a leak somewhere,” Johnson adds. “They aren’t that smart.”

I inhale. “Well, let’s get the fuck out of here. I still have to drive home.”

Martinez starts the car and makes his way back to the office, where another box is waiting for him at the door. “Those motherfuckers,” he hisses, stopping the car, putting it in park, and swinging the door open. The car is still running as I watch him open the box. He immediately pitches it in the air and kicks the shit out of it.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say it wasn’t a friendly gift,” Johnson says, looking over her shoulder at me. “Listen, I know you’ve got a long drive. If you want, you can take my couch for a couple of hours.”

“Thanks, but I have to get home.”

“One of these days you’ll take me up on that offer,” she mumbles, getting out of the car. She stops to talk to Martinez before continuing to her car.

Martinez slides back behind the wheel as I get out.

“What was in the box?” I ask.

“A fucking alarm clock with a note that said, ‘Ticktock, I guess you are late.’ When I find out who the fuck is playing both sides, I’m going to rip them a new asshole and then break their fucking face.”

I just nod.

When I get in my truck, I text Captain and Cathy before pulling out of the parking lot.

ME:

Another bust. Going home now. Call in later.

I pray my mind doesn’t go to her as I make the two-hour drive home, but when I let my guard down and relax, it always does. It’s been two weeks since I’ve seen her. Two weeks since I’ve kissed her. Two weeks since I felt like I could breathe. Every fucking morning, I expect to wake up and not feel the void, but it gets fucking worse with each passing day.

When I arrive, I drag my feet up the steps and open the door. The stillness of the house hits me right away. When Asa isn’t here, I dread being in this fucking house.

She was here three weeks, and it was more alive than it’s ever been. Now every single time I turn around, I picture her standing there before she drifts away, back into my memory. And I’ve got the next forty-eight hours off work.

My bedroom is the worst place in the fucking house. Her smell on my pillow is almost gone, and I fucking hate it. I take a shower before sliding into bed, hugging the pillow, searching for a lingering trace of her scent as I drift to sleep.

BY THE TIME I wake up, it’s almost 4:00 p.m. I turn over on my back and put my hand on my chest, blinking the sleep out of my eyes before heading

downstairs to the coffee machine. I make a coffee and go to sit outside on the deck, where, of course, I think of her.

I grab my phone and dial.

Maggie answers after the second ring, “Hey, Burke.”

“Hey. Is Asa available?”

“He’s not. He’s back at Charlie’s place, riding that horse again.” I smile at that piece of information. “He’s been there every day this week.”

“Okay, have him call me when you pick him up.”

“Will do,” she agrees.

I disconnect and call Captain, who answers after two rings.

“Hey,” he says, and I hear the door shutting on his side, “you home?”

“I am.” I pick up my cup and look over at the tree house. “So, the third time we got a tip, and when we show up, it’s fucking crickets.”

“The tips are all from different sources. Could be they’re planting information out there. But my gut says there’s someone inside feeding information.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think too. And we know it’s not us. But I don’t want to start making accusations about other agencies without knowing, right?”

“I agree. We got a report from the hospital this afternoon. Twenty kids showed up in the emergency room from tainted ecstasy pills that were passed out at some house party.”

“What the fuck?” I shake my head.

“Yeah, the parents were out of town. They had to come back early. Needless to say, no one is happy.”

“I bet.”

“Okay, I’ll let you go. Don’t forget it’s Scooter’s retirement get-together at Thatcher’s tonight.”

“Fuck,” I swear. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

I don’t really want to go out and socialize. But Scooter earned his retirement ten years ago and agreed to stay on as fire chief. I’ve known him

my whole career, and he’s a good guy. Not to mention, staying in the house alone is torture.

I hang up and look to see if there are any new texts from her. But the latest is still the one that came in the day before she left, when I went to the grocery store.

FINLEY:

I hear that whipped cream is good for dessert and other things.

FINLEY:

And by other things, I mean body parts.

ME:

I figured that.

Finley:

Are you going to get some?

ME:

I already picked up two cans.

FINLEY:

Two cans?

ME:

Yeah, one for you and one for me.

FINLEY:

Fine, but if you waste yours, I’m not sharing mine.

I smile and put down the phone, remembering that we had to change the sheets when we were done, and did it laughing.

I wonder what she is doing right now. Does she miss us or even me?

That last day, when I kissed her goodbye, I wanted her to tell me she would call me. I wanted her to say she would just be going home to do what she needed to do and would come back. I wanted her to come back to me. But she had to take that step. It sounded like her whole life, everyone has decided everything for her. She’s finally getting to decide what she wants.

So I couldn’t tell her to stay. It has to be her choice. If she wanted me, she would be here. But now the writing is on the wall. This town is too small for her. And she didn’t want me.

I feel the need to vomit and wait for it to pass before I head upstairs and throw on a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. I run my hands through my hair and then turn off the lights and head out.

The parking lot at Thatcher’s is full, so I have to park all the way down Main Street near Brock’s mechanic shop. I can hear the music coming out of the bar from there.

When I open the door to Thatcher’s, I see that it’s practically jammed. I spot a couple of the guys from the station, and I hold up my hand to say hello to them as I make my way to the man of the hour. Scooter sits at a table with Captain next to him and Hudson on his other side. There has been talk of Hudson taking over for him, but nothing has been announced yet.

“Hey.” I hold out my hand to Scooter, who gets up and comes over to me, forgoing shaking my hand, instead giving me a big bear hug. I look over at Captain and Hudson, who just chuckle and shake their heads.

“Thanks for coming,” Scooter says, slapping my chest before going back to his chair.

“Looks like a good turnout,” I state, looking around. “I’m going to go and get something to drink.”

“I’ll come with you,” Hudson says, jumping out of his seat. “You two need anything?”

Captain and Scooter shake their heads.

I follow Hudson to the bar, where he finds a spot at the side next to a group of four ladies sitting on stools and talking, each with a flight of whiskey in front of them.

“Hey,” Brady says, coming over to us, “what can I get you two?”

“Since when do you work weeknights?” Hudson asks him.

“Since my bartender got sick and I had no fucking choice.” He puts his hands on the bar. “Forgot how much I hated it until tonight.”

I put my arm on the bar and turn to Hudson. “What are you having?” I ask him as he mimics my stance with his own arm on the bar.

“I’ll have a shot of whiskey,” he answers.

“I’ll have the same.” Brady nods as he walks over to fill the order.

“How you been?” He gives me a chin-up. “You’ve been fucking quiet.”

“Yeah,” I huff out, “just working through things.”

“Those things include your nanny?” He tilts his head. “You can try to deny it, but—”

“Things got a bit carried away,” I admit. The tightness comes again as I think of her.

“When I shook her hand at the barbecue, I thought you were going to rip off my arm.”

“I wasn’t that bad,” I counter. “So, you going to take over for Scooter?”

“I’m hoping,” he replies, and then his head swings to the door. He shifts away from the bar. “Is that . . .” He shakes his head. “Is that McKenna?” I follow his gaze to a girl with brown hair that goes down to her waist, her bangs almost in her eyes.

“It is,” I confirm with him. “Did you know she was coming to town?”

All he can do is stare at her as she makes her way through the crowd to a table in the corner. Theo sits there with his arm around Collins’s chair, his other hand on her stomach.

“She hasn’t been back in what? Ten years?” I ask.

“Twelve.” His eyes are taking her in.

“I wonder what she’s doing home.”

“Her mother is sick. Breast cancer.”

“Fuck.” I shake my head. “Is she going to be okay?”

“She says it’s just a nuisance.” I chuckle. “She’s trying to hold on to her job at the library, but she’s had to miss a couple of shifts.”

I’m about to say something when he motions with his head, looking over my shoulder. “Someone has been checking you out for the last five minutes,” he says in a low voice. This time, he’s the one changing the subject.

I shake my head. “Not interested.” Brady put the two glasses on the bar. “Thanks.” I pick up my glass as Theo comes over.

“Didn’t see you walk in.” He slaps my shoulder and then squeezes.

“I’ll be back,” Hudson says as he moves around Theo and heads to the table where McKenna is sitting with Collins.

“You look rough,” Theo observes. I chuckle and take a drink of the whiskey in front of me. Everything in me wants to ask about her. Everything.

“Haven’t felt the greatest,” I admit.

“Everything okay?”

“From the outside, everything is fine.” I take a sip. “On the inside, man”—I shake my head—“I miss her.” Confusion fills his face. “Finley,” I clarify. His eyes widen, and I know she hasn’t even brought me up to Collins, or else he would know. “Yup.” I finish the drink. “I fell for her.” That is putting it mildly. Since she left, I’ve accepted that I’ve fallen head over heels in love with her.

“Oh fuck. That’s—”

“It’s fine.” I put the empty glass down and look at Brady, motioning that I need the bill. He shoos me off as he takes another order. “I’m going to head home.”

“Burke,” Theo starts.

“I’m good,” I assure, tapping the bar and then turning to leave, going home to my memories.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

FINLEY

I think about how my walk-in closet is the size of two bedrooms as I look through the summer part of my wardrobe. I select a pair of light-pink pants, then look through shirts, one after the other, until I see the silk long-sleeved wraparound blouse with pink, blue, yellow, and turquoise. I place it on the island in the middle of the closet before I pick out my lacy panties with a matching bra.

The pants fit my hips snugly as the legs flow to the floor. I slip the shirt off the hanger and slide one hand into the sleeve, and then the other. The cuffs are tight at the wrist, so the sleeves look oversized. It crisscrosses in the front, and I tie the sash in a bow on the right side. I move to the mirror and inspect my reflection. My makeup is expertly applied to hide the bags under my eyes from not sleeping properly. My hair lies over my shoulder, freshly washed and blown out by my stylist, who comes over every third day.

In my shoe-and-purse room, I pick sandals that are light green and cream. Sliding one foot inside, I tie it around my ankle. The peep-toes show off the fresh pedicure I had two days ago.

I've been home for two weeks now, and I do exactly what I did before I left, except now I feel hollow doing it. In the mornings, I sit on the couch

and watch the shows I used to watch with Asa, trying to somehow feel close to him.

I finish tying the second shoe and call Collins, moving to grab one of my purses.

“Hey,” she answers.

“Hey, yourself. How you doing?”

“I’m good.” She sighs. “Getting bigger and bigger.”

“Well, that is what happens when you’re carrying a human.” I chuckle and sit on the floor, crossing my legs in front of me and putting the phone on the carpet.

“We just left the doctor, and all is good,” she says, filling me in. “Except, well, the baby is in the ninety-fifth percentile, so he’s going to have a big head.”

“He? I thought you weren’t finding out what you’re having.”

“Oh, we didn’t. I call the baby *he* and Theo calls the baby *she*.”

I smile. “How is Theo doing?”

“Busy. The bakery is finally going to expand.” She goes on, filling me in on the town. I ache to ask her how Lincoln is doing. How Asa is. Did he start school yet? Is he still riding? I want to know it all, except it’s more than that. I want to be there. I want to wake up and have breakfast outside in that backyard. I want to go to the bakery and say hello to everyone because I know who they are and not just because I’m polite.

I went to the nearest coffee shop the other day, the same place I’ve always gone, and didn’t know a single fucking soul in the whole place. I looked people dead in the eyes, and they just stared back at me, not a warm bone in their bodies.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but I have to go,” Collins says. “I have to be at work in ten minutes, and I’m waddling.”

“Okay,” I say, sad that my lifeline to the town is going to be closed when we say goodbye. “Call me when you can.”

“I will. I miss you, by the way.”

I blink and look down, my bottom lip quivering. “I miss you too,” I say softly, “more than you know.” I use my thumb to wipe the tear from the corner of my eye. “Talk soon,” I sniffle softly, “be safe.” I hang up the phone before I cave in and tell her how sad I am, how my whole body feels broken and empty. Before I cave in and ask her if she’s seen Lincoln and if he’s okay.

As I put my phone in my purse, it beeps in my hand. Taylor has texted that my car is waiting for me out front. I grab the purse and head out, my heels clicking on the marble tiles as I cross to the elevator.

Sure enough, my silver Mercedes is waiting at the curb. “Thank you, Taylor.”

He nods his head at me as he holds the door open, and I climb in. The air conditioner is already on, and the car is cool. He waits for me to put my purse on the passenger seat before slamming the door shut. I pull out and make my way over to the restaurant. Two men stand behind the valet stand, and both rush to my car, one waiting on the passenger side, the other opening the door for me.

I put one foot out, then the other, as he hands me the ticket for my car. The other valet has already opened the door to the restaurant. “Welcome,” he says, smiling at me.

I walk in and find the two friends I’m meeting standing in the waiting area.

“Hey.” I smile at Brenda, who I’ve known almost my whole life. We met at boarding school at age five and try to get together at least once a year when she’s in town to catch up. I kiss her cheek. “Did you just get here?”

“No,” she huffs out. “So ridiculous. Someone incompetent lost our reservation, and they’re saying they don’t have my table available, the one I always sit at.” Her voice is higher than it should be as she looks at the

hostess stand, where two women dressed in black look like they are going to cry.

“I’m sure we can sit at another one for today.” I try to bring down the drama as I walk over to Kelly, who has her short bob perfectly done. “Hey.” I kiss her cheek.

“We’ve been standing here for four minutes, and they haven’t even done anything.”

“I’m sure they are working on it.” I hold my purse in both hands and say nothing more as Kelly goes up to the hostess stand.

“You see us standing here, right?” she asks one of the young girls. “Like, we’re not invisible?”

“Yes, ma’am”—she looks at her coworker—“we’re trying to get you that table.”

“Just ask the other people to leave,” Brenda demands, “it’s not hard.” She looks over at the table in the middle of the room. “They don’t even look like they’ve ordered yet, just put them somewhere else.”

“We’ll ask,” the girl replies.

“Hold on.” I laugh uncomfortably. “Can we not just sit at the table next to them?” The four tables around that one are free. Brenda’s eyes widen as she stares at me. “It’ll be fine,” I assure. “I promise it will be fine. Then no one has to move anyone, and we can sit now and get a drink.” I glance at Kelly to see if she is going to agree with me. Then I give her big eyes, and she rolls hers.

“Fine, we’ll do that. But if this happens again,” Kelly shakes her head, “it will be the last time I come here.”

“Of course.” The hostess, relieved, grabs the leather-bound menus. “Right this way.”

“This is going to be so much fun,” I say, walking ahead of my friends and sitting in one of the chairs. Brenda and Kelly sit next to each other,

facing me. “See? It’s all good.” I look around. “This table even has better lighting.”

“There’s a draft, and I’m dying of thirst,” Brenda complains, glaring at the empty glasses already set on the table. She flicks a hand in the air. “Excuse me,” she says to the air. She lets out an impatient breath when no waiter appears. “Excuse me.” Her voice goes louder, and several diners look our way. “Can someone please get me a glass of still water with four ice cubes?” She snaps her napkin before draping it across her lap. “Since you made me wait forever.”

“So what’s new?” I ask, wondering if she has always been like this. I mean, it’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, but still.

As Brenda starts complaining about something else entirely, Kelly nods sympathetically, and all I can think is that I want to get the fuck out of here. I want to sit in Maddie’s in Montgavin and eat bagels with my hands and then a nice sticky donut. Instead, I watch Kelly and Brenda use forks to spear two fucking peas at a time.

They talk about themselves and everything they are doing with their lives, which is basically nothing. I make a plan to stop at the grocery store on the way home and pick up everything I need to make a chocolate cake.

As soon as I can politely make an exit, I make a beeline for the valet.

On my way home, I stop at the supermarket, then call Clyde from the parking lot.

“I’m sorry, he is still refusing to sign the papers.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “How much longer can this take?”

“Honestly, he can drag it out for years . . . unless you agree to meet and negotiate.”

I close my eyes. “I’m not negotiating, Clyde.” There is no fucking way I’m giving Davis one fucking cent more than I absolutely have to. I will not let him win. I will not let him take anything more from me.

As I pull up in front of my building, Taylor comes out and opens my door for me.

“Thanks,” I tell him and walk to the back and open the trunk, grabbing the brown bag and then shutting it. “Have a good night, Taylor.”

I perch the bag on my hip and heave a sigh as I enter the new code in the elevator. I step into my living room and head to the kitchen, the clicking of my heels echoing. I put the bag down on the counter and put away what needs to go in the fridge. I close the refrigerator door, already turning to go undress and see him standing there.

“Jesus!” I exclaim, putting my hand on my chest. “What the hell are you doing here?” How did he get in?

“I think I’ve made it clear that you have to agree to my terms.” He walks toward me, and I notice he’s wearing a black custom-made suit. “I gave you a chance to do that.”

“Davis,” I’m trying not to freak out, “I will not change my mind.”

“And I fucking said that you would,” he roars. It’s a voice I’ve never heard from him. Before I can register what happens, he’s there in front of me. His hand comes up, and he backhands me across the face. I can feel the skin break open, and I lift my hand to touch my cheek.

“Davis . . .” The fear seeps through me. I try to back up, but my back hits the kitchen counter. His pupils are dilated, his eyes almost black.

He reaches out to grab me, and I dodge sideways, just out of his reach. “You are pissing me off.” He chases me around the island. I slip in my heels, my ankle twisting painfully, but right myself and run for the elevator. He’s faster than me. He grips the back of my head, pulling me by my hair. I feel some hair being ripped out of my head as he twists his hand to keep a firmer grip. “Just couldn’t give me what I fucking wanted.”

“Please,” I beg him, “don’t do this.”

“Oh, now you want to talk to me, you fucking cunt.” He pulls my head back and smashes it into the elevator door. “All you had to do was give me

what you owe me.” He slams my head again, and my vision blurs. “Greedy bitch.” The delayed pain hits me, and I feel like I’m going to throw up. Focus. I need to think. Need to get away. But he’s got me in a death grip. “Do you know the things I had to worry about because you decided to just take off? I had to hire someone to track you down, I had to take my vacation time to go fuck your shit up, and you still didn’t”—he slams my head again—“fucking”—again, harder—“come back.” That’s when I lose consciousness.

MY EYES slowly start to peel open to darkness. I feel sick and like I’m floating, and I close them again. I’m sitting up, and there’s something across my chest. My head throbs like nothing I’ve ever felt before, like it’s going to explode. And my neck is sore.

“Yeah,” I hear Davis say beside me, “I have her with me.” He laughs. My eyelids part, and I register the road in front of me as we pass under a streetlight. I’m strapped into the passenger seat of a car he’s driving. “She’s a little banged up.” He turns his head toward me, and I quickly shut my eyes, pretending I’m still passed out. “Yeah, bitch changed the code on her place. Fucking doorman wanted two grand for it.” He laughs. “I would have paid him five, but the fucker was a lot dumber than that bitch, Cathy.” The name rings a bell, but I can’t place it. “She held out until I went up to fifty grand to tell me when the fucking cop wouldn’t be there.”

My ears ring when someone honks. Davis turns to look out the driver’s side window. “Fuck you.” He holds up his finger. “Yeah, you fucking asshole.” He holds his finger higher, sneering, and while he’s distracted, I lunge, grabbing the steering wheel and yanking it to the side. We swerve right, slamming into a parked car.

He drops the phone and grabs the wheel, overcorrecting and hitting the car in the left lane. “You fucking bitch!” He tries to steady the car as I reach

back and punch him in the side of the head with everything I have. He holds the steering wheel with one hand and grabs for me with the other, slamming on the brakes. My hand is already on the handle, the door unlocked. I unbuckled my seat belt the moment he started braking. The second the car stops, I shove open the door and stumble onto the street. I look up into the headlights coming straight at me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

LINCOLN

I run my hand through my hair as I jog down the steps and hear the television going. “Are you almost done?” I ask Asa, who is shoveling the pancakes I made into his mouth. He doesn’t bother answering me, just nods his head.

I grab my coffee, seeing the last couple of sips in it, and put the cup to my lips. I know it’s going to be ice-cold, but I drink it anyway. I look out the window like always but avoid looking at the garage in the back. Once, when I was sitting outside in the morning, I even had the thought of tearing that motherfucker down. Completely bulldozing it to the ground. Of course, I’m not actually going to do it, but the thought lingers in my head more often than not.

“I’m done.” Asa pushes away from the counter and grabs his plate, rushing over to me. The plate still has a layer of maple syrup. “I got to brush my teeth. Then I’m good to go.” He has syrup on his face, too. “Do me a favor, buddy, don’t touch anything until you get to the sink, yeah?”

He smirks at me. “Buzzkill,” he mumbles. My head hangs, knowing it’s something else he picked up from Finley. She may be gone, but she’s very much here in this house when Asa is home, which is a double-edged sword.

He runs up the steps as my phone rings on the counter. I expect it to be either Captain, Maggie, or Cathy. I’m not expecting it to be Theo.

“Hey,” I say, putting the phone to my ear.

“Where are you?” I can tell by his voice that something is wrong. My body goes tight, and I worry that Collins got hurt.

“I’m home. I’m about to leave to drive Asa to Charlie’s for his lesson.”

“I’ll be there in ten. Do not go anywhere,” he demands and disconnects.

Weird. I call the office.

“Are you calling to tell me you’re going to be late?” Cathy answers at the second ring, laughing.

“Yeah, I might be. Is everything okay there?”

“What?”

“No weird calls or anything?”

“Not that I know of. Everything is calm here and, from what I can tell, no one is running out like the building is on fire.”

“Okay. Good.” Asa comes down the steps, wiping his mouth with the back of his arm instead of using a towel. “I’ll be in soon.”

“Gotcha,” she replies and disconnects.

“We have to wait for Theo,” I tell Asa. “He’s going to be here in a little bit.”

“But I’ll be late,” he whines, looking over at the clock and seeing he has about fifteen minutes to get to the barn.

“You’ll get there in time,” I assure him. “Get your shoes on, and we’ll wait outside and leave as soon as I’m done.”

I put on my boots at the same time he puts on the new cowboy boots he made me buy him this weekend. Supposedly, they are better than his running shoes, and, apparently, he’s going to be a cowboy, so it’s a necessity.

I open the door and we walk out as two trucks pull up to my house. I look at them and stop walking, stop moving, stop fucking breathing.

Sierra gets out of the first truck and smiles as if everything is okay. But one look at Theo’s face as he gets out of the other truck, and then the

tightness in Caleb's as he comes around to stand by Sierra, tells me everything is not fucking okay.

"Hey," Sierra says, "I heard someone is going riding today?"

Asa smiles, clueless that anything is going on. "It's me." He points to himself. "Me and Wyatt are going to go riding. Sage and Lucy are going to do their own riding, and then we're going to meet up."

"Well, I'm on my way over there right now," Sierra shares. "If you want, I can give you a ride since your dad has to have a meeting."

"Cool," Asa says. I have to put my hand on the railing because shit is about to go down. For the fucking life of me, I don't know what the fuck it could be, but I know whatever it is, it's going to cut me off at the knees.

Asa hugs me around my waist. "Bye, Dad."

"Bye," I reply on autopilot. "Your mom is going to be picking you up, so I'll see you in three days."

"Okay." He rushes to Caleb's truck. "Can we go now? I don't want to be late, and I want to help saddle the horses."

"I'm waiting for you," she teases, looking at me as she takes the keys from Caleb. I can see tears in her eyes. She opens the back door for Asa, then gets behind the wheel and speeds off.

I wait until the truck is at the corner of the street before I turn to look at them.

"Talk," I say.

"We should go inside," Caleb suggests, "and sit down." My head moves slowly toward him.

"Burke, you need to sit down," Theo agrees.

"No, you two need to stop fucking around and tell me what the fuck you need to tell me."

"I'm not sure how to say it," Theo starts. The hair stands up on the back of my neck. I want to swallow but my mouth is suddenly dry. "We just got a call. Finley was attacked."

I know I heard the words, but my heart is echoing and there's a roaring in my ears. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Collins called her, because she hadn't checked in for the last two days and"—he runs his hands through his hair—"a detective answered the phone."

I bend over and think I'm about to be sick. "Fuck, I did that." I close my eyes, and all I can do is picture her smiling at me. Lying in my bed on her side, her hand in a fist, holding up her head as she looks at me coming out of the bathroom. The lightness in her eyes, the smile on her face. The pain, the guilt, hits harder. "I did this to her. Fuck." I get up because getting sick is not going to catch the people who did this to her. I have to call Captain and then Johnson and Martinez.

"You didn't do shit to her," Theo retorts. "It was her husband."

It's all too much for me. I fall onto my ass on the step, my breaths coming in little spurts like a bull, ready to charge. "What did you just say?"

"We don't know all the details," his voice wavers, "but he attacked her and she—"

I hold out my hand, not ready for the rest of it. Not sure I can handle the rest of it. "Where is she?"

"She's in the hospital." My shoulders slump. "Collins is packing now." I get up on my feet. "We have a plane waiting. Charlie's grandfather is in town." Charlie's grandfather is a big tech whiz. He comes to town from time to time, usually in his private plane.

Five minutes later, I'm in the car, calling Captain to take a leave of absence, even if it isn't approved. I call Maggie next and tell her that I'll check in with her.

Collins is in tears as she hugs Theo goodbye, and we board the plane. I sink into a seat, put my hand on the armrest, and feel Collins's hand on mine. "She's going to be okay." She wipes her tears away. "She has to be."

I don’t say anything. I just look out the window and wait for the plane to take off.

Only when we land and we are ushered into a waiting car do I start to breathe a bit.

Thanks to Collins, who goes straight to the nurses’ station when we get to the hospital, we’re able to talk to the doctor on duty right away.

“We had to put her in a medically induced coma,” he tells us. “Because of the swelling of her brain.”

It’s right then and there that I know, without another second, I’m not leaving without her. “I want to see her.”

“I’m sorry, you can’t do that,” he states. “It’s family only.”

“I’m her family.” I step forward. “I’m going to marry her.” A gasp comes out of Collins. “Now, the only way I’m not going in there is if I’m in cuffs.”

I’m prepared for anything with my line of work. I’ve seen everything I think I could see. But nothing, and I mean nothing, could prepare me for seeing the woman I love lying in a bed, her face beaten, and her eyes sealed shut.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

FINLEY

"I'm Dr. Reeves." I try to open my eyes, but they are just too heavy. "I heard you had some questions."

"I do." I know it's not Lincoln talking. It's my mind playing tricks on me. A dirty, dirty trick. Even so, I want to hear it, hear his voice, even though it's not real. But my body has other plans. Because right when I hear him say, "Why . . ." I slip into the darkness again.

THERE'S A MACHINE BEEPING, becoming louder and louder. I try to open my eyes. I take a deep breath and conjure up all my strength to open them.

One flicks open, and the other one finally eases open just a bit. The room is dim, and just the light from the door is coming in softly. My mouth is so dry it's hard to swallow. My throat feels like it's raw from screaming, even though I don't remember screaming. I want to lift my hand to touch my face, but my body feels like it weighs a thousand pounds.

I close my eyes, and then I open them again, this time more. I move one finger, then try another, slowly getting my limbs to work with my head. I turn to the side, and I see Lincoln standing there, gazing out of the window in the corner. He's wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, and I wonder if I want

him here so bad that my eyes are putting him here, playing tricks like my mind did. He leans against the wall, his legs crossing at the ankles.

“Lincoln,” I whisper.

His head whips around, his eyes on me as if he heard a ghost. “Finley.” He takes two steps toward me as I close my eyes for just a second.

“Water,” I mumble.

He rushes to the door and yells, “She’s awake!” He comes back to my side and carefully takes my hand in his. The heat from his touch feels like it’s going into my body.

“Finley.” He bends and kisses my lips so softly. “You’re awake.” He puts his forehead on mine, and I feel his tears hit my face. “The longest three days of my fucking life,” he confesses. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“Okay,” I croak and close my eyes. I want to kiss him, but I have zero strength to do anything right now.

“Hello.” The soft voice of a woman fills the room. “Look who decided to wake up.” Lincoln moves away from my face but not my side. “We’ve been waiting for you,” the nurse whispers. “Well, he has.” She motions to Lincoln, and all I can do is stare at him. “He’s had everyone on their toes.” She checks my vitals. “I’ll call the doctors and let them know she’s awake.” She smiles and then looks at Lincoln, and it fades. “I’ll also let the authorities know.”

He nods and she starts to leave the room. “Can she have water?” he asks.

“Little sips,” she says, “for now.”

He walks over to the side table, pours water into a clear cup, and puts a straw in it before coming back and sitting on the side of the bed. “Little sips, baby,” he instructs softly, putting the plastic straw on my lips. The cool water hits my tongue, waking it up.

“Okay.” I move my mouth away from the straw.

“I was so scared,” he says, one hand coming to rest gently on my cheek. “So fucking scared I’d never see your eyes again.” He looks tired, as if he hasn’t slept in days. “So scared I would never get to . . .”

“I’m okay,” I murmur.

“You’re not fucking okay.” The anger flows out of him. “If they didn’t have that fucking piece of shit behind bars, I would—”

I try to shake my head side to side, but it takes a full minute before it moves a little right and left. “It’s over. I need to tell you something.”

“No, don’t say anything, save your energy. The police are going to be here any minute, and they are going to want a statement.”

“Why?” I ask him, confused.

He doesn’t have a chance to tell me because there is a knock at the door, and the doctor comes in wearing green surgical scrubs. “Ms. Westbook, I’m Dr. Reeves.”

“Hi,” I say. Lincoln gets up but doesn’t move from beside me.

“How are we feeling?” the doctor asks me.

“Like I got run over by a truck. Front and back.” I try to raise two fingers as I smile weakly. “Twice.”

He chuckles at that, takes some vitals, and listens to my heart. “We had to put you in a medically induced coma. There was swelling in your brain.” I hear the words, but all I can do is look at Lincoln, who looks down. I see his hands clenched into fists at his sides. “We pulled you out of it twenty-four hours ago, but you took your time waking up.”

“Sorry. I’ll do better next time.”

“There isn’t going to be a next fucking time,” Lincoln growls, and the doctor raises his eyebrows.

“He’s used to being the boss,” I mumble and close my eyes. “His bark is bigger than his bite.”

“It’s, ‘Your bark is *worse* than your bite,’” he whispers from beside me. “Rest if you need to.” He kisses my lips. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay,” I reply, “just . . . rest my eyes.” I let sleep take me away.

THE MUMBLING OF voices wakes me. Two guys in suits are in the room, talking to Lincoln. “If she says stop and you don’t fucking stop—”

“I think it’s safe to say I know how to do my job,” one guy says, putting his hands on his hips. There’s a badge on his belt.

I clear my throat and they all look over at me.

“Hey, baby.” Lincoln comes over to me. “These are Officers Cleary and Belvedere. They need to ask you a couple of questions.”

I nod my head. “Water,” I ask him, and he gets the same cup he got before, giving me a chance to take two sips.

“Ms. Westbook,” one of the officers says, “we’d like to ask you some questions about the incident that happened on the night of August 11, if you remember any of it.”

“I do.” I close my eyes and then open them again. “I went out for lunch with friends. I stopped at the grocery store on the way home to get things to make chocolate cake.” Lincoln smiles at me. His hand wraps around mine, and he brings my fingers to his lips. “I got home and was putting away groceries. And suddenly he was there, in my apartment. Davis.”

“He said you invited him over. That you went out with him willingly.”

“He would say that, wouldn’t he? I did not invite him. He broke in. And is grabbing me by my hair and knocking me unconscious considered going with him willingly?”

“The records at your building show he had the new code to your penthouse. You must have given it to him.”

“I didn’t. And how do you think I ended up here, like this?”

“He said you wanted to reconcile. That you were going out to dinner, but that you got into an argument. That you attacked him while he was

driving, almost causing an accident, and then jumped out of the car while it was still moving and sustained severe injuries."

"I have proof that he's lying," I counter. I fix my eyes on Lincoln. "I had cameras installed. Actually, I did it myself." I smile softly. "I mean, YouTube also helped me. It records movement for ten minutes once it's triggered and saves it on my phone. It should be there, and on my iPad, my laptop, and my desktop. You'll see I did not go with him willingly."

His eyebrows go up. "Well, according to the witnesses who had to pull him off of you—"

"What?" I ask. "The last thing I remember is lying in the street and a car coming right at me. What happened?"

"The car was able to stop in time. Your husband got out and said you had just attacked him, tried to kill him."

I hear a growl from beside me, and it's me who tightens my hold on Lincoln's hand.

The officer continues, "He hit your head into the pavement and then tried to kick you before someone was able to tackle him to the ground and get him off you. Once he got back up, he came back and tried to kick you."

"Enough," Lincoln snaps, "she doesn't fucking remember that."

He looks at Lincoln and then back to me. "I'm assuming you are pressing charges."

"She's pressing charges, and she wants a restraining order," he barks at them. "Her lawyer, Ryleigh Richards, is already handling it."

"My lawyer is Clyde," I correct him softly.

"It *was* Clyde." Lincoln's voice is tight. "I called someone else." I don't know if we need to have this out in front of the officers. "I know her. She took care of Harmony's divorce." Harmony is happily married to Brady now, so I guess her lawyer must know what she's doing.

"I guess that's my lawyer then," I concede. "The only thing I want is for Davis to sign the divorce papers and for this to be over."

One of the officers looks at the other. “He has bigger issues . . .”

“That is not my concern,” I retort, not giving one more shit. “I want him to sign the papers and get the fuck out of my life.”

“If you think I’m scary pissed off,” Lincoln informs them, “she’s like the Big Bad Wolf.”

They share a look, and after a couple of minutes of routine questions, they tell me that if they need anything else, they will get back to me.

I wait for them to walk out of the room before I turn to him.

“I need to tell you something,” I insist, though I’m exhausted.

“Why don’t you rest?” He sits beside me, kissing my lips softly.

“How bad does my face look right now?” I lick my lips and feel the cracked skin.

“You have never looked more beautiful,” he professes, touching my face gently.

“Cathy,” I say the name I heard, and his eyebrows shoot together. “Davis said Cathy told him when you wouldn’t be home, so he could break into the house. He was on the phone when I was coming to, and I heard him. And I know that name, but I can’t remember who she is.” His eyes search mine. “I tried. But I was so scared. So fucking scared because . . .” I feel the tear roll down my cheek. “Because I was afraid I wouldn’t get to tell you how I felt.”

“How you felt or how you feel?” His beautiful eyes are fixed on mine.

“I’m in love with you. I’m in love with you, Lincoln,” I repeat it in case he didn’t hear. “I wanted to tell you when I left. When you were kissing me goodbye, I was so scared you didn’t feel the same way I did. So I didn’t. But being in that car, not knowing what was going to happen to me, and knowing if I got one more chance to talk to you, I would tell you.” He bends to kiss my lips. “Though for the record, I fell in love with Asa before I fell in love with you.”

“Noted.” He tries not to smile.

“I really wasn’t sure if it was actually love. But then every single day that went by without seeing you, I knew it was love. It was different than what I felt for Davis. I thought about you with what felt like every single minute of the day. I had everything that I could buy, but all I wanted was you. To be back in your house, sitting on the couch, curled up beside you.” I move my hand up to his chest. “Every single day since, I felt a piece of me wither, like it was dead.”

“Baby,” he says softly, “I haven’t been able to breathe properly since you left.” I can’t help but sob. “Every single day, I tried to tell myself that if you wanted me, you would come back.”

“I thought that if you wanted me, you would have asked me to stay,” I counter. “I didn’t know all it took was me going into a coma for you to come after me.” He glares. “Too soon?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer me, he just kisses me, and I let him.

“I love you, Finley,” he says. “Now rest, baby. You need your strength if you are going to move across the country to live with me.” The smile fills my face, and it hurts, it hurts so bad, but I push through it. “I guess that’s a yes.”

“That’s a yes,” I agree. My hand rests on his chest, feeling his heart beating as I close my eyes and drift to sleep.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

LINCOLN

“Are you ready to get out of here?” She looks at me from her wheelchair. “Because I’m ready to get out of here.”

She smiles up at the nurse. “Not that anything was bad, it’s just, he has to get home to Asa.”

“He’s expecting us in a couple of days,” I remind her. “He’s fine.”

She rolls her eyes, and I try to tamp down the way I feel every single time I see her bruises. I’ve had to bite down so many times, it’s a wonder I haven’t broken any of my back teeth. “I’m fine,” she mumbles as I bend to kiss her lips. “Now that we’re going home, it’ll be good to sleep properly.”

It’s been four days since she woke up, and even though she wanted to go home the day after, the doctor had her stay, just to be on the safe side. Collins was able to visit her, then quickly left town to return home. It was just the two of us for the last couple of days, and I didn’t leave her side for even five minutes. When she went to sleep at night, I sat there in the chair and watched her, thanking all the fucking gods that were listening to me while she was in a coma. Three fucking days I will never get back. Seventy-two of the worst hours of my life.

We head down, and there is a car waiting for us, something she said she would take care of. “Thank you”—she gets up and gives the nurse a hug —“for everything.”

“It was my pleasure,” she replies. “Take care of big man.” She motions my way with her head as I hold out a hand for Finley to get into the SUV.

As we pull away from the hospital, I grab her hand and kiss her fingers. “How you feeling?”

“Better than yesterday, not as good as tomorrow.” I shake my head.

Pulling up to her high-rise building in the middle of the city, I get out and open her door. She’s moving slowly, and I hold out my hand. It takes everything in me not to pick her up and carry her inside. I contemplate it again as we walk into the lobby.

I try not to let the empty security station bother me. The doorman has been fired. Finley wasn’t interested in pressing charges, but the building owner is. She came to see Finley at the hospital with a massive bouquet, opened the app on her phone, and let Finley enter a new security code so no one else would have it. I’m just glad that in not too long she’ll be out of here and safe.

She gets into the elevator. “Can you put in the new code?”

“What is it?”

“It’s the code you use for the front door,” she teases me, and I smile as I enter Asa’s birthday, and the elevator starts gliding up. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her to me as I kiss her lips, my cock straining in my pants to get at her. The elevator pings, and we step out into her penthouse.

“Finley, this is where you live?” The wall-to-wall windows show the whole skyline. Everything looks like it’s fucking expensive, and the couch looks like you need a suit to sit on it.

“For now.” I follow her down the hallway. I’m expecting her bedroom but instead we walk into a closet the size of the whole bottom floor of my house. Boxes and boxes are stacked up on one side, and there are three

suitcases in the middle of the room. “I’m going to need thirty minutes,” she says, lifting folded clothes from the top of the big dresser in the middle of the room.

“This is your closet?” I look around and close my eyes.

“This is the clothes closet. The shoe closet is through there.” She points to a closed door. “Well, it’s not just for shoes. The purses are all in there, too.” She walks out into her bedroom.

My boots sink into the lush carpet as I take in the floor-to-ceiling drapes that look like they cost as much as my house.

“Finley,” I say through clenched teeth, “when you are better, you and I are going to sit down and discuss a couple of things. What are you doing?”

“I’m taking a shower,” she replies as if she didn’t just spend a week lying in a hospital bed. She opens the door to the big shower and turns on the rain setting. “I want to wash my hair. And I would like very much to see what I look like since you refused to let me see the mirror when I had to go to the bathroom.

“Because it doesn’t fucking matter what you look like. All that matters is that you’re safe.” I pull my shirt over my head.

“What are you doing?”

“You want to wash your hair, so I’m going to get in there with you and wash your hair for you.” I kick off my boots. “You think I’m just going to let you get into a shower when you haven’t been up in over a week?”

“I took a shower yesterday,” she reminds me, her eyes trailing my body up and down.

“Yeah, with a walker and a nurse. And I don’t care how much you ogle me. There will be no sex.”

“Buzzkill,” she mumbles as she takes off her shirt gingerly. I start to help her. “No, if we are not having sex, you can’t touch me.”

“Baby,” I say softly, “the doctor said—”

“To not stress myself. Having sex isn’t stressful. It’s relaxing.” I bend to take off her shoe and then the other one. She’s naked before I am, and my cock is rock-hard by the time I step into the shower behind her. “What if I sit on your cock while you wash my hair?” She looks back at me. “Or I can get on my knees and—”

“Finley,” I groan.

“Yes, Lincoln?” Her fingers wrap around my cock.

“I love you,” I say, and her eyes soften, “more than you will ever know.” I kiss her nose. “But I’m not having sex with you.” She rolls her eyes and lets go of my cock.

I have her turn, and I wash her hair. She gets out as soon as I finish rinsing her hair. I put on my shorts and a T-shirt and find her already dressed in loungewear.

I follow her around as she starts to pack, suggesting she rest instead. She doesn’t listen, only stopping twice to text a friend. I make sure she isn’t out of my sight.

Twenty-five minutes later, she turns to me. “Are you ready?”

“For?”

“We’re leaving.” She takes a deep inhale.

“What are you talking about?” The ding of the elevator has my head whipping to the side, and she must see my face get hard. “That’s the driver,” she explains softly and walks out of the bedroom. She enters a code on the security panel, and a minute later, the doors slide open, and a uniformed driver greets her.

“There are the suitcases in the closet.” She points down the hallway, then looks to me. “Can you get your bag so he can take it to the car?”

“Baby?” I ask her as the man walks past me, toward her bedroom. “What is going on?”

“What is going on is I’ve been home for two weeks, and I’ve been miserable. I want to go *home* home. I want to hug Asa. I want to have

coffee on the deck. I want to go to the bakery and see people who know me. I want to go riding. I just want to go home." She puts her hands on my T-shirt and grips it tightly. "Take me home, Lincoln."

"I'll take you anywhere you want to go," I tell her.

An hour later, we are on a private plane that she somehow organized from her hospital bed.

We touch down, and Theo is there waiting for us.

"Welcome home." He outstretches his arms to Finley, who smiles, but I can tell she's tired. "I brought you a surprise." He opens the back door of his truck, and Asa jumps down, holding a bouquet of flowers.

"Lincoln." She turns to me with fear in her eyes. "I didn't want him to see me like this." Her hand goes self-consciously to her face, trying to cover the bruising. We FaceTimed him a couple of times while she was in the hospital, but she made sure she was never fully in the screen for him to see. We told him she got into a car accident.

"It's okay, baby." I kiss her forehead before turning to Asa, who is walking toward us. "Be gentle, okay?" He nods at me.

"Hi," Asa says, and I can see the tears in his eyes. "I got you these so you can feel better." He holds the flowers out to her, and she reaches for them.

"These are the most beautiful flowers I've ever gotten," she replies as she bends down and opens her arms.

"I don't want to hurt you," he says, and she wipes the tear running down his face.

"You could never hurt me," she assures him. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." He walks into her arms and wraps his own around her as she cuddles him close. "So much."

Theo and I share a look. "Let's get her home, yeah?" I say.

The whole drive, I hold her hand while Asa talks her ear off with all the stories that she missed since she has been gone.

As soon as she gets to the house and steps inside, she turns to Asa.

“Hey buddy, can you put my flowers in water for me? Just find a big glass in the kitchen or something.” He nods, taking the bouquet from her. She walks straight to the stairs. “I need a nap.” She doesn’t bother looking at me.

“I’ll be back down when she’s settled,” I tell Asa and follow her upstairs.

I find Finley in the bedroom, her shoulders shaking.

“Hey, hey.” I take her in my arms. “What’s with the tears?”

“I’ve never felt like I had a home,” she shares between sniffles, “and then the minute I set foot in this house, I feel like I do.” She looks around. “It’s home. You and Asa, it’s like I’m home.”

“Baby . . .” I kiss the top of her head.

“You don’t have to say anything. That’s the beauty of this.” She kisses my chest. “It just is.”

“I have to step out for a bit,” I tell her. “Theo is going to stay with you and then I’ll be back.” I kiss her. “Then I’m off for another two weeks.”

“That’s a long time.”

“I had time saved up.” I kiss her. “Now get into bed.” She slides into bed and sighs. “I’ll see you soon.” I kiss her and then go downstairs. “She’s napping,” I tell Theo and Asa. “I’ll be an hour at max.”

“I’ll watch over her, Dad,” Asa assures. “Can I sleep here tonight?”

“Anytime, buddy. We’ll call your mom when I get back, yeah?”

“Collins is on her way here too, so take your time,” Theo says.

I walk out of the house and dial Captain, who answers after one ring. “Be there in five,” I say, disconnecting and trying to calm myself as I make my way to the office.

Cathy looks up from her desk. “Hey,” she greets, “this is a surprise. I thought you were still out of town.”

“Yeah, change of plans.” I smile at her, even though I want to rip her head off her shoulders. “Just here to meet with Captain.” I walk up the steps.

“Hey,” I say when I reach his office. I can see he’s just as pissed as I am, and I close the door. “You have everything?”

“Everything has been waiting for you for the past two days. You know how hard this was?”

“You have no idea. I had to see Finley’s face every single day, bruised and battered.”

He picks up the phone on his desk. “Can you come in here?” He hangs up and looks at me. “You want to lead this, or should I?”

We don’t have a chance to decide because the door opens and Cathy steps in, the smile on her face quickly dropping. “Oh fuck,” she swears. “This doesn’t look good.”

She sits in the same chair she’s sat in for the last ten years.

“It’s not good,” I agree. “Let me rephrase that, it wasn’t good, but now it’s good.” She looks confused.

“Over the last four days, the team was able to catch the head of the drug-smuggling operation,” Captain says as I watch her face.

“Which only happened because the news was kept from one person in particular,” I add. Her eyes dart right and left. “Got to say, none of us would have known if it wasn’t for Davis.” The minute I say his name, her throat bobbles up and down as she swallows. “After he kidnapped Finley, he started yapping when he thought she was unconscious.”

“Burke,” she whispers.

“We fucking trusted you,” I roar. “You sent him to my house, where my child was. My Asa, who I thought you cared about. I even trusted you to watch him.”

“It’s not what you—” she starts.

I get up. “I don’t want to hear one more fucking word out of you,” I hiss at her then look at Captain. “She’s all yours.” I spare her one last glance. “I hope it was worth it.” I pull the door open. “I hope it was fucking worth it all.”

“Burke!” she shouts after me. I ignore her, jogging down the steps and out of the building, on my way home to the woman who has everything, but only wants me. I smile as I get into the truck and vow to never make her regret choosing me.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

FINLEY

TWO WEEKS LATER

I feel the bed move, and cool air rushes over the side of my body before the blanket is put back down. I turn my head to the side, opening my eyes at the same time that Lincoln walks past the bed. A smile fills my face as I see his perfect naked body before he disappears into his bathroom.

I tuck my arm under me as I lie on my stomach and bask in the comfort of his bed. Our bed now, according to him. I look over at the bedside table at the picture of the two of us taken out on the deck while we were having coffee two days ago. The first day my bruises were gone. It took him six hours to have it printed and framed.

Another picture is beside it of the three of us in the tree house, me sitting with Lincoln behind me and Asa leaning into us. Lincoln made it a point to sit Asa down with us and explain to him that I was coming back but would be staying in the house. Asa, completely unfazed, just asked if I was Lincoln's girlfriend. So I was stressed for nothing; it was totally anticlimactic and free of drama, which is so Asa.

I smile when I hear the water turn off. I know he's going to walk out at any second.

The sight of him with his black shorts and nothing else greets me. He takes one look at me, not saying anything as he walks out of the room. I flip the covers off me and head to the bathroom he just came out of. Pinning up my hair, I wash my face before slipping on a pair of lounge pants and a matching tank top. My clothes now mingle with his in the walk-in closet. Well, more of my clothes than his clothes.

Walking down the steps to the kitchen, I smell the coffee right away. I catch him pouring milk into the frother and slide my arms around his waist from the back, one hand resting in the middle of his chest, the other on his stomach.

“Good morning.” I breathe in the scent of him before kissing his back and laying my head on it. I feel a sense of peace, knowing I’m here and he’s with me.

Ever since I got here, it’s been nothing but smooth sailing. My new lawyer, Ryleigh, is taking care of everything. She’s making sure that not only is Davis never going to touch a penny of mine, but she’s also suing him. I told her all I wanted was my freedom, and she’s giving me that and more. It helps that he had so many documents incriminating himself, including forged documents in which he tried to open accounts in my name. He was getting desperate at the end.

Lincoln lays his hand on mine in the middle of his chest, putting his fingers in mine and lifting my hand to his lips. “Good morning, baby,” he says softly. A smile fills my face as if the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa just came to deliver all the goodies to me. He lets go of my hand to pick up the frother and pours the milk into my cup of coffee. “Just in time for coffee,” he mumbles as I step to the side and pick up the orange porcelain cup that I’ve deemed mine since I came back.

“Thank you.” I put my head back and look up at him, and he bends to kiss my lips before I taste my coffee. “Smells good.” I take a sip. “Just perfect,” I compliment, walking to the back door and opening it. I step out

onto the deck with him right beside me. Each of us sits in the same chairs we always do. “It’s early.” I’m looking at the horizon where the sun is just starting to come up.

“It’s the same time.” He leans back, extending his feet and crossing his legs at the ankles. “It’s just that the days are getting shorter.”

“The things you learn,” I joke. He chuckles, and I wink at him. “It’s going to be a nice day.” I take in the soft breeze blowing through the trees. “Perfect day to go riding.” I fold one arm on the table as I cross my leg over the other, taking a sip of the hot coffee.

“Every day is a good day to go riding.” He reaches over to grab my chair and pulls me closer to him. “We need to get one of those chairs that we can sit in together.”

“Oh, you know what we should get?” My eyes light up when I see the flicker in his. “A porch swing. A white one, and we can sit on it at night and wave to the neighbors when they walk by.” I hold up a hand. “Or I can sit on it when I wait for Asa to come home from school on the bus.”

“You want a porch swing?” I nod my head. “So we’ll get a porch swing. I’ll see—”

“I’m so happy you said that.” I giggle. “I might have, perhaps, maybe ordered it two days ago. It’ll be delivered sometime this week.”

“Of course you did.” He shakes his head, chuckling.

“It’s not my fault.” I put my hand to my chest. “I was sitting in bed, waiting for you to come home. And you were late doing whatever it is you do when you don’t get home for dinner.”

“Working on a case.”

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes. “I saw a picture, and it was perfect. So I sent it to Theo and asked him if he could install it. He said yes, so I was like, ‘add to cart,’ and ‘check out now.’”

“When is he coming?”

I smirk. “As soon as I get it. It was going to be a surprise, but then I was like, what if he doesn’t want a swing hanging in front of his house?” He glares at me. “*The* house.”

“*Our* house,” he corrects, and I get up. He puts his knees up, knowing I’m about to cuddle in his lap. I get on him as if I’ve been doing this my whole life, instead of just the past two weeks. His arm wraps around my waist to bring me to him, and he holds on to me.

“Have I told you I love you today?” I ask him, seeing his eyes light up.

“Not yet.”

I smile big, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I love you,” I say, meaning it with my whole heart and soul.

“I love you more,” he replies, and I bend to kiss his lips before placing my head on his shoulder. The two of us just watch the tree for a while. Then he carries me up to bed, and we do the second-best thing I like to do in the morning.

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, I’m slipping on my shoes at the door as he comes back from the kitchen. “You ready?” he asks me as I stand up. I nod, and he slips his hand in mine and walks me out to the new SUV we got from Brock when I came back to town. It was the first fight that Lincoln and I had as a couple. I mean, I don’t even know why we were fighting since he said himself that I had to geta car. I left my Mercedes in the garage of my penthouse and have already made arrangements to sell it rather than bring it here.

He stands by the car with me. “You call me when you get there and when you leave.”

“I’m going to stop and get a matcha at the bakery first.” I put my hands on his chest. “But I will call you when I get to the barn and then when I leave.”

“Okay.” He bends to kiss my lips. “Have a good day, baby.” He opens the door for me and gives me one more kiss before he starts to close the door.

“You, too,” I tell him. “And stay safe, yeah?”

“Will do.”

I roll my window down as he walks to his truck. “In case no one tells you today,” I call out, and he looks over his shoulder, putting on his sunglasses, “your ass looks phenomenal in those pants.” He chuckles. “Actually, if anyone does tell you that, you call and tell me, and we’ll discuss it.” He shakes his head. “Love you,” I say to him right before I take off and head to the bakery.

I pull into a parking spot on the street and say hello to about five different people by the time I walk into the bakery.

Everleigh greets me with a smile. “There is my matcha-loving queen,” she teases. “I just made a brown sugar matcha latte.”

“Ooh, that sounds delicious, I’ll take one.”

“Coming right up.” I pay and, as I wait to the side, the door opens, and a woman with long brown hair walks in.

“Hey, McKenna,” Everleigh greets her over her shoulder. “What can I get you?”

“Can I have three boxes of donuts, please?” I smile at her. “They aren’t for me,” she says, defending her order. “Mom is doing chemo today, so I like to take them in for the nurses and staff.”

“That’s a very thoughtful thing to do,” I say softly.

“Finley, do you know McKenna?” Everleigh says, setting my drink on the counter. “Finley just moved here,” she explains to McKenna, then turns to me. “McKenna grew up in Montgavin. She went away for college, but she’s back to help her mom.”

“Good to meet you,” I say as we shake hands.

The door opens, making the bells on the door chime, and Hudson walks in, and McKenna smirks at him.

“Well, isn’t this a coincidence?” he says loudly, and McKenna’s face turns beet red. “Hey, McKenna, how are you doing?” Everleigh looks between them as she fills the boxes.

“I’m fine,” McKenna replies, her jaw tight. “Thank you for asking.”

“Hey”—he looks at me—“look who it is, Burke’s woman.” He winks at me, making me laugh. He’s been over a couple of times to check on Lincoln and me since I’ve been home. When he got too close to me once, well, not really close, but too close for Lincoln, he told him to stay away from his woman. So now he calls me that every single time I see him.

“*Burke’s woman*? What is this, 1925? She has a name,” McKenna hisses at him, and I roll my lips.

“Most people do call me Finley.” I hold up my hand. “But I answer to either.”

“Isn’t today a good day, McKenna?” he says. I can feel a spark oozing off them.

Before she has a chance to say anything, Everleigh sets her boxes on the counter.

“Thank you so much.” She pays Everleigh, picks up her boxes, and then turns to me. “Finley, it was really nice to meet you.” She turns, and it looks like she’s going to ignore Hudson, but ends up meeting his eyes.

He smirks at her. “I’ll see you later.” He tries to hide the grin that forms on his face when she walks out without answering him.

“Well, that was something,” he states.

Everleigh laughs. “Didn’t the two of you date in high school?”

“That we did.” He nods, looking out through the glass door. “That we did.”

I grab my matcha as they talk about the past, and slide away from them.

I make my way over to Charlie's barn, pulling into the employee parking lot where he told me to park last week when I came to ride.

I slam the door and see Emmett and Charlie walking out of the barn.

"Hey," Charlie says, coming over to me. "Look at what we just got." He motions with his head toward the fenced arena, and I see four bay horses and two pintos, white with brown spots.

"They are gorgeous." I walk over to lean on the fence.

"Was hoping you would say that. Was wondering if maybe you would be willing to work with them."

"Work with them?"

"Yeah, Monday to Friday, come in and ride them. Break them in, sort of." My eyes go big. "Lilah usually does it, but she sort of can't right now." That's right, I remember him saying when we met that she's pregnant and can't ride now.

"Are you serious?" I ask him. It comes out more like an enthusiastic shriek.

"Yeah," he replies, "not sure what salary you are looking for."

"I would pay you," I tell him, and it makes him laugh. "I'm not kidding." I turn back to look at the beautiful horses and hold out my hand toward them. "I have everything anyone could possibly wish for." One of the bays saunters my way. "I mean, I have everything material that can be bought, but I used to be just empty, you know? But this." The horse is close enough for me to stroke his velvet nose. He nudges me. "You can't buy this kind of happiness. You think you can, but then you try, and it's just . . . something else." I shrug. "I had it all and didn't know all I wanted was something I couldn't buy. And now I have it. Sorry, I don't know if any of that made sense. I'm just . . . happy."

"I hear you. So does that mean you'll do it?"

I smile big. "It means I'll do it," I confirm. "Oh, but I have Asa every other week, and I want to be there when he gets home."

“We can work out something,” he assures and holds out his hand for me to shake. “Welcome to the team, Finley.”

I shake his hand. “It’s good to be part of the team,” I tell him honestly. My phone rings, and I pull it out. “Shit, I forgot to call him.” It’s Lincoln, of course.

“I would get that then,” Charlie advises, walking away from me.

“Hey,” I answer, putting the phone to my ear, “I’m here.”

“No shit. Got a notification on my phone that you got there about ten minutes ago.”

“So then why do I have to call you?”

“Finley . . .” His voice is tight.

“Ugh.” I roll my eyes. “Fine, I’m here, I’m safe, and guess what?” I feel like I want to jump up and down like Asa does when he gets excited. “I got a job. Never thought I would say those words out loud. And yet this is the second time this year I’ve said them. And this job I can actually do, unlike the last job I was hired for.”

“What is it?” he asks me, and I fill him in. “So you’re going to take it?”

“I get to ride horses and be paid?” I scoff at him. “You bet your ass I’m taking it.”

“Good, we’ll celebrate tonight.”

“That we will,” I tell him, looking at the horses. “I love you, Lincoln,” I say softly. “More than you will ever know.”

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EPILOGUE ONE

LINCOLN

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Explain to me why we need a real Christmas tree?” I look over at Finley, who is in the passenger seat wearing a red knit sweater with snowflakes on it and a black puffy vest.

“It’s the right thing to do. It’s like a sin if we get a fake one.”

“But you already bought seven little fake trees for the house.”

“Those are decorative trees, Lincoln.” She folds her arms over her chest. “Asa said he never had his own tree in his room.” Her eyes go big. “So I bought him a little one, and then a small one for the bathroom downstairs and upstairs. Don’t tell me you don’t like the tree I bought for our room because after you saw it, you attacked me and fucked me under that tree.”

“Baby”—I reach over to grab her hand—“I will use any excuse to fuck you.” I kiss her fingers, my heart speeding up with nerves. “We don’t need a tree.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “I bent over today to tie my boots, and you reached between my legs to touch me.”

“You bent over and put your ass in my face. What did you think was going to happen?” I ask as we pull into the parking lot. “Then you wiggled

it side to side."

"I moved from one foot to the other."

I put the truck in park and turn to her, grabbing her face in my hands. "Love you, Finley." She just smiles at me. It is worth all the money in the world to see her smiling at me.

"Love you more," she replies before giggling and squealing as she claps her hands together. "It's tree day!"

"It's tree day," I mumble, watching her grab the door handle and open her door.

"It sucks Asa couldn't come with us."

"I know," I deadpan, avoiding looking into her eyes. In three months, she's cemented herself into my life as if she were there from day one. The two of us share a special bond that no one really could have guessed we would have. Maggie isn't thrilled about it, because I have a better bond with her than she has with Tim, but that isn't my problem.

We are supposed to have Asa every other week, but Finley sees him at riding practice twice a week when he's not with us. He then comes home with her and sometimes ends up staying the night. I swear, if we could have him full-time, Finley would be perfectly fine with it. Which makes me love her even more, which I thought was impossible. She's created a life for herself that to some would be nothing great, but to her it's everything.

She slides her hand in mine, as she always does when we are together. "So do we get to cut our own tree down?" she asks me. "Or do we point at it and be like, that one, please?"

"Not really sure." I look around to see if they have everything planned the way we talked about. I head down the pathway I scoped out yesterday when I told her I had to run an errand. She was busy decorating the tree house to surprise Asa with when he came home. She also had me pinky-swear to tell him I did it, even though he would know I didn't. But if it made her happy, I would do anything for her.

Her head is down as we make our way up the path, and I can see that the fairy lights are on and strung between the trees. “Look, they put up lights. And it looks like there are ornaments on the tree.” She looks at me. “That’s probably how they get you. They put up pretty tree ornaments, and the next thing you know, the tree costs you a thousand dollars.”

“Please tell me you did not spend a thousand dollars on the tree in our room.”

“I did not spend a thousand dollars for the tree in our room . . .” she mumbles. “It was more like fifteen hundred, but that’s because—”

“Finley,” I snap, “for a tree?”

“Lincoln”—she stops walking—“you love that tree.”

“No, you love that tree.”

“Fine, I love that tree. It’s so pretty with the silver-and-gold ornaments. It’s very magazine-worthy.”

“You really need to stop shopping online.”

She *pfft*s at me as I tug her along. “That will never happen.”

“You know, yesterday we had five packages delivered to the house by four different people.”

“It’s not my fault they ship them at different times. I—” She stops when she spots the blanket on the ground ahead with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. “Oh shit. This is someone’s spot.” She tries to pull me in the opposite direction, but I hold my ground and just smile at her.

“It’s not someone’s,” I say softly. “It’s ours.”

“Oh.” She notices the tree that has pictures hanging all over it. She lets go of my hand and moves closer, gasping when she recognizes they are all pictures of us from over the last three months. More pictures than we know what to do with. But she keeps taking them and printing them, making sure she writes notes behind each one so we can look back and reminisce later. Little does she know, when it comes to her, I have everything memorized.

She examines one picture, and then another, as if it's the first time she's seen them.

"Remember?" She turns to look at me, pointing to the picture we took the night before Halloween when she made me stack three pumpkins on top of each other, so the porch looked cooler. Her mouth opens when she sees me in the middle of the blanket on one knee, looking up at her.

"Lincoln," she whispers. I can see tears brimming in her eyes as she puts her hands to her mouth.

"Finley," I start, and think about the words that I sort of practiced this week every time I went to work. "Fuck." I shake my head. "I thought I had this all down and memorized, but I can't remember a thing. It's like everything is just erased from my mind. The only thing going through my head right now is the number seventy-two. The scariest thing that has ever happened to me was the seventy-two hours that you were in that coma. Seventy-two hours of rage. Seventy-two hours of different deals I was making with the devil. Seventy-two hours when I felt my heart stop in my chest. I vowed that if you woke up and spoke to me, there was not going to be another day that would go by when I wouldn't make sure to tell you how much I love you. You came into my life as a pleasantly unexpected surprise." We both laugh. "And you pushed every single button that you knew how to press. And without even knowing what was happening, I fell madly in love with you. It happened as if I was born to love you. As if I lived this life just to love you." She puts her hand on her chest. "I want to do life with you by my side, but not without you having my ring on your finger." I pull out the box I tucked into my pocket right before we walked out of the house, pretending I'd forgotten my phone. "So what do you say, baby?" I open it and show her the antique ring she saw in a shop last month when we were just walking in town. "I can't give you penthouses and seven closets, but I can give you my heart. Will you marry me?"

“Lincoln Burke,” she sniffles, trying not to sob, “what you give me, there is no money in the world that can buy it. You give me a sense of peace I’ve never felt before. You put me first before anything. You protect me, and you love me unconditionally, no matter how many times we’ve had to replace the microwave.” She laughs, and so do I. “You have given me a home. A place where I can’t wait return to every single night. You gave me something that no one has ever been able to give me, and I will spend the rest of my life thanking you for that.”

“So is that a yes?” I ask her, and she nods her head.

“That’s a yes.” The minute she says the words, I’m off my knees, picking her up, and twirling her around in my arms. Her legs wrap around my waist, and all that can be heard is the sound of her laughter, which means my job here is done.

“She said yes!” I shout, and then we hear cheers from our friends who are all hiding close by.

“She said yes!” Asa cheers. “She said yes!”

She lets go of me, and she’s barely on her feet before Asa runs into her. My hand around her waist stops her from going down. “He was so worried you would say no.”

“Are you kidding me?” she says to him. “I said yes for you”—she winks at him and then looks at me—“and you too.” I bend and kiss her lips. Falling for her is one of the best things that has ever happened to me, and I’m going to spend my life showing her.

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EPILOGUE TWO

FINLEY

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

I put the cup down on the bathroom counter before I pick up the white paper with instructions: *Remove the cap from the test stick*. I pull the pink cap off. “That’s easy enough.” I look down at the test in my hand. “Now what?” I put it down and pick up the instructions again: *Place the absorbent tip in your urine stream for five seconds or*—I scan the paper—*twenty seconds if it’s in a cup*. I pick it up again. “I don’t know if there is a chant or something I have to do.” I inhale deeply and say, “Here goes nothing.” I close my eyes once and put the tip in the cup. “We’re going to do thirty seconds just to be safe,” I mumble to myself, taking out my phone and starting the timer for forty-five seconds, “to be really safe.” I continue reading the instructions: *Replace cap*. “Okay, then what?” I huff out. “This is taking forever.” I switch to the pictures now to see what the next steps are instead of reading them: *Wait for one to five minutes according to the test*.

I put the paper down and stare at the cup of my urine on the counter. My finger taps it. I check my phone, watching the numbers tick down. I start the ten-second countdown as if I’m counting down the fucking New Year. The phone beeps on the counter as I take the test out of the cup and put the cap back on it.

I pour the leftover urine down the toilet and then take out the antibacterial spray and clean down the counter before I walk out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. The sun is shining into the window as I look over at the bed that I just fixed. So much has changed since I first walked into this house, including how I make the bed. Who knew how therapeutic it was to fix your bed every single day?

The test is in my hand as I walk down to the living room, as if it's a bomb ready to detonate. I think about getting myself something to drink, but instead I sit on the couch and put the test on the table in front of me. I kick off my slippers and curl my feet under me. The tears come, and I'm not prepared. I try to exhale, but it just makes the tears come on faster.

My eyes never leaving the test on the table, I try to calm my heartbeat, but it just speeds up more. My head feels like it's in the middle of a tornado, where everything is being tossed around and then spit out.

Outside, a car door slams and boots thud up the front steps. The front door opens and is slammed shut.

"Finley!" I hear him shout. It happens so fast, I don't have time to fix myself. He stops mid-step, his eyes on mine. "What's wrong?" His voice is soft as he takes one more step toward me. "Why are you crying?"

"What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be working and, I don't know, saving people from whatever they need saving from?" My voice goes higher at the end.

"I was saving people," he says calmly. "But I went by the barn to drop off the new green drink that Everleigh was making for you. They said you called in sick."

"I didn't call in sick," I defend myself. "I just said I was going to be there tomorrow."

"That means the same thing." He takes another step. "Now do you want to tell me why you're sitting in the middle of our living room with tears running down your face?"

“Not really.” I hope he doesn’t look at the table.

“Are you hurt?” Worry is etched all over his face.

“Not really.” I sniffle and use the back of my hand to wipe my cheek.

“Are you having second thoughts?” The pain in his voice makes my heart break a little bit more.

“No.” I shake my head at the same time as I say, “Never.”

“So, then what is it?” He moves deeper into the living room, coming to sit next to me. “Whatever it is, we can talk about it.”

“I’m not sure about that.” My eyes accidentally slip toward the test and then back to him, and I see his eyes follow mine. Then they look like they are about to come out of their sockets.

“Is that . . . ? Is that what I think it is?”

“That depends.” I swallow the lump that has now formed in my throat. “What do you think it is?”

“Finley.” He says my name, and just like all the other times, it feels like a big bear hug, but in a good way and not like I’m being mauled to death.

“What?” I’m so nervous, I feel like I’m going to throw up and then have a heart attack at the same time. “I don’t know what you think it is. It could be a cooking utensil or a wand or—”

He cuts me off mid-sentence, knowing that I’m just babbling at this point. “Is it a pregnancy test?”

“So you do know what that is?” I put my hand on his, and he turns his hand over to link our fingers together.

“Why are you taking a pregnancy test?” His thumb rubs mine gently.

“I didn’t feel so good yesterday when I got to work, but I thought it was just because you made me that sausage-and-egg croissant and I overate. So I ignored it and started riding, and then I started feeling more and more nauseated. Which then had me think maybe you poisoned me at breakfast.” He rolls his eyes. “One can never be too careful, Lincoln. Anyways, I walked inside to grab a glass of water, and Charlie was there eating a

sandwich, and I barely made it to the bathroom. When I came out, he was joking with me that I was probably pregnant. I laughed because, well, that can't be, can it? I'm on the pill."

"We do have a lot of sex." His eyebrows go up.

"Yeah, well, whose fault is that?" I push his hand away from mine, but he just takes my hand back. "It's all your fault."

"Okay, so you took the test and . . . ?"

"I don't know." I tell him. "I read the instructions and then came downstairs."

He lets go of my hand, and I'm expecting him to get up and look at the test, but instead, he reaches over and pulls me into his lap. I put my head on his shoulder as his arm wraps around me tightly. "Were you crying because you don't want to be pregnant?" he asks softly.

"I don't know. I think I was actually scared more than anything else."

"Why are you scared?" His voice is calm as I push up from his shoulder and look at him.

"I didn't exactly have the best mother for a role model growing up. Like what if I fuck this up?" My voice comes out in a little shriek at the end.

"Baby," he smiles, "look at how good you are with Asa."

I roll my eyes. "That's not really fair. When I met him, he was already amazing. I didn't really have anything to do with him."

"Finley," he says, waiting for me to meet his eyes, "you are kind, gentle, loving, and so much more. You will be the best mother that I have ever seen, and you want to know why?"

"No!" I say, making him laugh.

"Just having this conversation means that you are going to be the best mother you can be. You aren't selfish and only thinking of yourself. The first thing you thought about was the baby and how you would be with him or her."

“Technically, I was thinking about myself.” I turn in his lap. “I don’t know if I can do this. I barely know how to feed myself. I just got laundry figured out, and I’m not even going to tell you how many shirts I gave away and replaced.”

He chuckles. “No one is ready for a child. I wasn’t. It’s a learning experience, and I have no doubt that you are going to love and care for our child with everything you have.”

“No nannies.” I don’t even know what I’m saying until the words come out of my mouth.

“What?” His tone is equally surprised.

“I don’t want nannies. I want to do it myself.”

He smiles big. “No nannies.”

“Yeah,” I tilt my head to the side, “look at what happened the last time you hired a nanny. She’s now maybe carrying your child.”

“When do you want to find out for sure?”

I inhale deeply. “I guess now would be a good time.”

He wraps one arm around my waist and leans forward to pick up the test.

“Wait,” I say. “Should we count to three and then turn it over? Or should you look and then tell me? Or should I look and then tell you?”

“I’m going to give you a second to decide what you want to do, and then we’ll do it.” He sits back on the couch.

“Okay, we should find out together.” I look down at his hand.

“You sure?”

“Just turn it over.”

He does, and we look down at it. My eyes go to his. “What does that mean? What does two lines mean?”

“I think it means it’s positive.” A huge smile is filling his face. “Two lines are usually positive.”

“How sure are you? How many pregnancy tests have you taken?” I’m literally holding my breath, not sure what to do. I jump up off his lap and run up the steps to the bathroom to get the instructions.

My eyes scan the picture, and I see it. One line means negative, two lines means positive. The sob rips out of me, and when I look up, I see him in the mirror behind me. I spin around.

“It’s positive,” I tell him, and the smile now fills my face so big that my cheeks hurt. “I’m pregnant.” I move one hand to my stomach.

“Are you happy?”

I think of the question for a millisecond. “Ridiculously.” Now the laughter rips out of me in place of the sobbing. Actually, the sobbing and laughter both come together, and I bend over, cradling my stomach. “I’m going to be a mom,” I tell him, and he just nods his head. “We’re going to have a baby.”

He gets down on his knees in front of me, his hands holding my hips. “You are so loved,” he tells my stomach as I run my hand through his hair. “You are both so loved.”

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Keep reading for a sneak preview of the next installment of the Falling For series:

Falling for Him

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PROLOGUE

HUDSON

ME:

I'll be at your place at eight.

I press send and put my phone down before pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it into the laundry basket. My phone pings as soon as I turn on the shower.

MCKENNA:

Just finished packing the last box. I'll be ready by then.

She ends the sentence with a smiley face and then a red heart. My chest contracts as I try to inhale, only to realize I'm not even breathing.

Tonight is the night. The night we knew was coming, but I don't think either of us is ready for it. Fuck, she might be ready, but I know without a shadow of a doubt, I'm not.

Each day feels like a ticking time bomb. Tomorrow's date is waiting to detonate. I step into the shower before my head starts playing on a loop, and I fall over the cliff I've been standing on since we started dating.

I hang my head under the water, letting the warm liquid run down my sore back muscles. I've been in the gym for six hours every single day since we graduated from high school, preparing for the physical fitness test I have to pass to get into the firefighter program.

I dress in a pair of jeans and a white T-shirt before grabbing the bag I prepared this morning. I rush down the steps and stop in the kitchen where my mother is washing dishes.

“I’m heading out,” I announce.

She looks over her shoulder and smiles at me. “You going to be home late?”

“Yes,” I tell her, even though I don’t know how long we’ll be out.

“Be safe.”

The sun is setting as I open the creaky back door to the four-door pickup. The truck has seen better days. I bought it with my own money and decided I would fix it up in my spare time.

When I pull up to the curb in front of McKenna’s house, the front door opens and the smile on my face fills from cheek to cheek.

“Mom, I’m leaving,” she shouts over her shoulder. “Don’t wait up.”

She shuts the door and I take her in as she walks toward me. Her blue cutoff shorts hang on her hips, a white tank top shows off just a hint of her stomach, and she holds one of my blue sweaters in her hand. Her waist-long hair bounces and the smile on her face matches mine.

“Hey,” she greets as she opens the passenger door. She hoists herself into the truck and plops down on the vinyl seat. She leans over and her lips touch mine softly, quickly. “You smell nice.”

I laugh. “I figured you weren’t a fan of the sweaty gym odor I had when I saw you this afternoon.” She had stopped by the gym to drop off a protein shake she made for me.

“You would be correct.” She puts her elbow on the open window frame on her side. “So what is this surprise you’ve been teasing at all week long?”

I put the truck in drive and pull away from her house. “It’s still a surprise. I’m going to pick up our food first.”

She inhales then looks out her window, giving in with a dramatic, “Fine.” She leans her head back on the headrest, the wind blowing into her

face.

I stop at the local pizza parlor, D'amore's, and pick up the pizza I preordered.

"Okay, now are you going to tell me what my surprise is?" she asks as I pull away from the curb.

"Nope." I reach over and grab her hand, bringing it to my lips, then intertwine our fingers together on my thigh.

I drive out toward the spot I picked out a couple of weeks ago. The road turns to gravel and then it's just dirt. The stars start to fill the sky as I park in the middle of the field, a distant barn the only sign of civilization. I cut off the engine. The sound of crickets fills the night.

"You brought me to the middle of nowhere?" she asks me jokingly as she reaches for the door handle.

"No, not yet." I pull her back. "Stay here until I tell you to come out."

"Fine," she huffs as I get out of the truck.

I grab the pizza box and bag and head to the back of the truck. I spread a blanket on top of the steel truck bed to give it some cushion and add two pillows. I then pull three white candles from my bag, switching them on and propping them on the side of the bed. Satisfied, I jump down and make my way around to her side of the truck. I open the door for her.

"Is it time now?"

"It is." I hold out my hand, and she slips her hand in mine as she steps down. I close the door behind her and take her in my arms, one arm wrapping around her waist, the other holding her face.

"Hi," I say. "How are you?" My thumb rubs her cheek back and forth.

"I'm better now." She puts her hands on my sides, bunching my shirt and plastering her front to mine. "Much better."

"I bet I can make you much, much better." I smile and bend my head, touching my lips to hers. She gets on her tippy-toes, wrapping her arms around my neck as my tongue slides into her mouth. My arm around her

waist pulls her even closer to me while my hand moves from her cheek to the back of her head.

“That was way, way better,” she says with a laugh once the kiss ends. She leans in to kiss my neck before we slowly move away from each other.

“The night is only starting.” I slip my hand into hers and we walk around to the back of the truck. She puts her hands to her mouth when she sees. “I was thinking we could have a picnic under the stars,” I tell her as she climbs onto the bed of the truck, “just the two of us.”

“It’s exactly how I want to spend my last day here,” she says with a smile. I try to loosen the grip around my heart as I get up into the truck with her. I place the pizza between us and pull two bottles of the soda she likes from the bag.

“Pizza and a Coke”—she leans forward on her knees and kisses my lips —“it’s everything I could ever wish for.”

I laugh, opening the box of pizza. We both take a piece. “So you finished packing?” I ask.

She nods her head. “My whole room is packed up into eight boxes and three suitcases. It’s going to be strange waking up tomorrow and not seeing any of my pictures hanging or my little trinkets on my armoire.”

“It’s going to be even stranger going to bed tomorrow in a bed that isn’t yours.”

She looks down. “Don’t make this harder for me than it is,” she whispers.

“I would never do that to you, McKenna.” I watch her. “You told me the day I asked you to be my girlfriend that you would be leaving town for college and that you were not sure if you were ever coming back,” I remind her, “and you didn’t want to do the whole long-distance thing.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to either of us,” she says softly. “I would never want to hold you back.”

“I know. It’ll be okay.”

“Will it?” I can see the tears rolling down her cheeks. I toss my slice of pizza in the box, then take hers and toss it in with mine before moving the box to the side.

“Come here, Kenna.” I use the nickname I gave her as I pull her to me. She straddles my lap as I sit with my back toward the cab. I wipe the tears from her cheeks. “I knew it would suck,” I tell her softly, “but not being with you would have sucked even more.” I hold her face and kiss her lips. “You made my senior year even more special.”

She puts her hands on my chest. “I love you, Hudson Tate.” She kisses my lips softly. “But then again, I hate you,” she declares, making me laugh.

“Why?”

“You are like the best boyfriend I could ever have.” She looks at her hands. “I don’t think I’ll love anyone the way I love you.”

“Good,” I reply, and it’s her turn to laugh. “I know I will never love someone like I love you, McKenna.”

“Good,” she echoes my answer, “but I want you to.”

“Can we not do this tonight? I don’t want to talk about you leaving and how we’re going to have to move on.”

“Okay,” she gives in. “No sad talk tonight.”

“It’s just the two of us.” I kiss her lips.

“The two of us and the stars.” She looks up at the sky, and I move her off my lap and lie on my back with the pillow under my head.

She lies by my side, her head on my shoulder. “I’m going to miss this the most.”

“The quiet?” I know once she moves to Chicago, she isn’t going to get nights like this.

“Yes,” she admits softly, “and just you.” She puts her hand over my stomach, and I turn to the side as she cocks her leg over my hip.

“We have tonight.” I rub my nose with hers. “Let’s just—”

She puts her finger over my lips. “Tonight it’s about us and only us.” She moves closer to me. “It’s you.” She kisses my neck. “It’s me.” She kisses under my jaw. “And the stars.”

There, under those stars, I make love to her one last time. Neither of us wants the night to end.

When the sun slowly starts to come up, we fold up the blanket and put everything away. She sits on the bench seat in the truck, right next to me. My arm is around her as she rests her head on my shoulder.

I pull up to her house where the porch lights are on. The silence is almost deafening, but neither of us wants to say anything. I just let myself be in the moment with her, feeling her beside me. Her arm is bent so she can hold my hand in hers.

My chest tightens as I turn off the engine and face her. “This is it.” I open my door and when I walk around to her side, she’s already out. The wind blows and her hair flies into her face. I tuck it around her ear. “You be good, Kenna.”

She blinks away the big tears that formed at the bottom of her eyes. “This is harder than I thought it would be,” she whimpers. “You be good too, Hudson.” She gets on her tippy-toes and kisses my lips.

Then she lets go, walks away from me, and up the steps to her house. As she turns the handle, she takes one more look back at me. She brings her hands to her lips and blows me a kiss before holding up her hand to say goodbye.

I put my hand to my chest, tapping it three times to tell her “I love you” before she disappears into her house. When the door closes, I look down at my shoes. The heaviness of this moment, of facing the reality where we won’t be in each other’s future, makes it hard for me to breathe. A lone tear escapes and runs down my cheek, knowing that she will forever have a piece of my heart, regardless of where we end up.

“Bye, Kenna.”

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CHAPTER ONE

MCKENNA

TWELVE YEARS LATER

I open Jamie's fridge, snatching a bottle of beer and twisting the cap off before I grab my phone and send Jamie a text.

ME:

At your place. Want me to order something for dinner? What time will you be home?

JAMIE:

Sorry, work emergency. Rushing to airport. Back tomorrow afternoon. Call you when we land.

I exhale, take a pull of the beer, and decide to call my mother. The phone rings three times before she answers.

"Hey, baby girl," she mumbles.

"Hey, Momma," I say softly, "were you sleeping?" I look over at the clock on top of the stove. It's only five.

"Oh, I must have dozed off. What's new?"

"Did you call the doctor?" It's been a couple of months since she hasn't been feeling herself; her words, not mine. "Don't make me call them to check."

“I have an appointment next week. Why don’t you mind your own business and stop worrying about me?” I smile as I take another sip of beer. “How’s the wedding planning?”

I look over at the five stacks of bridal magazines and the boxes of save-the-date cards, addressed and ready to be mailed out.

“Good. I met with the wedding planner last night, and we went over a couple of options for the dress. She sent me home with some magazines. I’m supposed to go through them and pick out my favorite.”

“That’s exciting.” She’s trying to sound peppier.

“It would be more exciting if you were here with me.” I suddenly miss her a little bit more than usual, which is silly. “Why don’t you come down next weekend? I can show you the venues we were thinking about.”

“I don’t know . . . we’ll see sometime next week.”

I’ve been away from home for twelve years and she’s come to visit me a total of five times, always just for big occasions. The first time was to move me into my dorm. Then, when I graduated, to move me into my first apartment. She came for the ceremony when I got my master’s in foreign communications, and again to meet Jamie when I told her things were serious. The last time was to celebrate our engagement. We call or FaceTime every day, but she hasn’t really come up to visit and just spend time with me.

That isn’t to say that I’ve only seen her five times since I left home. Every single year, we pick a spot, and we do a mother-daughter trip. One year, it was doing the van life for three weeks. We drove from California to Utah then all the way to Colorado and then down to Arizona. A couple of other years we’ve done spa trips, but Mom isn’t a fan of just sitting around. The biggest one we did was going to Greece and Italy. It was in the peak of travel season, so she hated every single thing about it. But we made the most of it, and in the end, it’s the trip we talk about the most.

“I’d really like for you to come and visit. I’m doing all of these wedding things alone.” I gaze through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the bright blue sky, not a cloud in sight. “It would be nice for you to be here and choose some things with me.”

“What about Jamie?”

“You know how busy he is.” I take a deep breath. “He’s heading up a new account. He’s been gone practically the whole month. I think I saw him twice.” I put the beer down on the counter by the venue brochure I picked up. Jamie was supposed to check it out with me, but he got held up at the last minute and I had to use FaceTime to show him instead. “He’s been really stressed lately.”

“You sound lonely,” she notes, her voice low. “Have you tried to talk to him about it?”

“I don’t want to nag him, Momma.” I repeat the word he used last month when I told him how I was feeling. “It’ll be fine. I’ll plan the wedding, and it’ll be everything I dreamed it would be.”

“It will. Maybe we can ask Harmony or Everleigh to do the wedding cake.”

“I don’t know, Mom.” They work at Maddie’s, the local bakery in Montgavin, and I’m not sure how I feel about someone in my hometown getting involved. I don’t want everyone to know I’m getting married. I mean, I’m sure my mother has mentioned it to her friends, and the town is high on gossip, so I’m sure it made the rounds to everyone by now. I push the thought out of my head, not willing to open that box.

A knock at the door has me looking over my shoulder. “Mom, someone is at the door,” I say, thankful we can drop the conversation about the cake. “I’m going to have to go, but I’ll call you later.”

“Okay, baby,” she says softly. “Love you to the moon.”

“And back. Talk soon.” I disconnect and start toward the door, wondering if it’s the doorman with a delivery for me. Anyone else would

have to be buzzed in to come to the door.

Two men stand there. One is shorter with a little bit more weight than the one behind him. He's wearing a gray suit with a white shirt, open at the collar to reveal a gold chain. His salt-and-pepper hair is styled perfectly.

"Hello, can I help you?" I ask, glancing from him to the guy behind him, who has a buzz cut with a goatee and is dressed more casually. His black leather jacket is open, a black T-shirt under it, and he's wearing jeans and boots.

"We're looking for Jamie." They walk in and make it to the middle of the living room by the time I get my wits about me. The short guy sits down in the single chair and the skinny one stands beside him, holding his hands in front of him. His brown eyes are almost black as he glares at me.

"He's not home." I try to remain calm, but having two men I've never seen in my life just waltz into the apartment isn't helping. "How did you get up here?"

"Doesn't matter." He motions with his chin. "Call him." His voice is tight. "Get him on the phone."

"I'm sorry, who are you?"

He smiles, but the smile is anything but friendly. "Someone you don't want to know. Call him."

I'm shaking as I go to the kitchen where I left my phone, my mouth dry. My heartbeat is speeding to the point where it's all I can hear.

"Put it on speaker," he directs. I do what he says. Something tells me to just get this over with and get these men out of my space.

The phone rings three times and then, "You've reached Jamie Benjamin from JB Finances . . ." I don't listen to the whole thing, I just look down at the screen and wait for the beep.

"Call me back. Right now," I say, hoping he can hear the urgency in my tone. I keep the kitchen counter between the men across the room and me as

I disconnect. “He texted me not too long ago to tell me he had an emergency out of town with one of his clients.”

The short one leans back in the chair, watching me. “I believe you.” He gets up, and I try not to show him how bothered I am. “I want you to give him a little message for us. You tell him that Jimmy is looking for him. You tell him if I have to come back here tomorrow, it won’t be pretty.” I thought my mouth was dry before, but now as I try to swallow, my throat feels like it’s closing up. “Tell him he doesn’t want me pissed off.” He shares a look with the tall guy as he opens the door.

As soon as the door closes behind them, I run to lock it, then call Jamie. Again, it goes to voicemail, so I text him.

ME:

Call me back, it’s an emergency.

I pace in the middle of the room, calling him again. “Pick up, pick up, pick up,” I chant. Again, my pleas are unanswered.

I don’t want to be here anymore. I grab my purse, check that the hall is empty, then hurry to the elevator. Pressing the button, I call Jamie again.

By the time I get down to the parking garage, I’ve called him about fifteen times, the last two going straight to voicemail without ringing.

Me:

Call me now!

When I press send, the message turns green instead of blue.

“Shit,” I swear.

I’m about to pull open my car door when I hear footsteps behind me. I whip around. Two men are walking toward me, both wearing suits—one blue, the other black.

“Ms. Lambert,” the one in blue says, “I’m Agent Andrews.” He reaches inside his jacket pocket and pulls out a leather wallet, flipping it open so I

can see the badge. “This is Agent Burton.” He motions to the man beside him. “We’re wondering if you could come with us to answer some questions.”

I clutch my purse in one hand and my phone in the other, both in fists like a death grip. “What’s going on?”

“If you come with me, we can explain everything,” Agent Andrews says. I literally don’t know what to do.

“If you don’t want to come with us”—Agent Burton’s tone is softer, and he gives me a soft smile—“we can give you our card and you can follow us to the office in your car.” He pulls a card from his pocket and hands it to me. I see he’s not just an officer, he’s with the FBI. *What the actual fuck?*

“I’ll follow you.” I open the door of my Mercedes and get in, locking the door immediately as they walk off to their car.

Online, I look up the address on the card to confirm it before putting it into my GPS. They pull up in their black sedan and wait for me to pull out so I can follow them.

The whole drive, I keep calling Jamie for what feels like a thousand times. Each ring goes to voicemail. I leave him one last message when I pull into the parking lot.

“Jamie, someone came to your apartment.” I try to keep my voice calm. “He said his name is Jimmy and he’s coming back tomorrow. You need to call me back.” I close my eyes once I put the car in park. “Please, call me.”

When I get out and walk into the building, Agent Andrews is waiting for me in the lobby. “Thank you for coming in, Ms. Lambert.”

“Listen, I don’t know what is going on, but something tells me it has to do with my fiancé?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, you came to his building. And right before the two of you showed up, two other men came to his apartment, and I’m going to guess they are not part of your division.”

His lips fold together in something like a smile. “Please, come with me.” He moves to the side and holds up a badge to get a door to open. I follow him through and down a white hallway lined with rooms that each have just a table in the center with one chair on one side and two on the other.

“Please have a seat,” he tells me. I pull out the single chair and sit down.

Nothing could have prepared me for what he is about to tell me and how the life I know will be blown to bits.

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It’s always so hard to do this. I’m so afraid to leave anyone out.

My husband and children: Thank you for being kind to me when dinner isn’t ready when it should be. Thank you for coming on this ride with me. I’m so proud that I get to live in this life and get to be your mom. I’m proud of the tiny humans you were and the adults you have become.

Shauna: I really don’t know where I would be without you. Thank you for being there through the good times and the bad. I need you to have an open heart and an open mind!

Stephanie: Thank you for fighting for this series and for me. Without your dedication, this wouldn’t be happening.

Marilyn: Thank you for taking a chance on me. It’s such an honor and a privilege to be on this journey with you. Never let that crown slip!

Christina: Thank you for loving this series as much as I did and for making it so much prettier.

Cole: For seeing the little things that would go unnoticed. Thank you! Go get that frother!

Karen: This would be a disaster without you. Thank you for not firing me for my bad grammar and mistakes.

Emma: I’m so, so happy you are in my corner. You have the most creative mind I’ve ever seen, and I’m not sharing you with anyone. Ever . . . Okay, maybe Harry Styles, but that’s it.

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And lastly, and the most important one to YOU, the reader. Without you, none of this would be real. Thank you for picking up and reading the book!

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THE FALLING FOR SERIES

DISCUSSION GUIDE

BY NATASHA MADISON

1. The Falling For series features first responders as central characters. How did their professions shape the tone of each story? Did it influence how you viewed the romantic relationships?
2. Romance tropes often guide reader expectations. Did tropes influence your decision to pick up books in this series? Which tropes stood out to you?
3. Which character (or characters) resonated with you the most? What specific traits, decisions, or moments made them memorable?
4. Each heroine brings a distinct “black cat energy” (independence, guardedness, sharp edges). How did these personalities impact your connection to their stories? Did this trait enhance or complicate their romantic arcs?
5. If you had the opportunity to ask Natasha Madison one question about the Falling For series, what would you ask? What aspect of the story, characters, or writing process are you most curious about?
6. For readers familiar with the author’s Dream series, how does the Falling For series compare in terms of tone, character dynamics, and emotional depth? Did you prefer one over the other?
7. Many readers grow attached to couples in interconnected series. Which couple would you most want to befriend in real life, and what about their dynamic draws you to them?

8. If one couple were to get a follow-up or sequel story, which would you choose? What unresolved threads, future milestones, or character growth would you want to explore further?
9. The heroines in this series are portrayed as fiercely independent. How did you feel about their character development as they navigated falling in love? Did the relationships complement or challenge their independence?
10. Book one features the surprise pregnancy trope. How did you respond to its use in this story? Did it feel organic to the plot and characters, or did it influence your enjoyment in a different way?
11. Book two explores the single dad/nanny dynamic. How did this trope work for you in this context? Did it feel fresh and engaging, or familiar and predictable?
12. Second-chance romance is central to book three. How did you interpret the characters' decision to reconnect? Did their history strengthen the story, or did you find yourself questioning their reunion?
13. Were there any tropes that didn't work as well for you? What about their execution or placement in the story made them less effective?
14. Montgavin serves as the backdrop for the series. How did the setting contribute to the overall experience? Did it feel like a character in its own right, and which couple's story fit the town best?
15. The series incorporates light romantic suspense elements. How well do you think this aspect was balanced with the romance? Did it add depth or distract from the core relationships?

16. “Book boyfriends” are a staple of romance reading. Did you have a standout favorite in this series? What qualities made them appealing—or not?
17. As interconnected standalones, the books revisit characters across different stories. Did this structure enhance your experience by creating continuity, or did it ever feel overwhelming to keep track of?
18. Side characters often enrich a series. Was there a secondary character you wished had more development or page time? What made them stand out to you?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Natasha Madison is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author who, when her nose isn't buried in a book, or her fingers aren't flying across a keyboard writing, is in the kitchen creating gourmet meals. You can find her—in four-inch heels no less—in the car chauffeuring kids, or possibly with her husband scheduling his business trips. It's a good thing her characters do what she says, because even her Labrador doesn't listen to her.

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