



Until

HARMONY

UNTIL HER **BOOK FOUR**

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY **BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

Aurora Rose Reynolds

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Until
HARMONY
UNTIL HER *BOOK FOUR*

Aurora Rose Reynolds

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Dedication

Little Wolf, I hope you always live your life wild and free

Prologue

Harmony

AS I EXIT THE HOSPITAL with a smile on my face, I spot Harlen tossing his denim-covered leg over the seat of his Harley. I haven't seen him since I took him home from my cousin June's house a few weeks ago. He had been shot by a guy named Jordan, who was part of an MC out of Nashville. Jordan's motorcycle club was trying to infiltrate the Broken Eagles motorcycle club and take over so they could expand their business. And by business, I mean selling women, drugs, and guns.

Lucky for Harlen, his wound was clean, through and through, so he was released from the hospital after one day. I didn't know him before I saw him leaning against the wall at my cousin's house, not really talking to anyone, but I did know just by looking at him that he was in pain. When I saw that, I went into nurse mode and insisted on taking care of him. I'm pretty sure he thought I was a little nuts, but somehow I still convinced him to let me take him home.

After I got him to his place and settled with some of his pain medication, I left, and I haven't heard anything from him since. That's not to say I haven't thought about him more than a few times since then. He's been like a constant itch in the back of my mind that I can't get rid of, no matter what I do.

"Harlen!" I shout his name as I hurry in my heels across the parking lot, watching him kick up the stand on his bike and plant both his boot-covered feet on the asphalt.

His dark eyes come to me over his broad shoulder, and just like the first time our gazes locked, my lower belly pulls tight and my blood sings through my veins.

God, he's gorgeous, just not in the traditional sense. He's too scary looking to be handsome. He's too big, his eyes too dark, and his jaw too hard. The thick stubble covering it makes him appear dangerous. Only, he looks like the kind of danger you want to tame so you can see it up close; like a lion or bear in the wild. You know if you ever got a chance to experience the thrill of touching an animal like that, you'd never forget it. *Ever*.

"Hey." I smile once I'm close, feeling my skin warm and prickle as his eyes wander over me in a lazy way before he lifts his chin. Taking that for a familiar scary guy hello, I grin. He didn't say much to me the last time I saw him either. Mostly, he looked at me like I was amusing.

“Were you here to see the doctor?” I ask, settling my purse higher up on my shoulder as I study him. He looks good; his color is back, and there is no sign of pain in his eyes, which is a relief.

“Not sure why else I would be at the hospital, darlin’,” he rumbles, leaning deeper into his seat and planting his long legs farther apart.

“They take semen all hours of the day,” I reply, watching his lips twitch in amusement, and that same amusement shines in his eyes.

“What did the doctor say?” I ask after a moment of enjoying his expression.

“It’s all good, wound’s healed. Stitches are out.”

“Good.” I reach out and touch his muscular, tattooed arm just under the sleeve of his black tee. His eyes drop to my hand resting on him then lift to meet mine and fill with something that makes me feel off-balance. Dropping my hand away, I take a step back. “I’m glad you’re doing okay,” I say, and he lifts his chin once more.

“What are you doing here?” he questions after an awkward pause.

I smile. “I just had an interview for an RN position.”

“Did you get the job?”

“I did.” I smile brighter. I’ve wanted to move home for a while now, but knew I couldn’t until I graduated, passed my state test, and got a job in town. I love my parents, but there is no way I would lean on them or move into their house after being free to do my own thing for so long.

“Feel like celebrating?” he asks, catching me off guard, and my stomach does a flip at the idea of celebrating in any way with him.

“Yes,” I agree without thinking about my answer, and he starts up his bike, the loud rumble making my whole body vibrate.

“Hop on.”

“Hop on?” I repeat as he hands me his helmet.

“Yeah, hop on.” He nods to the seat behind him and my eyes go there briefly.

“Maybe I shouldn’t.” I shake my head, trying to hand his helmet back to him, but he doesn’t take it. Instead, he crosses his arms over his broad chest, making his already huge arms look even more intimidating.

“Are you scared?”

“No,” I lie. I am scared; I’m always scared of taking chances. Every decision in my life is planned out. I don’t take risks. I do not jump the gun or do things on a whim. My twin sister, Willow, does that, but not me. I’m careful with every single decision I make. Maybe even too careful.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I have my car.” I point across the lot toward my red Audi A6. “It’s my baby. I can’t leave it here.”

“All right, then follow me,” he suggests.

Shit.

“I...” I look from him to my car then back again. “I can’t,” I whisper regretfully. Yes, I want to hang out with him. Yes, I want to be the kind of girl who does crazy shit like get on a bike with a guy she hardly knows to celebrate her new job. And maybe that celebrating happens with a few shots of cheap alcohol and a few—hopefully—really great orgasms. I want to be that girl, but it’s not who I am. “I’m sorry. I can’t.” I hand him back his helmet, and he takes it this time while studying me intently. “It was nice seeing you, Harlen. I’m glad you’re doing better.” I back up a step. “See you around.”

I turn on my heels and head across the lot. Getting in my car, I toss my purse onto the seat next to me then start the engine. I look out of the windshield, expecting Harlen to be gone. He’s not. He’s still straddling his bike, but now his torso is turned and his eyes are locked on me with his brows pulled together.

Dragging in a breath, I remind myself one more time that it’s for the best that I didn’t go with him. I click my seat belt into place, put my car in drive, and take off without looking his way again, even though I really want to.

Arriving home in Nashville an hour later, I pull up and park outside my building then get out, carrying my purse with me toward my apartment that’s on the first floor. I live in one of the older housing complexes in the city. It’s a nice area that’s safe, with mostly older residents as my neighbors. I’ve called this place home for a few years, ever since my twin sister, Willow, and I decided it was time for us to part ways and live alone. We needed to have some separation between the two of us to build our own lives.

Don’t get me wrong; I love my sister. She’s my best friend. But I’m my own person, and sometimes people, including my family, forget that. It’s almost like they think that because we look alike and share the same birthday, we are the same in every other way. Which might be the case for some twins, just not for me and Willow. She’s always been wild and free, whereas I’ve

always been more conservative and cautious.

Hearing Dizzy, my rescued five-year-old Maltese mix, barking on the other side of the door, sensing I'm home, I place my key in the lock and open the door an inch so he doesn't have a chance to escape. Something he will do if I'm not careful. Bending at the knees, I scoop him up against my chest and take two steps inside, where I drop my bag to the floor and grab his leash hanging on the wall.

"Hey, Dizzy boy." I kiss the top of his fluffy white head and rub behind his ears. "Did you miss me?" I ask, kissing him again, and he licks my chin. I laugh while hooking his leash to his collar then set him on the ground and let him lead the way back outside. Not surprisingly, he takes us down the block, straight to his favorite park. Watching him sniff the trees and the grass, I silently promise myself and him that our next place will have a fenced in backyard, where he can run free anytime he wants.

On that thought, I pull my cell phone out of the pocket of my slacks and send a text to my cousin Ashlyn's best friend, Michelle, to let her know I'm ready to start looking for a house since she's a realtor. Then I dial my mom's number.

"Honey, hold on a sec," Mom answers, sounding out of breath, and I hear her tell my dad to stop doing whatever he's doing. Rolling my eyes, I wait for her to return to the phone. My parents might be old, but they are seriously still grossly in love with each other. "Okay, I'm back. How did the interview go?"

"I think it went good... since I got the job," I tell her.

I then hold the phone away from my ear when she screams, and then I hear my dad in the background ask her what's going on before I listen to her relay my news. "Your dad wants to talk," she says, and I can tell by her tone she's smiling.

"Congrats, honey. I'm proud of you," Dad says, and my heart gets warm.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Love you. Come see your old man soon."

"I will, and I love you too," I murmur then listen to the phone being jostled.

"I knew you'd get it!" Mom shouts, coming back on the line.

"Mom," I laugh, following Dizzy as he heads farther into the park with his nose to the ground.

"Stop it. I get to be excited. You're finally moving home. Are you going to stay with us while you search for a house? Please say yes, please?" She asks

question after question without taking a second to breathe, making me laugh again.

“I think I’ll stay here until I find a place in town.”

“You could have your old room back.”

“I love you and Dad, Mom, but no way. Anytime I’m home, Dad turns the clock back and I’m suddenly sixteen again, having a curfew and asking for permission to go out with friends.”

“I could talk to him,” she insists, making me smile. Mom has been talking to my dad about giving us girls space to become women since we turned thirteen, and it’s never worked.

“I’d rather not move more than once,” I say softly so I don’t hurt her feelings. “Besides, before you know it, I’ll be around so much you’ll be sick of me.”

“I’d never be sick of you.” She huffs, and I know she’s annoyed she didn’t get her way. “When do you start your job?”

“Probably three weeks or so. I need to give Dr. Brandsaw a few weeks’ notice to make sure he’s able to find a replacement.” I work as a nursing assistant at a small clinic here in Nashville, and I’ve been there since starting school. Dr. Brandsaw has been great about working around my school schedule and giving me whatever time I need off. I just don’t know how he will feel when I tell him that I won’t be working with him any longer, now that I’ve graduated. My long-term goal is to work as an ER nurse, and unfortunately, I won’t be able to do that if I stay with him, which means it’s time to move on to the next chapter in my life.

“So I have to wait an entire month, if not longer, for you to move home,” she says, sounding disappointed.

“The time will fly by, and in the meantime, you can help me find a house. I just sent Michelle a message letting her know I’m ready to start looking. I want to find somewhere with a backyard so I can put in a doggy door for Dizzy. That way, if I’m working, he doesn’t have to stay inside.”

“I can help you with that,” she replies, sounding excited once again. “They’re building some new townhomes just down the road from us. They look nice. Maybe we can check them out next weekend.”

“That sounds good,” I agree, even though I’m not sure about living in a townhome. After spending years in apartment complexes, it would be nice not to share a wall with anyone. There is nothing more annoying than hearing people going at it when your sex life is non-existent, or people fighting

nonstop.

“What kind of house are you looking for?” Mom questions as Dizzy finally finds the perfect spot to take care of business.

“I don’t have a huge budget, but I want something with at least two bedrooms, so if I have company, they have a place to sleep. And a backyard for Dizzy.”

“I’m sure we will find the perfect place, and if you need your dad and me to loan you some money, w—”

“No. Mom,” I cut her off before she can finish her sentence. My parents paid for my schooling. I never had to worry about that, which was a relief, but I don’t want to live off them forever. I want to make my own way in the world. It’s something that is really important to me.

“You’re just like your father, so darn hardheaded,” she grumbles, and I smile, taking that as a compliment. “So what are you doing for the rest of the day?”

“Right now, I’m taking Dizzy for a walk, and I might see if Willow wants to get dinner tonight, and maybe see a movie.”

“You girls have fun, and I expect to see you this weekend. I love you.”

“Love you too.” I hang up after she does then dial my sister.

“Hey,” she answers, sounding half asleep.

“Are you sleeping?” I ask, wondering how that’s possible when she’s supposed to be at work.

“Yeah, I’m sick. I think I have the flu.”

“Do you need me to bring you anything?”

“I just want to sleep,” she mumbles, and I laugh.

“I’ll bring you over some soup in a few hours.”

“You don’t need to do that,” she mumbles then continues. “But if you insist, can you make it hot sour soup from Pot Stickers?”

“Sure.” I smile. “Get some rest. I’ll be over later.”

“Okay.” She coughs as she hangs up.

I tuck my phone back into my pocket then follow Dizzy around the park for another half hour before leading him home. Once we’re back inside, I head for my bedroom and kick off my heels, trade my slacks for a pair of yoga pants, and my blouse for a tank top. Grabbing a sweater, I put it on then tie

my hair up in a ponytail.

I call out to Alexa as I head across my living room on bare feet and wait for her to light up. I ask her to shuffle songs by Ed Sheeran so I have something to listen to while I clean up the kitchen and run the vacuum. I hate cleaning, so I try to stay on top of it, but between work and school most days, I'm not up to it. That is one thing I do miss about living with Willow; I never really had to cook or clean. She has always been obsessive about keeping things tidy, which meant everything was always done before I had a chance to pitch in, and dinner was always ready when I wanted to eat.

After I vacuum and put away the things that have gathered on top of every flat surface over the last week, I go in search of my cell phone so I can call in the order for Chinese food. Seeing a text from Michelle on the screen telling me that she will start searching for a house as soon as she has my budget, I text her back and tell her my max spending limit, and then I dig through my junk drawer for the menu for Pot Stickers. I find it in the back of the drawer under all the randomness that has been shoved in there since I moved in.

Once I've called and placed my order, I hang up and look at Dizzy, who has made himself comfortable on top of one of the furry blankets I have lying across the end of the couch. Placing my hands on my hips, I study him, and he lifts his head then tips it to the side. "Do you want to go see Aunt Willow?" I ask, and he jumps down off the couch, runs to me, and starts to spin in a circle at my feet, proving once more that I gave him the perfect name.

"All right, come on." I head for the hall, grab his leash, hook it on his collar, and then pick up my keys and purse. As I open the back door to the car, he hops in then jumps up into his doggy car seat, knowing the drill. Shutting the door, I get in behind the wheel. After I pick up the food from the restaurant, I head to Willow's. She lives in a small two-bedroom house on a tree-lined street just outside the city. She bought her house when we parted ways. She didn't want to rent again, and I totally got that. If I hadn't been in school and knew I didn't want to move closer to our parents after I graduated, I would have bought too instead of renting.

Parking in her driveway, I get out, taking our food with me, and then open the door for Dizzy, who jumps down in a hurry to get out and explore. I snatch up his leash before he can get away then lead him up to the front door. Using my key to let myself into the house, not worried about walking in and finding a random naked man inside.

Willow, just like me, hasn't had a guy in her life for a while now. In the love department, we haven't been very lucky. I don't know why Willow hasn't settled down, but I know I'm too picky when it comes to men I want to

spend my time with. I also know I should probably lower my standards. I just won't. I want a man who is like my father, a man who is strong, who knows who he is and is okay with himself. I also want a man who wants me beyond reason. My father worships the ground my mom walks on, and I want that. I refuse to settle for less. Hence why I'm still single. Men nowadays (at least the men I've met) are wishy-washy with their feelings. One minute, they can't get enough of you, and the next, they are claiming you're suffocating them. Personally, I'd rather be alone than put up with that kind of unnecessary emotional bullshit.

Coming out of my head, I shut the door and let Dizzy off his leash. After setting the paper bag holding our food on the counter in the kitchen, I head through the living room toward Willow's bedroom in the back of the house. The door is already open when I get there, and I find Dizzy up on the bed, trying to burrow his way under the covers to get to my sister.

"Dizzy dude, seriously, your breath stinks," Willow grumbles, poking her head out, sitting up, and pulling Dizzy into her lap while petting him. "You need to get him some doggie breath mints," she tells me, and I roll my eyes at her. "Did you get my soup?"

"I did. Do you want to eat in here, or do you feel like getting out of bed?"

"I should probably get up. I've been in bed all day. This flu is kicking my ass." She tosses back the blanket and scoots to the edge of the bed with Dizzy still in her arms. "You should probably stay away from me so I don't get you sick."

"I never get sick," I remind her. I can count on both my hands the number of times I've been sick in my life. It was a curse when we were younger, because I never had a reason to miss school and was always jealous when she and the rest of my siblings got to stay in bed all day and have Mom look after them.

"Right, I forgot you hogged all the good immune system stuff," she responds, letting Dizzy go and standing.

"Whatever," I laugh, watching her move slowly toward her bathroom.

"Wait." She turns to look at me. "Didn't you have your interview today?"

"I did."

"And?" She raises a brow.

"I got the job." I grin, watching her smile.

"I knew you'd get it. So when do you start?"

“In a few weeks. I need to give Dr. Brandsaw time to find a replacement.”

“Did he know you were looking elsewhere?”

“He knows my long-term goal is to work in the ER, but no, I didn’t tell him I would be looking for a job in a hospital once I passed my exam for my license.”

“You and your goals,” she mumbles, turning back toward the bathroom. “I’m happy for you!” she shouts through the partially closed door. “How happy were Mom and Dad when you told them?” she asks after I hear the toilet flush and the pipes turn on.

“Happy. Mom tried to talk me into moving in with them,” I say, walking across the room and leaning my shoulder against the doorjamb, watching while she washes her hands and face.

Meeting my gaze in the mirror, her eyes widen in horror. “Are you going to do that?”

“Do I appear mentally unstable to you?” I retort.

She grins and replies, “Right?”

I shake my head. “Anyway, now I need to find a house so I’m not driving two hours a day.”

“I love house shopping, I’ll help you search.”

“Thanks, I’m going to need it.” I smile as she grabs her robe and puts it on over her T-shirt and sweats.

“Did you tell Michelle to start searching?”

“Yes, and she said she should have some houses for me to go through over the next few days,” I say, following her back through the house and into the kitchen.

“Awesome. Forward the e-mail to me when you get it, and I’ll help you go through them and narrow the list down.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer,” I agree, handing her the soup and a spoon.

“Thanks.” She takes it with her to the living room. Following with my Lo Mein and a fork, I pad behind her, kicking off my flip-flops, and settle in with her on the couch, tucking my feet under me.

“What do you have to watch?” I ask as she flips on the TV.

“There are a few episodes of the newest season of *90 Day Fiancé* recorded. Do you want to watch it?” she asks, flipping through her recorded list on her

DVR.

“Duh.” I smile, taking a bite of my noodles as she presses start on the first episode.

“I love this show,” she says halfway through the episode, and I shake my head.

“I just feel bad for most of them,” I admit, watching some poor sap fawning over a woman who is obviously not even a little bit interested in him.

“Love makes you blind,” she mutters, and I nod in agreement. She’s right. Love does make you blind, and sometimes stupid. “At least they’re brave enough to try.”

“True,” I agree softly, wondering if I will ever be brave enough to go after love the way they are. I doubt I ever will. “I saw Harlen today,” I blurt, and she presses pause on the show then turns to look at me.

“You did?”

“When I was leaving the hospital after my interview, I saw him in the parking lot.”

“What happened? What did he say?”

“Nothing much. He asked what I was doing, so I told him about getting the job. And then he asked me to celebrate with him.”

“Celebrate?” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Did you take him up on his offer?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Why the hell not? I thought you said you think he’s hot.”

“He is hot. I just... I just couldn’t,” I admit, and she studies me closely then lets out a sigh.

“Not all aspects of your life can be planned out, written down, and scheduled. You need to live a little and have some fun.”

“I have goals, things that are important to me,” I defend myself.

“Yes, and you always meet your goals, but some events won’t fit on one of your lists of things you need to do.”

“You’re right.”

“Next time he asks yo—”

“If there is a next time,” I cut her off and correct her, not wanting to get my

hopes up that there will be a next time. It was a fluke that I saw him today.

“Fine, *if* there is a next time.” She rolls her eyes. “Seriously, do you really want to look back on your life in fifteen or twenty years and think about all the things you missed out on because you were afraid to take a chance?”

“No.”

“Exactly, you don’t. So in order for that not to happen, you need to start living a little,” she scolds gently. “Seriously, I love you, but I don’t get you sometimes,” she grumbles, before pressing play on the TV. I pull in a breath then press my lips together. I don’t know if I will be able to do what she is telling me I should do, but I know she’s right. I don’t want to look back on my life and have regrets.

Chapter 1

Harmony

“THIS IS PERFECT,” I SAY as I spin around, taking everything in. The living room is huge with a white fireplace, and white bookshelves built into the wall on either side of it. The kitchen is open to the living room and has off-white cabinets and cream-colored granite with flecks of gold and wine in its surface. It offsets the pretty dusty rose-colored long cabinet separating the kitchen from the living room, with a butcher block top and three clear glass pendent lights hanging over it. Tipping my head back, I look up at the tall white ceilings with dark beams running upward, meeting in the middle, where there is a decorative crystal chandelier. Dropping my eyes to the floor, I check out the dark wood under my feet that seems to run through the entire house.

“You haven’t seen the bedrooms,” Michelle says regretfully, and I look up at her. “They’re small. Most of the square footage is out here.” She waves her hand around to encompass the room we’re standing in.

“I don’t care. I love it,” I tell her honestly, looking around the room again.

This has to be the hundredth house I have looked at since I started my search. I gave up on finding somewhere four weeks ago after I started my job at the hospital in town. Michelle assured me that she would find me a house, but I destined myself to an hour-long commute every day to and from work. When Michelle called me this morning and told me that she had a place *I just had to see*, I agreed to meet her before work, even though I didn’t really want to. Now, I’m glad I did.

At just over fifteen hundred square feet, it’s everything I was looking for and more.

“If you’re sure about this place, we need to put in an offer. The owner did me a favor letting you see it before she officially put it on the market. I know when that happens everyone and their mother is going to fight for it.”

“I’ll pay full asking price, and I won’t even ask for closing costs,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Let me go get my paperwork from the car. While I’m doing that, have a look at the bedrooms just so you can be sure this is the one.”

“Sure,” I agree, watching her turn on her heels to leave. I wander to the sliding door off the living room and look out past the wooden deck. The yard isn’t very big, but it already has a five-foot tall white fence around it, so

Dizzy can run whenever he feels like it. All I will have to do is figure out a way to put in a doggie door for him.

Spinning around, I head past the kitchen toward the bedrooms. The first door I open is a small bathroom with a pedestal sink, tub/shower combo, and a toilet. Going to the next door, I find a bedroom. Not a very big room, but if I put in a daybed, I can make it work. The next room is exactly the same size, perfect for an office. At the end of the hall, I open the door and step in.

Bright light is filling the room through a double bay window looking toward the neighbors' place. This room is big enough for my queen size bed, and there is an attached bathroom that has been updated with gray wood like tile floors and cream-colored tile in the glass enclosed shower. Looking at the pedestal sinks side by side with pretty oval mirrors over them, I sigh in happiness and relief.

"So what's the verdict?" Michelle prompts, and I turn to face her.

"Sold." I grin then ask, "Where do I sign?"

An hour and a call to the owner later, my offer is accepted. *Thank God.* She also agreed to let me move in and pay rent until we close, since the house is now sitting empty, and she's all the way in Florida and—in her words—"losing money everyday."

With a smile on my face, I leave Michelle to lock up, and head for my car and get in. I look through the windshield at the house one last time after I put on my seat belt, shoving my key in the ignition. The house is cute with blue siding and black shutters. The front door is in the middle of the porch, and there is enough space that I can place pots on either side of it and fill them with flowers. The landscaping around the house leaves much to be desired, but I can fix that up myself on my days off, maybe plant some flowers and a couple more trees.

I take out my phone and snap a picture, sending a group text to my mom and my sisters so they can see the house. My sister, Nalia, who moved to Denver, is the first to text back an emoji of a smiling face with heart eyes. Willow's text comes next with the same emoji. Right after that, my phone rings. Hitting accept on the call, I back out of the driveway.

"You finally found a house," Mom says, sounding relieved. I know she's been worried about me driving an hour each way to work and home every day, especially after working double shifts at the hospital. I love my new job, but working three doubles in a row is tiring, even if I do get four days off after working those shifts.

"Mom, wait until you see this place. It's perfect," I tell her as I stop at a red

light. “The owner also agreed to let me move in and pay rent until we close.”

“I’ll tell your dad. You tell your cousins. I’m sure between the two of us we can gather enough guys to get you moved this weekend,” she assures, and I laugh.

“I haven’t really packed, Mom. It’s going to take me a few days to get that all sorted out.”

“Oh, hush. I’ll drag everyone I can get with me tomorrow and we’ll get you packed up in no time at all.”

“If you think you can get them all together, I won’t stop you,” I agree, making a mental note to at least pack up my bathroom and the side tables in my room so my mom and aunts don’t accidentally run across any of my toys. That would be humiliating.

“I’ll call them when we get off the phone. When are your next days off?”

“The day after tomorrow, which is Tuesday then Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.”

“Perfect, we’ll get as much done as we can while you’re at work tomorrow, and then we will finish up on your days off and have you moved out by the weekend,” she says, and I smile, pulling into the hospital parking lot.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Don’t thank me. You know I’m happy to help,” she says as I shut down the engine.

“I just got to work. I’ll send a text to the girls to let them know what’s going on.”

“Let me know what your cousins say.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you too.” She hangs up.

Getting out of my car, I grab my bag along with my lunch and go inside. I pass the elevator and instead take the stairs. My love of takeout and all things carbs means I need to work out when and however I can; otherwise, my ass will double in size. I like my ass, but I don’t need any more of it to love. Reaching the metal door for the second floor, I shove it open and head down the hall, approaching the nurses’ station where Latoya and Maya, two of the nurses, are in deep conversation. Walking past them, I see Fiona who works overnights. She’s the head nurse on the floor—an older woman with a plump figure and caring eyes—standing in front of her medicine cart near a patient’s room.

“Hey, Harmony,” she greets me with a warm smile. “It’s me and you today.” She nods to the stuff in my hands. “After you drop your bags and clock in, meet me back here.”

“I’ll be right back,” I agree, passing her. Going to the break room, I put my lunch away in the fridge and my stuff in my locker before clocking in. I clip my badge to my scrub top then go out to find Fiona, whose cart is now farther down the hall in front of another room. Knocking on the open door, I wait for her to tell me to come in. The room is quiet when I enter, and I find Fiona next to the bed with a man not much older than me. He’s sitting up in bed with his leg, which is in a cast, slightly elevated.

“Harmony, this is Mr. Russell,” Fiona introduces us, and I smile at him when his eyes come to me. “He was in a car accident two days ago and had surgery this morning on his leg. He’s here until tomorrow morning and will be your first official patient.” Her words have Mr. Russell looking at her with wide eyes.

“Don’t worry. Harmony will take very good care of you.” She smiles at him reassuringly, and I plaster her same expression on my face. I haven’t had any patients on my own since I started working here. I knew it would happen eventually; I just didn’t know it would be today. “As soon as we finish the nurses’ meeting, she will be back in to give you your medicine and help you to the bathroom,” she tells him.

“Sure,” he agrees, studying me closely, so I keep the smile on my face. I don’t need him freaking out and thinking I’m incapable of taking care of him, or Fiona thinking I’m not ready.

“If you need anything before then, just press your alarm.” She points out the button on the side of the bed and he nods.

“I’ll see you soon,” I tell him, before I follow her out of the room.

“Are you ready to be on your own?” she asks me as we step into the hall, and I let out a short laugh. I’m not sure it would matter if I was ready or not, since she just told me that I have at least one patient.

“I’m ready,” I assure her, squeezing her upper arm.

“I knew you were.” She smiles softly. “Today and this evening should be slow. We only have five patients on the floor, and as of right now, there is only one new admit coming in this evening.”

“I’m excited,” I tell her.

“Good, let’s get our meeting done so the girls can get out of here,” she says, so I follow her to the nurses’ station, where we get an update from

Latoya and Maya on all the patients on the floor and the doctors who will be on call throughout the day. Once we are done with the meeting, I go through med count and sign off Maya, who I'm taking over from, and then I head back to Mr. Russell's room with my cart. I fill the order for his pain pills and enter his room. The TV is now on, but he's not watching it; he's looking at his phone.

"Hi, I have your pain meds," I tell him, and his eyes come to me. "Lunch should be coming around soon as well." I go over to his bed.

"Hospital food." He makes a face, and I smile, watching him set down his phone near his hip on the bed.

"It's not so bad."

"If you don't have taste buds, it's not bad. Unfortunately, mine are still working."

Laughing, I hand him his pills then pick up his standard pink hospital cup and hand that to him as well. "Tomorrow, when you get out of here, you can go out to dinner and have whatever you'd like," I murmur, watching him tip the tiny plastic cup back and swallow the pills before taking a gulp of water. Handing me back the cup, his eyes move to my badge clipped to my top.

"So, Harmony Mayson, are you offering to take me out?" he asks and I shift uncomfortably. He's not a bad-looking guy. He's cute in that wholesome boy next door kind of way, with dirty blond hair that is cut short and parted at the side, and blue eyes that stand out against his tan skin. Too bad for him, my mind has suddenly become obsessed with wild and untamable.

Laughing awkwardly, I shake my head. "Sorry, no, but I will help you to the bathroom," I say, and he shrugs.

"I guess I'll take what I can get."

With a smile, I help him out of bed and into his wheelchair then take him into the bathroom. After he finishes, I get him back into bed then leave him to get some sleep. The rest of the night goes by quickly between admitting our new patient, running meds, and doing paperwork. When I finally get off, I'm exhausted and thankful I only have a few more days of having to drive an hour to return home.

Surrounded by boxes, standing in my new living room, I blow a piece of hair out of my face and continue to put away my books and knickknacks on the white shelves at either side of the fireplace. The house is coming together quickly thanks to my family. My mom was not kidding when she told me she

would get me packed up and moved out of my apartment by the weekend. In fact, she did it all in two days. When I got home from work the day before yesterday, Monday, I found out she, my aunts, my sister, and my cousins had packed up my apartment from top to bottom. They even cleaned out my fridge and freezer, the bathroom, and around the boxes and furniture, so I didn't have to.

Yesterday, my first day off work, my dad, brothers, and uncles got my stuff put into a moving truck and parked it out front of my new house. Last night, I stayed with my mom and dad in town, and today's been a whirlwind of family coming over to help empty the truck, set up my furniture, and store stuff away. About two hours ago, my parents left to return the moving truck and to go eat, and everyone else besides, June and July took off not long after, with plans to come back tomorrow to help finish putting together the furniture they had dismantled.

I pick up and unwrap one more of my snow globes out of the box I'm unpacking and shake it before setting it on the shelf, watching the white dust inside settle over the New York City skyline. My dad got me the snow globe when he took me to New York for my eighteenth birthday, and it's one of many. I didn't always collect globes. My collecting started when I was fourteen and was supposed to go with my grandparents to the Bahamas. Instead, I had to have my tonsils removed, so my grandma brought the beach home to me in a glass ball filled with sand and seashells. Since that one, I've collected dozens from all over the place. Unpacking another, this one a clear ball with a photo of my family inside, I shake it as well before putting it in its place. Then I look toward the front door when I hear the roar of pipes getting closer to the house.

"I think Evan and Wes are back to pick you guys up," I say loud enough to be heard over the music playing, and July and June, who are both in my kitchen unpacking boxes, look at me then the front door.

"Has it already been three hours?" June questions, and I look at the clock. It's already after seven in the evening, so it's been more like four hours since the guys left.

"Seems so." I cover my stomach with my hand when it gurgles, reminding me all I have put in it today is coffee and donuts.

"I'll be back when I get off work tomorrow to help you finish up," July says, putting a stack of plates in one of the cupboards before meeting me halfway across the living room to give me a hug.

"You don't need to come. I think I can handle the rest of this."

“I’ll be here when I get off work,” she repeats with a smile as I pick up Dizzy and follow her toward the front door.

“I’ll be here after school,” June tells me, giving me a hug as July steps outside.

“I really can handle the rest. You should be home with your feet up,” I tell her softly, looking down at her stomach and the small little pooch she has there. I couldn’t be happier for her and Evan if I tried.

“Don’t even start. You sound just like Evan.” She rolls her eyes, making me laugh while we both step out onto the porch. “See you tomorrow.” She waves over her shoulder, heading down the steps toward Evan who she greets with a kiss.

Standing on the porch, I wave at Wes and July as they take off on Wes’s bike. Then I watch June get into Evan’s SUV with his help. Lifting my hand, I wave then wait until they are backing out of the drive before I go inside and close the door. Letting out a breath, I look around and sigh. Even though we got a lot done today, there is still a lot to do.

“It’s just you and me,” I tell Dizzy, setting him down, and he takes off without looking at me, probably going to explore his new home like he’s been doing since I released him from his kennel earlier. Hearing my stomach gurgle again, I head for my bedroom and trade my tank top for a T-shirt and my flip-flops for sneakers. Once I’ve retied my hair up into a ponytail, I grab my keys and bag then head out.

On my five-minute drive into town, I try to decide between pizza and Chinese food. The pizza place is closer, so I pull into the parking lot and get out, taking my bag with me. Like it’s been since I was a kid, Marco’s is packed. People are playing pool around the two pool tables in the back of the restaurant. Kids are battling on the video games that line the walls, and families are gathered around each and every table in the place. Going to the counter, I put in my order for a medium Hungry Man’s pizza, which consists of every kind of meat known to man, along with all the toppings you could ever ask for on a pizza. I also order a small dessert pizza that is covered in cinnamon sugar, fresh sliced apples, and caramel cream sauce.

Once I pay, I grab my soda and take my ticket with me over to one of the tables to wait. I pull out my phone and send everyone in my family a quick thank you text then scroll through Facebook out of boredom.

“Harmony.”

Hearing my name rumbled in a familiar deep voice, I jump in my seat and my eyes scan up from a pair of black heavy-looking boots, jeans that have

been washed so many times they have started to fray at the seams, and a faded blue shirt that shows off every single muscle of his torso under a black leather vest.

“Babe, you okay?” Harlen questions, and I tip my head farther back and blink up at him, shaking my head.

“Sorry, yes.” I smile awkwardly. “Long day of moving and unpacking along with not eating has put waste to every brain cell I have left,” I tell him. He nods then pulls out the chair next to mine and takes a seat.

“Evan said you got a place in town and that he and Wes were helping with the move today,” he says, stretching his long legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles on the outside of mine, effectively blocking me in.

“They got roped in with everyone else.” I take a sip of my soda, studying him, but trying not to look like I’m studying him. His hair and beard have grown longer since the last time I saw him, and I’m not sure if he looks hotter or scarier. I do know the longer beard makes his lips seem even more inviting.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, breaking into my thoughts about his mouth and what it might feel like to have it on mine.

“Getting pizza then heading back home to eat and unpack some more. I have to get back to work on Saturday, so I’m trying to get as much done as I can before then,” I ramble.

“I’ll help,” he states, and I blink at him.

“Pardon?” I ask, sure that I heard him wrong, because I can’t imagine he has nothing better to do than help me unpack.

Shrugging one big shoulder, he tips his head to the side. “My order’s to-go. I’ll bring it with me to your place, we’ll eat, and then I’ll help you unpack.”

“That’s sweet, but—”

“Payback,” he cuts me off before I can tell him it’s not necessary.

“Payback?” I prompt.

“You helped me out, and this is me returning the favor. I won’t take no for an answer. Besides, you look beat.”

Great. I look beat. Good to know. “Really, you don’t have to help.”

“I know I don’t. Still going to,” he says, and I see the determination in his eyes.

“Fine,” I sigh, realizing I’m not going to be able to refuse, and really not sure if I want to.

“Order seventeen and sixteen are up” is called, and I look at my receipt and see that one of those orders is mine.

“That’s us.” He takes the paper from my hand and unfolds himself from his seat.

“Now what?” I whisper to myself, watching him head toward the counter. With no answer and no other choice, I grab my bag and let out a breath as I stand.

“Ready?” he asks once he’s turned toward me with the three pizza boxes that look minuscule in his large hands.

“Yep,” I lie, and his eyes roam my face.

“Let’s go.” He jerks his chin toward the door for me to lead the way and then he follows outside, where I see his bike is parked next to my car.

How he was going to ride his bike carrying a pizza, I have no idea, and I don’t have a chance to ask him before he’s depositing the pizzas in the back seat of my car and opening my door. “I’ll follow you,” he mutters.

“Right.” I slide in behind the wheel before he shuts my door and I start my engine. I wait for him to mount his bike, and then I ignore the funny feeling in my chest when his eyes meet mine and he lifts his chin.

With a shake of my head, I reverse then head out of the parking lot, back toward home, watching Harlen in my rearview mirror following behind. I try to convince myself on the drive to my house that none of this is a big deal, but my stomach is turning with nervous butterflies and my heart has started to thump hard against my rib cage. I don’t remember ever being attracted to anyone the way I’m attracted to him, and it’s making me feel excited and completely freaked out. Pulling into my driveway, I watch him park his Harley next to my car, liking the look of his bike in my drive. I ignore that feeling too, or at least I tell myself to ignore it, as he opens my door before I can, and holds out his hand to help me out.

“Nice place,” he says, looking over the top of my head at my house, and happiness that he likes it engulfs my chest, making it warm.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

His head tips down toward me, and his eyes go soft in a way I wouldn’t think possible coming from him. But I see it, and I want to see it again and again and again. Before I can do anything—probably something stupid, like throw myself at him—he turns and opens the back door, grabbing the pizzas.

“Lead the way.”

Without a word, I turn on my sneaker-covered feet and head up the stairs and right inside, where I stoop to pick up Dizzy before he can escape.

“You need to lock up when you leave,” he rumbles behind me as he follows me inside the house, shutting the door, and I look at him over my shoulder.

“It’s light outside,” I tell him.

His brows draw together, making him look sinister, and I hold Dizzy a little closer to my chest when I feel his scary energy fill the room. “The sun being out isn’t going to stop some sick motherfucker from breaking into your house. Do you know what will?” he questions, not giving me a chance to answer before he does, leaning in close. “A fucking locked door.”

“I’ll lock up,” I whisper, and he nods then leans back.

Yikes.

“So.” I clear my throat. “This is it.” Apparently still angry about the door not being locked, he doesn’t look around. Instead, he heads toward the butcher-block island in the kitchen and drops the pizzas there carelessly. “I have some beer,” I tell him, walking around the island to the fridge and opening it up. “Well, I have apple cider beer.” I bite my lip and turn to look at him, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

“That’ll do,” he says, taking off his vest and dropping it next to the pizzas on the counter. Setting Dizzy down, I grab two bottles from the fridge then turn around to find Harlen in all his giant glory holding my pup gently against his wide chest, petting the top of his furry head. Taking a mental snapshot of him and Dizzy, I twist off the tops from the beers then grab two plates from the cupboard.

I go to the opposite side of the counter from him and set down the plates then hand him a bottle, which he takes with one hand, still keeping hold of Dizzy with the other. Dizzy, who is not okay with the lack of petting, starts trying with all his might to lick the underside of Harlen’s jaw. Ignoring the way my stomach is dancing, I open the boxes of pizza and discover they’re both the same.

“Two or three slices?” I ask him. When he doesn’t answer, I look up and find his eyes on the pizza but a million miles away. I want to ask him what he’s thinking so hard about, but I don’t. Instead, I slide two slices on each plate then scoot one across the island toward him. “We can eat in the living room. I still need to find some chairs for the island,” I mutter, picking up my plate and beer, taking both with me around the island to the couch.

Finding the remote for the TV, I flip it on to fill the silence then settle in

against the arm of the couch, watching him take a seat. Dizzy, who he set down, runs in circles in front of us, wanting a reward for just being cute—a reward he knows he's not going to get. I don't give him human food, or I don't anymore, since the last time I took him to see the vet they informed me that he was overweight and, if I wasn't careful, would get diabetes. I didn't even know dogs could get diabetes, but apparently they can.

"No pizza, Dizzy. I'll find your treats after we eat," I tell him, and he stops spinning and sits on his rump to glare at me.

"Dizzy?"

Looking at Harlen, I bite my lip, and his eyes drop to my mouth before lifting to meet mine. "He spins in circles when he's excited. He's done it since he was a tiny puppy. It used to make me dizzy watching him," I explain, and he looks from me to my dog then back again and grins.

Okay, his soft look was good. His scary look was... well, scary. But his grin makes my insides curl up and something deep inside of me tighten in a really good way.

Needing to do something to get my mind off the way my body is feeling, I ask, "How's work been?"

Chewing and swallowing a bite of pizza, he rests his plate on the top of his legs before answering. "Been good, busy, which means we are finally making a name for ourselves in town. Hasn't been easy."

"It hasn't?"

He takes a pull from his beer, which I can tell he's not really enjoying, so I make a mental note to stock normal beer in the fridge. Not that I know if he will be back, but just in case.

"The town's small. People tend to stick to what they know. It's taken a while for people to realize we're not in the business of fucking people over. Unlike some of the more established shops in town."

"What do you mean?" I question before taking the last bite from my first slice, leaving the crust.

"We don't fuck around with fixing cars or bikes. If you come to us with an issue, we take care of the issue. We don't do a half-ass job so you have to come back in a week or a month for something else. We also don't mark up the prices on work or parts to get more money."

"That's nice."

"No, that's good business," he says, and I nod in agreement.

“I’m glad things are picking up for you guys.”

“Me too,” he agrees, and I take a pull from my own beer then turn toward the TV to watch the show that’s on, not really seeing it as I eat. “You want another slice?” he asks, and I turn to look at him, seeing his eyes on my now empty plate.

“Two more,” I reply, and he grins then unfolds himself from the couch, taking my plate from me. Sipping my beer, I watch him go to the kitchen to get us each more pizza, thinking I also liked the feeling of having him in my house and wonder if I can convince him to come back again after tonight. Then I think it’s stupid to wonder that, because he is obviously just here because he is a nice guy. Okay, a scary guy, but still a nice one, who wants to pay me back for looking out for him.

“Thank you for helping,” I tell him four hours later, standing in my open front door with Dizzy against my chest, watching Harlen slide on his leather vest. After we ate pizza on my couch, we unpacked, and then we took a break to eat my dessert pizza while standing in my kitchen, before unpacking some more. He didn’t talk much, but I found that he was easy to talk to, easy to be around, and funny. Not in-your-face funny, but still funny in a way that made me laugh and do it often while we worked.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” he says, moving past me to stand just outside the door, close enough I can smell a hint of something intriguing, but not close enough to be in my space.

“It was. We got almost everything done,” I tell him, looking back into the house. Most of the boxes that were stacked up in the living room and kitchen are gone, emptied and broken down in the spare bedroom, ready to take to the dump. And the stuff that’s left has been stacked up to drop off for donation. All I have left to do is put away my clothes and hang some of my photos and art. “I feel like I owe you payback now,” I add truthfully, meeting his gaze once more.

“Tomorrow, come by the compound,” he says, and my head tips to the side.

“The compound?” I prompt. I haven’t been there. My cousins and even my sisters have, but not me. I know it’s a part of the auto shop he works at and that some guys who have recently been discharged from the military live there, but that’s really all I know about it.

“We’ll hang out, play some pool, and drink a couple beers. I’ll call it even.”

“I don’t know,” I mutter, sliding my eyes away, and then his warm fingers

wrap around my chin. My body jolts from the touch and my eyes shoot to his.

“Six.”

“I—” Before I can tell him no, his fingers tighten, not painfully but just enough to get me to shut my mouth.

“Six,” he repeats, then his head lowers, and my breath catches as my eyes slide closed. I don’t know if I expect him to kiss me or not, but when his lips brush my hairline at my forehead, disappointment fills my stomach. “Lock up,” he orders, and then both he and his touch are gone.

Opening my eyes, I watch him head down to his bike and get on. Knowing I don’t want to look like a teenager with a crush or a lovesick fool, I close the door, making sure to lock it behind me. Then, without anything else to do and really too tired to do anything more, I go to bed, where I spend the night tossing and turning.

Chapter 2

Harmony

PUTTING ON MY WATCH, I look at the pile of clothes on my bed and the rest of it scattered across my floor, shaking my head. I didn't do what I should have done today—that being put away my clothes, and unpack my bedroom. Instead, I spent the day overanalyzing every moment from last night, between running errands, picking up beer at the grocery store, and trying to figure out what I would wear to see Harlen.

As promised, my family came over a little after four to help me finish up what I needed to get done, and since there wasn't much left besides my bedroom, they ended up helping me hang pictures and take boxes to be recycled and some stuff to Goodwill.

When my mom asked how I got so much done, I told her that Harlen had come over to help me after running into him at Marco's. My mom, who knows Harlen, got a funny look on her face at the mention of his name, but she didn't say anything besides "That was nice of him." July and June, who overheard me telling Mom about Harlen, shared a look I didn't understand. Thankfully, the rest of my family (the guys) weren't around for that part, so I didn't have to deal with them going all overprotective.

Shaking away those thoughts, I go to the bathroom and shut the door to see the mirror behind it. I rest my hands on my hips and study my black tank top, jeans with holes in the knees, and my four-inch black wedge booties with a peep toe. After thinking about what to wear all day, this is what I came up with—something casual but still cute. Looking at my watch again, my stomach starts to dance. The compound is about twenty minutes away, on the other side of town, so if I'm going to get there on time, I need to feed Dizzy then head out.

Going to the kitchen, I dump a can of wet food in his bowl and give him a pet before grabbing a case of beer from the fridge, my keys, and my bag from the counter.

Parking out front of the auto shop a little over twenty minutes later, I take a few deep breaths and open my door. Before I even have one foot on the ground, I see Harlen step out of one of the open bays, wiping his grease-covered hands on a red towel. Taking him in I notice that he's wearing a pair of navy blue coveralls with the arms of the top down and tied around his waist and his torso covered in a black tee that's been washed so many times it's faded to an almost gray color.

“Hey.” I smile then bend back into my car, reaching across the seat to grab the beer I brought with me.

“You’re early,” he says, and I feel my stomach drop as I turn to face him. Lifting my wrist, I look at my watch and see that it’s six. Actually, it’s two minutes after six. I’m not early, technically I’m late.

“You said six.” I hold up my watch toward him. “That’s now,” I say, and his head tips to the side.

“Most women show up at least thirty minutes later than the time you give them,” he tells me, and my brows draw together tightly.

“So you told me six thinking I’d be here at six thirty?” I ask, and his lips twitch.

“Just figured if I told you six you’d be on time.” He comes toward me, taking the beer out of my hand.

“I’m always on time,” I inform him, and his lips tip up into a small smile.

“I see that now,” he replies, and my eyes turn squinty as I rest my hands on my hips.

“Do you want me to get in my car and drive around for half an hour?”

“Nah, since you’re here, you can come help me,” he says, turning back toward the shop taking the beer with him.

“Help you?” I ask his back, and he looks at me over his shoulder. “Yeah, you can hand me tools while I finish up on the car I’m workin’ on.”

“Great.” I shake my head then follow behind him, thinking this isn’t starting how I thought it would.

After we head through the open bay door he came out of earlier, I watch him drop the beer to the top of a tall black toolbox then go to a white Toyota that has seen better days—those days being a century ago—and lean into the open hood. Not sure what to do with myself, I cross my arms over my chest and watch him work, his arms flexing and his jaw twitching in concentration.

“Hand me the wrench,” he says, and I look from him to the toolbox. Finding what he’s asking for in the mess of tools, I pick it up and hand it over.

“What?” I ask when he looks at me strangely, closing his large hand around the wrench.

“Nothing.” He goes back to work, and I go back to watching him. “Did you finish unpacking?” he asks, looking up at me, and a piece of his dark hair falls forward across his brow, making my fingers twitch to move it aside.

“Mostly.”

“You want me to help you some more tonight?”

Him... in my bedroom? Yeah, I don’t think that would be smart.

“No, I got it covered, but if you feel up to the task of going with me barstool shopping on my next day off, I won’t turn you down,” I say without thinking.

“I can do that.” He says looking up at me.

His easy answer catches me off guard. All the men I know would rather shoot themselves in the foot than go shopping for anything besides groceries, and even that’s a stretch.

“Cool,” I agree, and then take the wrench from him when he holds it out to me.

“Pliers.” He nods to the toolbox, so I grab the first pair of pliers I see and hand them over, then out of boredom, I move the beer out of the way and start to arrange his tools. “Waste of time, babe. They’ll be fucked up again by tomorrow morning.” He startles me, and I look over at him just as he moves the cloth from the side of the car and slams the hood closed.

“Well then, for about an hour tomorrow, things will be in order,” I retort, and he shakes his head then gets in the car, leaving the door open. He turns over the engine, and it purrs quietly like it’s brand new. After revving the engine a few times, he shuts it down and gets out. “It sounds good.”

“You wouldn’t have thought that a few hours ago,” he says, and I nod, having no doubt it probably sounded just like it looked before he fixed it. “Now that work’s done, it’s time for a beer.” He drops the pliers he’s holding next to another pair then grabs the beer and my hand. With no choice but to go wherever he’s leading me, I follow him toward an open door that looks like an office. “Toyota’s done. Call Mike and let him know,” he says, and I peek around his big frame and see Wes sitting in a rolling chair in front of a metal desk. “Harmony’s here,” he adds.

Wes’s head jerks back then his eyes come to me and drop to Harlen’s hand still wrapped around mine. Letting Harlen go, even though I kinda like... okay, *really* like holding his hand, I move around him and into the office to give Wes a hug.

“You settling in okay?” Wes asks once he’s released me and I’ve taken a step back.

“Yep.” I smile, and his eyes roam my face before he looks over my shoulder to Harlen. Not really understanding badass guy eye talk, I don’t

know what he's communicating; I just know it's something.

"I'll let Mike know he can come by to pick up his ride," Wes mutters then lifts his chin. "Be smart."

Without a word to Wes, Harlen grabs my hand once again and leads me away, through another door, this one on the back wall of the shop.

"Be smart about what?" I ask him as we walk side by side down a long hall and out into an open courtyard, where there is a grill covered with a blue tarp, along with some tables and three metal barrels that are black, as if they have had fires in them before.

"Nothing," he answers as we head up a flight of stairs. Stopping at a metal door on the second floor landing, he lets my wrist go and I watch him pull out a key then put it into the lock. The second he opens the door and I step into the dimly lit room, I look around. There's a queen size bed with a fitted sheet halfway coming off the mattress. The top sheet is gone to places unknown. A small, crappy dresser with the drawers shoved in, most of them off-kilter, with clothes hanging out of them is against one wall, and there's a bedside table with a lamp on top with the shade missing.

"Just gonna clean up," he says, dropping the beer to the top of the dresser that is piled high with dusty receipts, loose change, and other odds and ends. Watching him go into the bathroom and close the door, I look around again, wondering what this place is. The night I took him home from June's, I took him to an apartment building that was similar to the one I lived in in Nashville. It was nice. This place, not so much. Hearing the toilet flush then water turn on, I turn to face him when he comes out.

"What is this place?" I wave my hand around, and he stops in the open doorway of the bathroom, looking at me then around the room.

"I used to crash here before I got my place," he says, moving to the dresser. Opening one of the drawers, he then does something I don't expect him to do. His hands go behind his head and he pulls off his shirt. His chest is covered in dark hair that thins out over his cut abs then turns into a narrow line that disappears into his jeans. Seeing all of that and imagining feeling that hair against my bare skin and breasts, my core tightens and my cheeks heat.

Holy shit.

Jerking my eyes off the trail of hair leading into his jeans, I look toward the bathroom. "Do you mind if I use your restroom?" I squeak, not even bothering to wait for him to answer before heading that way. Hearing him say "sure" to my back, I go in and close the door.

Flipping on the light, I look at myself in the mirror. My cheeks are pink, and my eyes are dilated so much that there isn't any blue left. They are almost all black. I'm turned on. I'm turned on from just seeing Harlen shirtless. He didn't touch me, didn't look at me, didn't do anything but take off his shirt. Turning on the water, I rest my hands on the edge of the sink and drop my head forward. I need to ask him what's going on. I need to find out from him where his head's at. With that thought in mind, I shut off the water and open the bathroom door.

"You ready?" he asks, and my step falters, along with my resolve to ask him the question I need to ask him.

"Yep," I lie, and he steps around me to the door, opening it. Without taking my hand, he leads me back into the building we came out of but into another room, this one with a pool table, TV that must be a hundred inches with a crappy couch in front of it, and a kitchen. Going into the kitchen area, he dumps the beer I brought into the fridge then grabs two others from the door, twisting off the tops before handing me one. I take it, but what I don't do is ask him why I'm here.

"Have you played pool before?" he asks, leading me toward the pool table.

"No." I shrug, taking a sip from my beer and wishing it were apple cider, since I don't really like real beer at all.

"Finally," he says, and I look at him.

"Finally what?"

"Been thinking you're too good to be true."

"What?" I repeat, this time sounding breathy, wondering if I heard him right.

"You eat actual pizza, show up on time, know which tools are which, you don't suck to look at, and you look fucking great in a pair of jeans. Too good to be true."

Did he just say that? Holy shit, my legs go weak and I have to lean into the pool table to keep standing. "I... thank you, I think."

"Yeah, you're welcome." He laughs, and the sound washes over me, making my insides turn liquid and my pulse kick into overdrive. Last night, I got him to smile a few times, but that's the first time I've heard him laugh, and I know I don't want it to be the last. "You ready to get your ass kicked?"

"Are you really going to kick my ass when I don't know what I'm doing?" I question, and he laughs again, this time softly.

“Right, I’ll show you how to play. Then I’ll kick your ass.”

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes then take the stick he hands me. Taking another sip of the beer, I must make a face, because his eyes focus on me. “What?”

“You want a wine cooler?”

“Yes,” I answer immediately, and he chuckles.

“I’ll add that to the list,” he mutters, going to the kitchen and coming back a minute later with a blue wine cooler, handing it to me.

“What exactly are you adding to the list?” I ask.

He grins. “The fact you don’t like real beer.”

“So that’s going into the negative line of my resume?” I joke, and his grin gentles into a smile but he doesn’t answer my question. Instead, he moves to the table and sets up the balls in the middle. “Should I start my own list?” I ask, and his eyes come to me.

“Probably,” he mumbles, dropping his eyes from mine. “Ready?” He stands back and I sigh.

“Ready,” I agree, and then I listen as he walks me through how to play the game and tells me that I’m solids. After that, he breaks and we start playing, and it’s much more fun than I thought it would be.

“You sure you never played pool before?” Harlen asks an hour later, and I grin at him, bending over the pool table to take my shot.

“I’m sure.” I slide the stick between my fingers and hit the white ball into the yellow one, watching it sink into the right corner pocket.

“Maybe we should go into town and make some money,” he says as I stand.

“What?” I laugh, picking up my second wine cooler from the edge of the table and taking a sip.

“Never mind.” He smiles as I move around the table to take another shot, this one missing. Watching him take his turn, I study him. He’s full of contradictions. Just seeing him, I would never guess he could be sweet, that he could make me laugh and put me at ease without even trying. “How do you feel about Chinese?”

“Pardon?” I come out of my thoughts and focus on him.

“I need to eat. You want Chinese or a burger?”

“Chinese works,” I agree then watch him pull out his phone, press a few

buttons, and put it to his ear.

“What do you want?”

“Sesame chicken, fried rice, and an eggroll.”

“Got it.” He places the order then gives them the address to deliver. Once he hangs up, he takes another shot, and I narrow my eyes when the white ball hits the stripped one into the pocket at the corner.

“Did you just cheat?”

“No,” he denies, taking another shot, this one putting the eight ball into the pocket and winning the game.

“You did. You just took a shot and it wasn’t your turn. Then you took another and won,” I accuse, resting my hand on my hip, and his lips twitch.

“Babe, I didn’t cheat.”

“You totally did,” I say, looking at him then the table. “You cheated so that I didn’t win.”

“Did not.” His eyes scan me, my hand on my hip, and my tapping foot, and his lips twitch into a smile.

“Did too, Harlen... Wait. What’s your last name?”

“MacCabe,” he answers, and I blink. “Full name’s Harlen Alistair MacCabe.”

“Harlen Alistair MacCabe,” I repeat. Wow, okay, a totally cool, totally badass name. I can actually picture him overlooking a castle in Scotland on the back of a giant horse, going into battling with a sword in his hand, wearing a kilt and making that shit look, *again*, badass.

“My family’s from Scotland. Dad was a second generation, and Mom was third.”

“Was?” I whisper, and his eyes flash.

“Lost both my parents when I was fifteen.”

At his words my heart seizes in my chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“Long time ago,” he says, but I can see pain in his eyes, pain he doesn’t try to hide from me.

“Still, I’m sorry, Harlen,” I continue whispering, feeling my knees shake and my eyes burn. I have no idea how he is still standing. I know one day I will have to face losing my parents, but I pray every day that time is a long way from now.

“Don’t cry, Angel,” he tells me, getting closer and wrapping his warm hand around the side of my neck. “Not for me.”

Shaking my head, I close my eyes and pull in a deep breath. “I’m good,” I lie, opening my eyes back up. Then, without thinking, I close the distance between us and slide my arms around his waist. It takes a second, but his arms close around me then his chin rests on top of my head.

“So damn sweet.” Those words rumble against my ear and my hold tightens.

“Yo!”

Hearing that, I jump and release Harlen quickly. So quickly, I almost fall over on my wedge heels. Luckily, Harlen wraps a hand around my waist, preventing me from going down. Unlucky for me, I’d know that “yo” anywhere.

“Fuck,” Harlen mutters just loud enough for me to hear, and I look to see his eyes on my dad, who’s looking between the two of us.

“Dad.” I walk across the space separating us and wrap my arms around him. His arms close around me then his lips touch the top of my head. “What are you doing here?” I ask, tipping my head back to look up at him.

“Came to talk to Harlen.” His arms tighten before he asks, “What are you doing here?”

“Learning to play pool.” I smile at him then loosen my hold and step back. “Is everything okay?”

“Not sure.” He looks over at Harlen, who’s watching us with his feet spread wide and his arms crossed over his chest. My heart sinks when I realize my mom probably talked to him about Harlen. I love my father, but he’s protective to the point of being overbearing. I have never dated a guy he’s liked, and he’s always made that perfectly clear, which means the guys I’ve dated tend to disappear, never having the balls to stick around. I get it; my dad’s scary, covered in tattoos, tall, and fit. Even at his age, he doesn’t look like someone you fuck with. Still, it would be nice to someday meet a guy who likes me enough to weather the storm that is my father.

“Dad.” His eyes come to me. “Don’t,” I whisper, and his brows pull together. “Please don’t.” I shake my head, holding his gaze.

Hearing Harlen’s phone ring, I turn to look at him as he comes toward us, pulling out his wallet. Holding money out toward me, he mutters, “Food’s out front. You mind getting it for us?”

“I...” I look between him and my dad and cannot imagine what will

happen if I leave. Harlen, like my dad, is scary, maybe even more so. These two alone together doesn't seem like a good idea, especially since there's no way to miss the tension filling the room. "But—"

"It's all good," he says, and I swallow, looking between him and my dad again.

"Go on, baby girl," Dad orders, and I pull in a breath, take the money from Harlen, and send my dad a look before leaving.

I don't know what happens when I'm gone, but when I get back, my dad gives me a hug goodbye and a look to Harlen. When I ask Harlen what he and my dad talked about, he tells me it's nothing I need to worry about. So for once in my life, I don't worry. Instead, I hang out, eat Chinese food, and then play another game of pool before getting another touch of his lips to my forehead and a goodbye at my car.

Hearing my cell phone ring on the way to my parents' house, I hit the Accept button on my dash then almost run off the road when my cousin June shrieks, "Ashlyn and Dillon got married in Vegas!"

"What?" I shout back in stunned disbelief. I knew there has always been some serious chemistry between the two of them, but I had no idea they were together, especially not enough to get married.

"Evan just told me that Jax is going postal. Apparently, he walked into Ash's house and found out they got married, lost his mind, and tried to take Dillon out."

"Shut up."

"No, you shut up!" she yells, and I smile at my windshield. "God, I can't believe it. I mean, I can believe it, because they have been beating around the bush for a while now, but still. Married, that's just crazy."

"I'm happy for them," I murmur, and then my stomach pitches. "Wait... what about Isla?"

"I don't know," she mutters like she just remembered about Isla too. Isla is the woman Dillon was engaged to. I only met her once, but that one time left an impression, and not a good one.

"I hope it all works out for them."

"Me too," she agrees, and then continues. "Her dad is going to flip when he finds out."

"Uncle Cash doesn't know?" I whisper.

“Apparently not, and since Uncle Cash and Aunt Lilly are in Florida with Grandma and Grandpa, they probably won’t for a while unless Jax tells them, and I doubt he’s going to do that.”

“I don’t envy Ash,” I mutter my understatement. My dad would lose his mind if I got married in Vegas without telling him, and I know Uncle Cash is going to flip out when he finds out his only girl did that without him there to give her away.

“Me neither, but they’ll be okay. I mean, look at me and Evan. Everything worked out for us in the end.”

“True,” I agree, pulling up and parking out front of my parents’ house.

“Anyway, how are things with you? I heard you and Harlen hung out a few nights ago and that he took you coffee last night.”

How the hell did she hear he brought me coffee last night? Yesterday morning, he called to ask what kind of coffee I liked. I told him, not thinking anything of it, and then later that evening, he showed up at the hospital to bring me coffee and a muffin. It was sweet, but it sucked that I didn’t have time to chat, since I wasn’t on break. Still, before he left, we made plans to go out barstool shopping this evening after he gets off work.

“I—”

“He’s a good guy. Scary, but super hot. I’m happy for you. We should set up a double date.”

“We’re just friends.”

“Sure.” She laughs.

“No really, we’re just friends,” I repeat, this time a little more firmly, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. Hell, not wanting to give myself the wrong idea. For some reason unbeknownst to me, Harlen decided we were going to be friends. Not friends in a way that I would enjoy a whole lot more, like friends with benefits. So as much as I want to rip off his clothes and have my way with him, I’m going to take this for what it is.

“Okay,” she agrees, but I know she doesn’t believe me. “I’ll talk to Evan about dinner.”

“I... okay,” I agree, dropping my head to the steering wheel and tapping it there twice.

“I gotta get back to class. The bell’s about to ring. We’ll talk soon.”

“Soon, have a good day.” I lift my head and look out the windshield.

“Yeah, you too.” She hangs up.

Opening my door, I get out and head up the porch and twist the knob for the door while pushing thoughts of Harlen out of my mind.

“Dad, Mom!” I shout as I walk into the house, not even bothering to knock.

“In the kitchen!” Mom calls, so I toss my purse to the entryway table and head down the hall into the kitchen. Seeing my mom at the stove and my dad sitting at the island, I head for my mom, kiss her cheek, and then go to my dad and tuck myself under his arm he holds up.

“How are things?” Dad asks, kissing the side of my head.

“Things are things.” I squeeze his waist then take a seat next to him.

“How are things going at the hospital?” Mom asks, studying me in the way only a mother can, like she’s visually taking my temp and checking me for injuries.

“Good. I spoke with one of the emergency room nurses yesterday, and she told me the hospital offers a class on trauma and critical care. She said that if I take it, it should put me in a position to transfer to that department if something opens up.”

“That’d be good,” Dad says, and I nod.

“Fingers crossed. The class is hard to get into. Hopefully they accept me. If not, I might see about going somewhere else to take the same courses.”

“You’ll get in,” Mom says, and I smile at her. My mom is the kind of mother who believes her kids have the power to walk on water and would go to war with anyone who says differently. I love that about her. “So what are you doing today?” she asks, handing Dad a plate piled high with eggs, bacon, and toast.

“Grocery shopping, ‘cause I have no food in my house. Then I’m meeting Harlen at the shop and we’re going to go pick out barstools for my kitchen.”

“He’s going shopping with you to buy barstools for your house?” she asks, sounding like he agreed to walk across hot coals while balancing a sword on his nose.

“It’s not a big deal. He said he didn’t have anything to do today, so he’s borrowing Evan’s SUV and helping me out.”

“I could have taken you,” Dad grumbles, and I turn to look at him.

“You hate shopping,” I remind him.

“I still would have taken you.”

“I know, but now you don’t have to.”

“Honey, you need to be careful. Harlen’s a—”

“Please don’t.” I shake my head, not wanting to hear my dad talk badly of Harlen.

“Baby, that man has demons.”

“Yeah, and I bet if I asked anyone, they would tell me the same thing about you when you were younger. But mom took a chance on you.”

“Are you taking a chance on him?” he questions, and I squirm on my chair.

“We’re friends and I like him. I think he’s a good guy. He’s easy to be around and he makes me laugh. That’s all I know right now.”

“Nico,” Mom says, and Dad’s eyes go to her and I watch her shake her head. Then I look at my dad and see his jaw is tight. “I like him,” Mom inserts, and my eyes go back to her. “He’s always been respectful, and if you like him, I like him,” she finishes then hands me a plate that is just as full as the one she gave my dad. “Though I still wouldn’t have minded going with you to pick out barstools.”

“I still need lamps and a coffee table. Next month, after I close on the house, I’ll have the money for those things. We’ll go to Nashville, spend the day shopping, get dinner, and see a movie,” I promise, and she smiles.

“You got a date.”

“Good.” I dig into my plate then feel my dad’s hand wrap around the back of my neck. Turning to look at him, I see his eyes are soft.

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Dad,” I whisper, and he nods then touches his lips to my forehead in the same spot Harlen has kissed me twice. Not that I’m counting. Letting me go, he goes back to eating. I do the same before taking off, going grocery shopping, and meeting Harlen to pick out barstools.

“Where are you?” Willow asks, and I press my cell phone closer to my ear so I can hear her over the loud music playing from the speakers in the back of a truck parked a few feet away and the people around me talking loudly.

“At a bonfire!” I shout into the phone, and Harlen, who is standing at my side, looks down at me. Rolling my eyes at him, I catch his smile in the light of the fire.

“A bonfire,” Willow repeats. “Who the hell are you at a bonfire with?”

“Harlen,” I answer, and a few people around me turn my way to look at Harlen and me, probably wondering what the hell he’s doing with me. Something I have been wondering myself for the last few weeks. “I’ll be back,” I tell him, and he looks at me then scans the area before meeting my gaze once more.

“Stay where I can see you.”

“Righty-o,” I mutter, dropping my eyes to my feet. I stomp in my Converse through the grass and mostly dirt, toward the outskirts of the party, where there are more than a few people making out, and in some cases having sex, in the cover of darkness.

“Willow, you still there?” I ask once I’ve made it to a quiet area.

“I’m still processing the news that you’re out with Harlen *again*, this time at a bonfire,” she says, and I look up at the stars sprinkled across the dark sky. “What the hell is going on with you two?”

“Nothing,” I grumble. “We’re friends.”

“Right.” I hear the disbelief in her voice, and my hand balls into a fist at my side.

“What’s going on? Is everything okay with you?”

“I wanted to see if you were around to get dinner. I feel like I haven’t seen you since you moved.”

“I’m sorry.” She’s right. I haven’t seen her much since I moved. Then again, most of my days off have been spent hanging out with Harlen, shopping with him, watching movies, eating dinner, drinking, and just having fun. I have tried, on more than one occasion, to turn him down when he’s asked me to hang out, but somehow I always end up caving and doing whatever the hell it is he wants to do.

“I’d like to see my sister to spend time with her,” she whines, and guilt hits me in the stomach.

“I have tomorrow off. I’ll drive up and spend the night at your place. We can get dinner then veg out and watch movies.”

“That works. I also expect you to tell me what’s really going on with you and the giant.”

“Seriously, there is nothing to tell. Nothing is going on. We’re just friends, Willow.”

“Right,” she mutters again, and I sigh, wishing for the first time that I wasn’t right, that there was secretly something happening between Harlen and

me, something more than us just becoming good friends. “I get off work at four tomorrow, so I should be home by five, if not before.”

“I’ll be there.”

“See you then.” She hangs up, and I shove my phone in the back pocket of my jeans. Looking toward the bonfire, I watch Harlen talk to a guy then feel my stomach muscles tighten uncomfortably when a woman sashays up to him. Like every time it’s happened when I’ve been around, he doesn’t do more than dip his chin toward her in greeting. Still, I hate seeing it. I hate knowing I have no claim over him, that if he did want to take a woman up on an offer of a good time, he could without so much as a second thought.

Watching her walk away, I head back toward him, and like he knows I’m close, his eyes come to me. My stomach does the same thing it always does around him, which is more than a little annoying. I wish I could get over this crush and focus on the fact that I’ve got a really great friend.

“Everything okay?” he asks, studying me.

“Yep, Willow just wanted to get dinner. Since I’m here with you, I told her I’d drive up to Nashville tomorrow and spend the night at her place for some sister time,” I say, taking the beer he has in his hand, putting it to my mouth, and watching him smile as I take a sip and force it down.

“That’d be good.”

“Yeah,” I agree then look around. It’s getting late, meaning most of the people who are still here are no longer just hanging out. Most of them are finding partners to spend the night with.

“You ready to get out of here?” he asks, and I look at him once more.

“Are you okay to drive?”

“Only had two beers. I’m good,” he promises, and I watch him lift his chin to someone across the fire. Looking that way, I watch his friend Everret come toward us with a chick under his arm.

“You taking off?” Everret asks once he’s close, and the girl looks me over then tucks herself tighter against him like I’m going to pull him magically into my snare.

“Yeah,” Harlen answers, taking the beer from me and tossing it into a bin off to the side.

“Cool,” Everret mutters, and then his eyes come to me. “Good meeting you, Harmony.”

“You too.” I give him a smile then watch him and Harlen do the man

handshake-back-pat thing before he walks off with his arm around his girl.

“Ready to go?” Harlen asks, tipping his head down toward me.

“Yep,” I say, and then his large hand closes around mine so that he can lead me to his bike. Once he’s on, I get on behind him and hold onto his waist as he pulls off the grass and onto the road. Just like every other time I’ve ridden on the back of his bike, the warmth of him seeps into my skin, the smell of him filling my lungs, and for a few minutes, I pretend we’re something we’re not.

Chapter 3

Harmony

“HARLEN,” I MOAN AS his mouth travels down my neck to my breast and he pulls my nipple into his mouth. My clit pulses and my toes curl. Running my hands up his chest and neck, I slide them into his thick hair to hold him where he is. My head digs deeper into my pillow, and my breath hitches when his hand slides over my hip. Squeezing my eyes closed, I wait to feel his fingers against my pulsing clit.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

“No,” I pant, rolling to my side. I shut off the alarm then reach into my bedside drawer and quickly pull out my vibrator. Closing my eyes, I flip it on then finish myself off. Once I come, I lie there waiting for my breath to even out and my body to cool down. “This is getting ridiculous,” I groan to the ceiling then roll to my side, hugging my pillow.

It’s been three months since Harlen came into my life, and in that time, we’ve grown close. He’s always around when I have time off work, when I need someone to bitch at about things that are happening with the doctors or other nurses. He’s around when I need help putting together furniture, need a shoulder to lean on, or a just need a friend. So he’s around a lot. I like having him close; what I don’t like is wanting him the way I want him and being so afraid to lose what we have that I’m paralyzed to do anything about it.

Knowing I’m not going to find a solution to that problem right now, I sit up, drop my vibrator back in the drawer, toss back the covers, and scoot out of bed. Putting my feet to the floor, I head out of my bedroom and past the living room, smiling when I see the coffee table and standing lamp Mom and I picked out. We went to about ten shops before I found the vintage style rectangular coffee table with burnt wood and iron wheels, and three more after that before I found my lamp, a tripod base with a burlap shade. What I love more is that both pieces blend perfectly with the barstools Harlen and I found in the same vintage burnt wood, but with pretty dusty rose velvet tops and black grommets. Even Harlen, who is all man, said they were perfect. Okay so he didn’t say that but I could tell he thought so.

I turn on my coffee pot, grabbing a can of Dizzy’s food from the cupboard. The second I pop the top, he hops down off the couch where he slept last night and comes to sit at my feet. I dump his food in his bowl, set it to the floor, and then make myself a cup of coffee. Once I’ve added cream and sugar, I go to the back door and open it up a couple of inches so he can get out

when he's done eating.

I take my coffee with me and head for my bathroom, where I set it on the sink. Reaching in to turn the water on hot, I strip out of my nightgown, tossing it to the hamper. When I step into the shower, I let the hot water clear away the rest of the dream and the worry that's been plaguing me these last few weeks—worry about my feelings, worry about Harlen's feelings. Worry that I'm still not really living life.

Once I'm out, I dry off, put on a bra and panties, tie my still wet hair up into a ponytail, and then head to my closet to get dressed. Today is my last day off for the week, which means it's going to be a busy day. I have plans to meet Harlen at one of my favorite bars in town to get a drink and watch a fight that is playing there tonight. I don't really want to watch a fight, but I do want to see him before I can't see him for a few days. So while he watches the fight, I'll drink and soak up as much of him as I can. Before that though, I need to run to the bank to pay my mortgage, since I haven't set it up to be drafted out automatically yet. Then I have an appointment at eleven a.m. to get my hair done by Ellie. And after that, I'm meeting my dad for lunch.

I get dressed, choosing a pair of jean shorts with lace showing through the holes in the material, a light pink satin tank with a high neckline and round hem, and my favorite leather T-strap sandals that have large rose gold crystals down the center strap. After I finish getting ready, I grab my cell phone and coffee before shutting off the light in my bedroom, and head into the living room, taking a sip from my mug as I walk.

Going to the back door I look out at Dizzy, who's busy chasing the birds around the yard, and then open up the door wide and lean out. "Dizzy!" I yell, and his head swings my way, his ears perking up. "Come on," I call, and he rushes through the yard, up the steps, and across the deck to me. Once he's inside, I push the door closed behind him. I still haven't gotten a doggie door put in. When I looked into putting one in, I found out that, with the door being glass, it's going to cost me a small fortune. So I'm waiting and saving up the money I need to have it done.

"I'm going out, but I'll be back." I pick him up with one hand and kiss the top of his head. "Be good while I'm gone." I set down my coffee then open the jar on the counter where I keep his doggie treats. Giving him one, I kiss the top of his head again before setting him to the ground and watching him run off with it in his mouth.

After taking the last sip from my coffee, I set the cup in the sink and fill it with water then grab my purse and keys. Locking the front door behind me, I head down the steps to my car. Seeing my neighbor, Misty, outside with her

phone to her ear while she's watering her flowers, I wave, watching her tuck the phone against her shoulder and wave back with the hose. Misty, her husband Matt, and her daughter Molli came over a few days after I moved in, welcoming me to the neighborhood with cookies, and since then, we've had a few over-the-fence conversations, but we haven't really had a lot of time to get to know each other. It's the same with my other neighbors. We wave hello and goodbye, but for the most part, everyone tends to stick to themselves.

Getting in my car, I start the engine and back out. I go to the bank first and take care of business there, then head to the salon. I park out front and get out, taking my bag with me, and head inside. I don't remember when Ellie started doing my hair. It seems like forever ago. I used to go to a girl in Nashville, but when Ellie started working for Frankie, and my cousins started going to her, I gave her a try and haven't gone to anyone else since.

I open the door, and the minute I spot Frankie, the owner of the salon, behind the counter, a smile splits my face.

"Harmony," he greets me, coming around the counter toward me. Taking hold of my upper arms, he kisses both my cheeks. "How are you, gorgeous?"

"I've been really good. How are you?"

"Good." He smiles then looks through the small opening in the wall to the back of the shop. "Ellie is just finishing up with her last client. You don't have a long wait, but you do have time to get a coffee if you want one."

"I'm having lunch with my dad across the street after this. I don't want to ruin that by drinking too much coffee."

"Got it." He grins then his eyes go past my shoulder when the door chimes, and I turn to watch a woman walk in. "Jenna." He lets me go then greets her the same way he did me, with the arm hold and cheek kiss. "I'm all set up. Are you ready?" he asks her.

"Ready." She smiles at him.

His eyes come to me. "Make yourself comfortable. Ellie will be out soon."

"Thanks, Frankie." I take a seat on the purple couch in front of the window and drop my purse to my side. Pulling out my cell phone, I send a text to my dad reminding him about lunch today, and then I reply to a text from Willow who wants to go get dinner next week. I send her back a text saying yes then I send my mom a message asking if she wants to go with me to have dinner with Willow. When she responds with a yes, I send Willow another message letting her know that mom is coming along.

"Hey, girl," Ellie says, and I shut down my phone and drop it into my bag

looking up at her.

“Hey.” I stand and skirt the coffee table, giving her a hug.

“You ready?”

“Totally.” I smile at her as she takes my hand and drags me with her to the back of the salon to her station.

“I have to show you a photo. I came across it the other day, and I swear the second I saw it, all I could think is Harmony needs this haircut and color.”

“Show me.” I sit in her chair then take the photo she hands me.

“Am I right?” she asks, and I study the woman’s hair. It’s shorter than my hair is now, just below her shoulders, with lots of layers and highlights.

“I love it.” I lift my head and smile at her in the mirror.

“Do you?”

“Yeah, it’s hot. Can you do this today?” I lift the photo in my hand.

“Heck yes!” She grins at me, and I grin back.

“Then make me pretty.”

“Please, you’re gorgeous. You don’t need any help with that.” She pulls out a hot pink cape, drapes it around my shoulders, and spends three hours highlighting, lowlighting, cutting, blow-drying, and curling my hair. When she’s done, my hair doesn’t look like the woman in the photo’s hair. It looks better. The cut makes me look like the kind of woman who lives her life wild, the kind of woman who takes risks and doesn’t care what anyone else thinks.

“You are amazing.” I look from my reflection to Ellie in the mirror and smile.

“I think this is the best cut and color I have ever done.” She runs her fingers through my hair, watching the choppy layers fall into place.

“I love it, thank you.”

“No problem.” She takes off the cape, and I pull my card out of my wallet and hand it to her. “You wanna meet me in the front to sign?”

“Sure.” I pull out cash for her tip and set it on her station, knowing from experience that she won’t take it if I try to hand it to her. Going to the front of the salon, I sign the receipt she hands me.

“Do you want me to set up your next appointment now, or do you want to wait?”

“I’ll wait. I’m not sure of my schedule right now, but I’ll call.”

“All right.” She comes around the counter to give me a hug. “Tell everyone I said hi.”

“I will. Do the same and kiss Hope for me.” I say, referring to her daughter, and wave at her over my shoulder as I leave then head across the street. I sent my dad a text when Ellie was almost done, so I’m not surprised when I spot him through the window at the restaurant, already seated in a booth.

“Hey, Dad.” I slide into the seat across from him and his eyes widen.

“You changed your hair?”

“I did.” I run my fingers through it, loving how soft and light it feels.

“It looks good.”

“Thank you.” I drop my bag next to me.

“Ordered you a Coke with your usual Monte Cristo sandwich and fries,” he says, and my mouth waters. A Monte Cristo is ham and Gouda cheese between two thick pieces of Texas toast, which is then dipped in egg batter and fried to a golden brown. Then they cover it in a drizzle of raspberry jam and powdered sugar. I probably wouldn’t want to know how many calories are in the sandwich, but it’s one of my favorite things to eat whenever I come here, and totally worth taking the stairs at work.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiles. “So how are things with you?”

“Things are good,” I tell him, then I smile at the waitress when she drops off our drinks.

“Yeah, what about you and Harlen?”

“Dad,” I sigh. This happens every time I see him lately. Really, it happens every time I see *anyone* in my family. They always ask what’s going on between Harlen and me, making me feel like a broken record.

“What?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“We’re just friends.”

“You keep saying that.”

“I keep saying it, because it’s the truth. He’s my friend. I like him. If I was with him, I would tell you that we’re together, but that’s not the case.”

“Hm,” he grunts, rubbing his jaw, and then asks, “Did you hear back about the class you wanted to take?”

“Yeah, they didn’t accept me this time, so I’m going to try again when it comes back around. And if that doesn’t work, I found an outside school that has the same program. I’d just rather not have to pay for the class if I don’t have to.”

“Your mom and I will pay if you need us to.”

“I know,” I agree with a noncommittal shrug, and then I move my hands off the table when the waitress comes over with our food.

Setting my sandwich and fries down in front of me, she places my dad’s burger and fries in front of him and asks, “Do you two need anything else?”

“I think were good,” I answer, and she nods before wandering off to another table. Picking up a fry, I pop it into my mouth, chew, swallow, and then ask, “What’s going on with Bax and Talon? Are they still planning on moving home?”

“Yep, they’re getting things sorted out now. Hopefully it won’t be long before they’re here.”

“It will be nice having them around.” I know both my parents want all their kids close, but Bax and Talon, just like Nalia, had other ideas about what they wanted. After the boys both graduated, they decided to move to Alaska. First, they bought a fishing boat, thinking they could run it in the summer and make enough money to get them through the rest of the year. Unfortunately, their first and second fishing seasons sucked, leaving them broke. They ended up selling their boat and moving to Montana, where they began working for a log home company. They both ended up loving it so much that they started their own side business building tiny hunting cabins in Alaska in the middle of nowhere during their time off. That business took off, so they have been traveling between Alaska and Montana for work. They now have a plan to start a similar company in Tennessee, which means they need to be here, at least for a little while.

“When they get home, I want to get Nalia out for at least a week,” he says, bringing me out of my head. I study him, trying to read his mood, the same thing I do when he or Mom talks about her. My sister Nalia and my brother Sage were both adopted. I don’t recall when it was, since I only ever remember them being a part of our family, but I know they were young, maybe around two years old. Not long after Nalia turned eighteen, she decided to get in touch with her birth mother, and now she lives in Denver not far from her. My mom and dad have both been supportive of her relationship with her mother, even if it hurts them to have her so far away. But Sage hasn’t been supportive. He won’t even speak about the woman who gave birth to him, and that has taken a toll on his relationship with Nalia.

“Maybe we can plan a trip to the Smoky Mountains, rent a couple of cabins and a boat, like old times,” he continues. “Your mom would like that.”

“I’d love that, so I know Mom would really love it,” I agree, wondering if Harlen’s ever been to the Great Smoky Mountains. He would love it there, nothing but tree-covered mountains and good people. I used to love going to the Smokies when I was a kid, visiting Dollywood and all the other places set up with things to do. The whole town is built with family and fun in mind.

“We’ll plan for it.” He smiles before taking a bite of his burger.

“Maybe I’ll invite Harlen.” I grin, and he grunts, making me laugh.

Feeling my skin prickle, I look at Harlen and catch him staring at me *again*. “You’re making me self-conscious,” I sigh.

“I can’t believe you cut your hair,” he says while I pick up my drink and down half of it. He didn’t say he liked it when he came to pick me up. No, the first words out of his mouth after I opened the door were “What the fuck did you do to your hair?” making me want to kick him in the shin.

“Well, I did, so drop it,” I snap, fed up and a little bit drunk. Okay, a lot drunk.

“Babe, I like it. It’s just going to take me some time to get use to it,” he soothes, and I turn to look at him again.

“Whatever,” I gripe, and he smiles, making me narrow my eyes. “I’ll be back. Can you order me another drink?”

“Sure.” He nods, and I slide off my stool. Going to the bathroom, I take care of business then look at myself in the mirror as I turn on the water.

“I like my hair,” I mutter to my reflection as I wash my hands. Once I’m done, I grab a paper towel and dry them quickly then use that same paper towel to turn off the water and open the door out of habit.

The moment I step out of the hall, Harlen’s eyes come to me. “Ordered you some water,” he tells me, and I shake my head.

“I wanted another drink, not water.”

“You can have one after you drink some water.”

“Whatever,” I mumble again, climbing up onto the barstool next to his.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I turn my head and meet his gaze.

“You sure?”

“Yep.”

“Still pissed at me?” he asks, and I drop my eyes to his mouth and see his smile.

“No.”

“Angel,” he laughs, and my belly tugs. God, I love it when he calls me that. It’s not all the time, but it’s always sweet. “You’ll get over it.” He wraps his hand around the back of my neck, and I know he’s going to kiss the top of my head, but instead of tipping my head down to let him, I tip it back without telling myself to do it. Then I lean forward, putting my hands on his chest. The moment our mouths meet, my lips part and my tongue slips out, touching his bottom lip. My nails dig into his chest through his shirt, while one of his hands slides into my hair at the back of my head and his other molds around my hip. Tipping my head to the side, his tongue flicks over mine and I whimper.

“Fuck,” he growls. Then he’s gone. Ten feet away, across the room, with his back to me as he disappears down the hall toward the bathroom.

“Oh no.” Breathing heavily, I realize what I just did, what just happened, and I look around, jump down from the stool, and grab my bag, booking it to the door. I don’t think about what I’m doing or where I’m going. I run toward the end of the block. I didn’t drive us here; Harlen did. So I don’t have my car—not that I would drive in my state, but still, I could hide in it if I had it.

Reaching the corner of the building, I press my back to the wall and pull out my cell phone, unlock the screen, and bring up my Uber app. I need to get out of here and do it quickly. Thankfully, there is a driver close, so I press the button I need and wait until they are parked. Only then do I leave my hiding spot and run across the street.

“Harmony?” a girl asks, rolling down her window. I nod, open the back door, and get in, ducking down in the back seat. “You okay?”

“Yep,” I lie, and I hear my cell phone ring in my hand. Looking at the screen, I then squeeze my eyes closed.

“You sure?” she asks, and I open my eyes and meet her gaze in the rearview mirror. She’s pretty, really pretty, with dark hair and big blue eyes. She doesn’t look like any Uber driver I’ve ever had. Then again, I don’t take an Uber often.

“Yeah, just a little tipsy,” I fib as my cell phone starts to ring again.

Hitting Deny, I watch a text pop up on my screen.

Where the fuck are you?

I sit back and close my eyes. I must be drunker than I thought I was. I know for sure I'm stupider than I thought. Opening my eyes, I text back.

Sorry, had to go. I'll see you around.

Not even two seconds later, my phone chimes again.

Where are you?

I ignore that text. I also ignore my stomach turning and my eyes stinging, and I keep ignoring everything that I'm feeling until I'm home in bed. Then I turn off my phone and proceed to ignore the pounding on my door. But no matter how hard I try, I can't ignore the way my heart hurts.

Chapter 4

Harlen

“JESUS,” EVAN SAYS, AND I look at him and see his eyes are pointed across the bar. Following his gaze, my stomach muscles tighten along with my hand around my beer.

“What the fuck?” I growl, watching Harmony put one knee then the other onto a barstool, then her hands to the top of the bar, and climb on before standing. Once there, Ashlyn climbs up next to her and they smile at each other. Only then do they start singing along with a pop song that’s playing way too fucking loud. Seeing her, her makeup smoky, her hair done big, in a mass of messy curls, the tight black dress she’s wearing showing way too much skin, and the heels she has on making her long legs impossibly longer, my dick starts to get hard and my blood starts to heat. Not heat: it boils, making me see red.

“You finally gonna deal with that?” Evan asks, and my eyes go to him. He doesn’t know what went down between us, but he knows Harmony and I went from spending almost every day together to her avoiding me.

I was angry two weeks ago when she didn’t return my calls or answer her door after we kissed and she ran off. I’m no longer angry. I’m furious she’s refused to talk to me and hasn’t had the balls to come to me. Oh, I’m sure she’s twisted shit up in her head about my reaction to the kiss, but the reality of it is, if I didn’t get away from her, I wouldn’t have been able to control myself. I was two seconds away from taking her right there in the bar, not giving a fuck who saw the show. That’s how badly I wanted her.

When I started talking to her, I went against every single instinct I had because of her reaction to me asking her out the first time. That fear I saw in her eyes, it showed me she was truly afraid, afraid of living, doing something on a whim, taking a chance. That’s when I came up with a plan to get into that head of hers, to get her comfortable with me, make it easy on her. Obviously, that plan went to shit.

“Fuck.” I drop my beer to the table then stand and cut through the crowd of men gathered around the bar glaring at them until they back off. “Get down,” I growl, and Harmony’s eyes come to me and widen. What she doesn’t do is make a move to get down. “Get the fuck down now,” I demand, watching her swallow and take a step back. Seeing she’s about to step off the top of the bar, I shake my head, wrap my hands around her waist, and pull her down, listening to her shriek as I toss her over my shoulder.

“Harlen!” she shouts, pounding my back with her fists.

“Calm,” I rumble, smacking her ass, and her body stills as I push out of the door.

The second we’re outside, she kicks her legs and yells, “Put me down!” She hits me again, so I smack her ass, this time harder than before. “You didn’t just do that... *again*,” she cries the last word, and I wonder how the fuck it’s possible that I feel like smiling when I’m so unbelievably pissed off.

As soon as I reach the lot where I parked my bike, I put her to her feet, keeping hold of her hand. I kick my leg over the seat of my Harley then order, “On. Now.”

“I’m not getting on your bike,” she hisses, trying to pull her hand free.

“Get on, Harmony.”

“No!” She tries to tug free, but I don’t let her go. Instead, I use her hand to pull her closer, then take her mouth, thrusting my tongue between her lips. Her free hand starts out trying to shove me off, but soon, she’s pressing her tits against my chest, trying to get closer.

Ripping my mouth from hers, I repeat, “Get on,” watching her eyelids flutter open.

Her eyes scan mine. I don’t know what she’s looking for, but she must find it.

“Fine,” she whispers, tossing her leg over the bike behind me and wrapping her arms around my waist.

Squeezing her bare thigh in silent approval, I let her go, start my bike, and then take off toward her place. Pulling into her driveway twenty minutes later, I park next to her car and wait for her to get off. By the time I shut down the engine and dismount, she’s up the steps and at the door. Widening my stride, I make it there as she bends to pick up Dizzy. As I step up behind her, I wrap my hand around her hip, forcing her inside a step so I can close the door behind me. The second I click the lock in place, her shoulders bunch and she steps away.

Fuck.

“Harmony,” I call, but she doesn’t turn to look at me. Instead, she shakes her head, goes to the glass door, and opens it up, letting Dizzy out. “Angel, look at me.” I watch her turn toward me slowly, and that’s when I see tears in her eyes. Seeing her attempt to blink them away, the anger sitting in my gut vanishes.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice comes out in a whisper. “I didn’t mean to do it. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

My brows pull together and I take a step toward her. “What are you talking about?”

“Ki—” She shakes her head. “Kissing you.” Her cheeks turn pink and she drops her eyes from mine. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I care about you, about our friendship. I shouldn’t have ruined that by kissing you. It was stupid. I’m so sorry.”

“Are you’re shitting me?” I growl in disbelief. She lifts her eyes to mine and they widen as I close the distance between us. “Babe, pretty sure you felt me participating in the first kiss, and you know I instigated the second one. So I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about right now.”

She blinks, looking adorably confused. “But...”

“Do you know how hard you made me? Know how badly I wanted to rip those fucking shorts down your thighs so I could bury myself inside you? I didn’t walk off because I didn’t want you. I walked off so I didn’t fuck you in front of a hundred people. I needed a minute to calm the fuck down.”

Her lips part, and I shake my head, ripping a hand through my hair in frustration.

“I know I shouldn’t have walked away without explaining that shit to you, but you shouldn’t have run off without giving me a chance. You also shouldn’t have run off, turned off your phone, and then ignored me when I came to your door.” I lean in and growl, “Repeatedly.”

“I.... I thought. I...” Her eyes close and she tips her head back toward the ceiling. “God, I’m an idiot.”

Taking another step toward her, I wrap my hand around her waist and her eyes open, meeting mine. “I should have made a move sooner.”

“What?”

“Do you know how hard it’s been, being around you and not touching you the way I want? How hard it’s been, keeping my hands to myself, when that’s not what I want? How hard it was for me not to claim you when your dad asked me what it is I’m doing with you?”

“What?” she repeats, this time with wonder.

“I didn’t want to scare you off. I knew if I came at you the way I wanted from the beginning, you would have shut me down,” I confess, and her eyes slide away, letting me know I was right thinking that. “I knew I was getting

inside that head of yours, but until that kiss, I didn't know I was already in there," I emphasize the last words with a squeeze.

"I thought... I thought you just wanted to be friends," she says, avoiding my gaze by looking at my collarbone.

"I do want to be your friend." I get closer then lean down and place my mouth close to her ear. "I also want to fuck you." Feeling her shiver, I slide my free hand around her and pull her fully into me. "Now tell me where do we stand, Harmony?"

"Where do we stand?" she repeats, slowly tipping her head back to look up at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, are we gonna keep pretending like this isn't happening? Or are we going to take advantage of what we know we've got and move on to the next step?" I ask refusing to beat around the bush with her anymore since that shit obviously doesn't work.

Her hands come up to rest against my abs. "Do you mean... like, being together... as in a couple?" she asks, and I dip my face closer to hers. So close, I feel her breath brush against my lips.

"I don't give a fuck what label you put on us."

"Oh," she breathes.

"Are you in, or are you out?" I question, and her eyes flare with both fear and exhilaration.

"I'm in," she replies, and that's all I need to hear.

I use my arm around her back to pull her up against me, then take advantage of her parted lips. The moment my tongue touches hers, her hands slide up my abs and chest then clench my shoulders.

Fuck yes.

Hearing her whimper while her tongue toys with mine, I walk us backward toward the couch. The instant the back of my knees hit the cushion, I slide my hands down her sides, over her hips, and then grab two handfuls of the material there, yanking up the skirt of her dress, and falling back, bringing her down with me.

"Harlen." Her lust-filled eyes meet mine and flash with worry.

"Just getting us comfortable, baby," I tell her, grabbing her behind her knees and pulling her deeper into me. Once I have her where I want her, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck then slide my fingers up into her hair. "So fucking beautiful." Her eyes flash again right before I pull her mouth

back down to mine for another taste.

Feeling her rocking against me while she moans into my mouth has me just about coming in my jeans. Fuck, I knew it would be good when I got us where I wanted us to go, but I didn't have a fucking clue it would be *this* good. Nipping her bottom lip, I pull her head back and study her face. So fucking gorgeous, not even an exaggeration. She's perfect. I thought that the moment I saw her, but having her on my lap, her heat resting against me, her lips swollen, her cheeks pink, her eyes filled with desire, I've never seen anything more magnificent.

"Fuck me." I pull her face forward and tuck it into my neck, willing my heart to stop hammering against my rib cage and my hard-on to die down.

"Are we stopping?" she asks, sounding disappointed, and I smile at the ceiling.

"Dizzy's outside, door's open, and I'm not fucking you for the first time on your couch," I say. Then add, "Maybe the second." Her head lifts away from my neck and our eyes meet. "Maybe the third, since I've thought about fucking you on the island more times than I've thought about fucking you on your couch."

"Seems you've thought about..." She pauses rolling her lips together. "You know... a lot."

"Needed something to keep me busy, since I wasn't fucking you," I explain, and her lips twitch.

"You're not the only one," she whispers, dropping her eyes to her hands that move to my jaw.

"Yeah? What have you thought about?" I question, and her head dips farther while her cheeks, which are already pink, darken.

"Just about us," she answers vaguely.

Before I have a chance to question her further, Dizzy jumps up on the couch and fights his way between us to get to my jaw, where he always licks. Letting go of her hips, I grab hold of him, tuck him against my chest, and then order, "Hop off and lock the door, baby."

Nodding, she scoots off my lap, giving me a glimpse of the sheer panties covering her pussy before she adjust her dress, and heads around the couch for the door.

"Do you want a beer?" she asks, and I turn my attention from Dizzy, finding her standing in the kitchen in front of the open fridge.

“Is it real beer?” I ask, and her eyes narrow, making me fight back a smile. “What?”

Even with the island between us, I still see her plant her hand on her hip.

“You’re the only one here who drinks the beer you bring over. I don’t have another man coming to my house, lounging around and drinking your alcohol,” she sasses, and I narrow my eyes. “And... I don’t drink it either,” she finishes.

“I’ll take a beer,” I grumble through clenched teeth, and she frowns before looking away, reaching into the fridge, and grabbing a beer and a bottle of water. Coming back to the couch, she hands me the open beer. “Do me a favor,” I say as she takes a seat, and her eyes meet mine. “Do not even joke about there being another man around.”

After studying me intently for a long moment, she whispers, “It’s been you, Harlen. For months, it’s been you, even when it wasn’t.”

Hearing her admission, I set Dizzy down on the floor, then drop my beer to the coffee table and take her water from her, doing the same with it before pulling her under me. “It’s been you from the moment we met.” I lower my voice. “I’m crazy jealous when it comes to you,” I admit, framing her face with my hands, and her eyes flare but not in a bad way. “It’s irrational, but it is what it is.”

“Okay,” she agrees, sliding her hands around my waist and moving them up my back, under my shirt.

“You okay with that?” I ask, and she tips her head to the side.

“I want whatever it is you want to give me,” she answers, and I press my forehead to hers.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” she says, and my eyes close.

“Fuck, I should have made a move sooner,” I repeat, opening my eyes, and when I do, I find hers soft. Seeing that look, I wish even more that I didn’t wait so long.

“It’s late, and I have to work tomorrow,” she says softly, and I turn my head and look at the clock, seeing its already after one in the morning.

“Right.” I touch my mouth to hers then start to move back, but her thighs tighten around my hips and her arms grip around my back.

“Will you stay the night?”

Fuck

“You want that?”

“Yes.”

“Then yeah.”

“Good.” Her hands slide farther up and I dip my chin, kissing her again, this time, deep and wet. Pulling away, I push up off the couch, dragging her with me. “I’ll let Dizzy out one last time and shut everything down, while you go get ready for bed.”

“Okay.” She leans up and presses her mouth to mine, and then I watch her ass until she disappears out of sight.

Looking down at Dizzy, I pat my thigh and he follows me to the door. Letting him out, I order, “Hurry.” And he rushes across the deck and down the steps to the grass, taking care of business before coming right back. Once he’s back in, I lock the door, go to the kitchen, grab him a treat, and give it to him, watching him run off before I hit the lights for the kitchen. Turning off the light in the living room, I make my way in the dark toward the open bedroom door at the end of the hall and walk in.

Seeing the door to the bathroom open, I sit on the edge of the bed and take off my boots and shirt then stand to unbutton my jeans. Pulling down my zipper, I freeze when Harmony walks out of the bathroom, wearing a light blue nightie, with pink lace covering her breasts and more of that same pink lace hitting her mid thigh.

Her eyes lock on mine and I watch her swallow. “I put a new toothbrush on the sink for you,” she says, and I lift my chin, finish shucking my jeans, and then head for the bathroom, wearing nothing but my boxers. Taking care of business, I wash my hands then use the toothbrush she left out, ignoring the fact that it’s hot pink. Once I’m done, I open the door and find the overhead light off but both bedside lamps on. She’s in bed, her back to the wooden headboard, a frilly gray comforter down around her hips. Unlike the rest of her place, I know at just a glance that her bedroom furniture is old. It doesn’t fit in with the look she’s building through the rest of the house, and it won’t be long before she’s searching for new pieces to replace all of it.

“Here.” She holds the remote for the television out toward me. “If you want to watch TV.”

Taking it from her, I pull back the covers and get into bed next to her. “You need to sleep.” I set the remote down on the bedside table then turn off the lamp, seeing her reach over to do the same with the one on her side. Once the

lights are out, I pull her across the bed to me. The moment she's there, she tucks her face into my neck, her hand slides over my stomach, and her thigh lifts to rest over my hip. *Perfect, and yes I should have made a move a lot fucking sooner.*

"Is this okay?" she asks, squeezing my gut, and I know she's asking if I'm comfortable. I don't tell her that I've never slept with a woman tucked against me before, or that I don't cuddle. Instead, I pull her impossibly closer then touch my mouth to the top of her head, letting her know nonverbally she's good right where she is. "Night, Harlen."

"Night, Angel." I give her waist a squeeze.

Lying here in the dark, I stare up at the ceiling, listening while her breathing evens out, then feel her body relax deeper into mine. Once I know she's asleep, I close my eyes and follow her.

Feeling the bed shift, my eyes pop open, and it takes a nanosecond to realize where I am. Hearing a whimper, I tip my head down to look at Harmony in the light filling the room, and then I see her shift restlessly in her sleep. I roll to my side and wrap my arms around her. "Angel, wake up. You're having a bad dream," I say against her ear, and then pull back when she moans my name.

Jesus, no fucking way. My dick, which is already hard, pulses, and my jaw tightens along with my arms around her.

"Harlen." Her hand slides over my pec and down my abs. Grabbing her wrist when I see where her hand is headed, I feel her freeze and know she's no longer sleeping.

"You awake?" I ask, and it takes a second but she eventually answers.

"Yes." She presses her forehead into my chest.

"What time do you gotta be out of bed?" I ask, letting her wrist go and sliding my hand down the material at her back.

"Um... nine," she breathes, as I keep sliding my hand down until I reach the hem of her nightie.

"Is your alarm set?"

"Yes," she answers, and I start skimming my hand back up and under the soft silky material.

"How about we see how far we can get before it goes off?" I suggest, listening to her breathing change and feeling her nails dig into the skin on my bicep she's holding onto.

“Okay,” she agrees, keeping her forehead pressed into my chest.

“Tip your head back and give me your mouth,” I order, feeling her shiver. When she pulls her head back, I place my mouth against hers while sliding my hand over her hip and soft stomach. Her muscles bunch and her nails dig deeper as I slide my fingers along the lace edge of her panties. Only when I reach the apex of her thighs with my fingers do I kiss her, touching my tongue to her bottom lip. Her mouth opens on a gasp and I slide in to heaven with both my tongue and fingers, encountering wet heat in both places.

I deepen the kiss then move her to her back, rolling her clit with my thumb. Pulling her mouth from mine, her head presses into the pillow while her hips lift, wanting more. “Harlen.”

Hearing the need in her voice, I don’t let up, not even when her hand slides down my abs and into my boxers to wrap around my dick.

Fuck. Hearing her, smelling her, knowing I’m soon going to get a taste of her, my hips press deeper into her hand and I slide one finger, then two deep inside of her.

“You gonna let me have a taste of you?” I nip her earlobe, and her grip on me tightens. “You are, aren’t you?” I ask, and she moans, lifting her hips, riding my fingers while I keep my thumb at her clit circling. “Answer me.”

“Yes.” She pants.

Kissing her ear, I move and kiss her neck, collarbone, and then shift and pull down the lace edge of her nightie, exposing her breast and peach-colored nipple. Palming her breast, I lick over her nipple then blow against it, watching it tighten, and then do the same with the other one. I feel her core grip and pulse around my fingers, cluing me in to the fact she’s close, which is good, ‘cause so am I. Pulling myself from her hand so I don’t come before my mouth is on her, I shift down the bed. Ignoring her alarm when it starts blaring, I toss her leg over my shoulder and place my mouth on her, over the lace covering her. Pressing my tongue in, I pull back and suck hard.

“Oh God!” she cries, and I groan. Sliding the lace to the side, exposing her to me, I put my mouth back. The second my tongue slides through her folds, her thighs tighten and her pussy pulses around my fingers. Lifting my head, I watch her come then slow my strokes. I get up on my knees and wrap my hand around my cock, jacking it off. Looking at her mass of hair spread out on the pillow, her eyes dark with greed, her perfect tits out, and feeling her pussy pulsing around my still thrusting fingers, I get close then lose it completely when her hand wraps around mine and she takes me there, watching in wonder as I come all over her exposed belly.

Dropping my head back to my shoulders my hips jerk as she keeps stroking. “Christ,” I groan, righting my head. I slide my fingers slowly out of her pussy and bring them to my mouth, sucking them clean.

“Oh my God,” she whispers, holding my gaze, and I grin around my fingers.

“Don’t move,” I order, getting off the bed and going to the bathroom for a washcloth. Turning the water to hot, I warm up the cloth then take it back to the bed to clean her up. Once I’m done, I smile. “You wanna shut the alarm off?” I ask, and she blinks like she hasn’t been listening to it beep for the last ten minutes. She sits up, reaching over and turning it off. Taking advantage of her being propped up, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and drop my mouth down to hers for a hot, deep, very wet kiss. “Morning,” I rumble when I pull back, and she laughs, sliding her hands around my waist.

“Morning.” She rests the side of her head against my abs, and I run my fingers through her thick, soft hair. I hate that she cut all her hair off, but I have to admit I love the way it looks now. Wild, just like I know she is when she lets her guard down.

“Do you wake up like that often?” I ask, and her body stiffens.

“Maybe.”

“Not complaining, just wondering what you do with yourself when it happens?”

“Vibrator,” she answers, shocking the shit out of me with her honesty, and I feel myself tense as visions of her masturbating fill my mind.

“Gonna have to see you take yourself there sometime,” I warn softly, and she shivers. Tipping her head back toward me, I cup the back of her head and study her face, thinking I was wrong last night. Seeing the soft, sated look in her eyes right now makes her look even more magnificent than I have ever seen her before. “You gonna shower?” I ask, and she nods. “All right, I’ll make coffee.”

“You coul—”

“I could baby, but you’d be late for work if I did,” I say, cutting her off before she can even finish her suggestion, and her eyes go half-mast. Dipping my head, I touch my mouth to hers, give her neck a squeeze, and then let her go. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

“Kay,” she agrees.

I grab my jeans from the floor, pull them on, and then leave the room, not looking back at her, ‘cause I know I won’t be able to stop myself from

following her into the bathroom if I do. I go down the hall and use the restroom there. Once I'm out, I head for the living room, with Dizzy dancing at my feet, spinning in circles and hopping. Stooping, I rub his head then open the back door to let him out, watching as he takes off down the steps, chasing a bird out of the yard. I leave the door open and move to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee and find something for breakfast. Not surprising, there's coffee but no food in the fridge other than one egg, a few slices of cheese, half-and-half, butter, and nothing much else. Resting my hand on my hip, I study the empty fridge, wondering when the last time she went shopping was.

"I haven't had time to go to the store." Turning my head, I see her on the other side of the island, her wet hair up in a ponytail and her body encased in a thin black robe. "I'll go tonight when I get off work. I think I have a couple bagels that we can eat though."

"You don't have any cream cheese."

"I have butter." She shrugs, coming around the island, opening up one of the cupboards, and lifting up on her bare feet to reach the coffee cups on the second shelf.

"What time do you get off work tonight?" I ask, and she looks at me over her shoulder.

"Eleven."

"I'll go to the store," I say, and she sets two cups on the counter then looks at me again.

"I can go when I get off. I've done it before. It's not a big deal."

"You can, but that'd mean you'd have to make a stop late at night instead of heading straight home after work," I tell her, leaving out the fact she's a Mayson and that last name seems to be a magnet for trouble.

She studies me with a look I can't read flashing in her eyes then turns to the coffee pot. "If you don't mind. I'll give you a key." I grab the carton of half-and-half before shutting the fridge, then go to her and fit myself against her back. Dropping the carton on the counter, I slide one hand around her waist to rest against her stomach, the other on the counter near her hip. Touching my mouth to her neck, I watch her pour coffee into both cups.

"When's your next day off?" I ask, breathing in the scent of her clean skin.

"In three days," she answers, and I nod. "You could..." She pulls in a breath and lets it out. "If you want... I mean, if you want you can hang around here until I get off," she offers, and I know by her tone she wants that, and fuck if I don't want the same thing.

“Sounds good.” I kiss her neck then let her go to grab the sugar that’s across the kitchen.

“I’m going to tell my parents,” she warns, and I stop halfway to her and her eyes come to me. “They’ve been asking about us and, well, if this is happening, I don’t want to keep it from them. That didn’t go over too well when my cousins kept their relationships from their parents.” She bites her lip then mutters, “Unless you don’t want me to tell them.”

“Not hiding us, Angel, but heads up. I’m not going to let your dad intimidate me. He’s tried that before, and as much as I respect him, I won’t like it if he tries that shit again.”

“He tried to intimidate you?” she asks, and I study her, wondering how she missed it when he made it obvious he wasn’t happy she was spending time with me, even if there was nothing happening between us at that time.

“Yeah, keyword: tried. I’m not easily intimidated, especially when I want something. And now, after we shared what we shared last night and this morning, I know I want more of that. And your dad isn’t going to get in the way of me having it,” I tell her, watching the look from earlier come back, this time stronger than before.

“Okay,” she agrees quietly, opening the creamer and dumping some in her cup, leaving mine black but adding sugar. Handing me a cup, she leans back against the counter with hers. “Is this weird?” she questions, and I rest my hip against the counter opposite her.

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know. This just feels normal. Even when I’ve been with a guy for a while, I feel anxious. With you...” She shakes her head. “I don’t feel that. It’s weird.”

“We’ve spent a lot of time together,” I point out, and she nods, taking a sip of her coffee. “You know how I like my coffee without me having to tell you, know what kinda shows I watch, what I do with my free time. And I know the same things about you.”

“I guess you’re right,” she replies.

“All that means is now we getta move onto the good shit without the anxiety.”

“Good stuff?”

“Yeah.” I grin, and her eyes drop to my mouth. “Now I get to find out how wet I can make you just by whispering in your ear, find out how fast I can make you come with just my fingers. I get to discover things, like I found out

this morning that you're just as beautiful when you wake up as when you go to sleep. Good shit," I finish, seeing her mouth is softer and her eyes are darker than they were before I started speaking.

"Right," she whispers, taking another sip from her coffee.

Sipping from my own cup, I watch Dizzy run into the kitchen and jump up, placing his paws on her bare leg. Reaching down, she picks him up. "You ready to eat?" she asks him, and he answers by licking her jaw, making her laugh. I lean back and watch her wander around the kitchen in her robe. Knowing I can kiss and touch her whenever I want, all I can think is, *Yeah, this is the good shit.*

Chapter 5

Harmony

SEEING AT LEAST A DOZEN missed texts on the screen of my cell phone, I bite my lip and start going through them one by one. Apparently, no one missed Harlen tossing me over his shoulder and leaving with me last night. Obviously, they were all okay with him taking off with me, since no one even attempted to rescue me from him.

I need to finish getting ready for work, so I send everyone a quick text letting them know I'm okay and will call as soon as I have time to explain everything that happened, and there is a lot to explain. I lift my head when I see a shadow fall over me and watch Harlen, who's still shirtless, wearing only jeans, put a hand on the bed at my hip and his face close to mine. "Gotta get to my place, shower, then get to the shop."

"Kay." I study his eyes and handsome face up close, loving that I now know exactly how his lips feel when they are pressed against mine and how his beard feels against my skin.

"I'll see you when you get home tonight."

"Kay," I repeat, watching him smile.

"Kiss me, Angel."

"Kay," I breathe, lifting my hands to his warm, rock-solid bare chest then sliding them up to his shoulders, using the leverage to lift myself up to kiss him. I may start off placing my mouth against his, but before long, he takes over and turns the kiss into something else... something better... something hotter. God, I didn't know anyone could kiss the way he kisses. I had no idea a kiss could take the oxygen out of your lungs while at the same time filling you up with life.

Dragging his mouth from mine, his hand wrapped around the back of my neck squeezes. "Tonight," he says, and my eyes flutter open while I pull in a breath.

"Tonight," I agree, and his lips touch mine then the tip of my nose before he stands. I watch him in a daze as he puts on his shirt, and then keep watching him as he grabs his boots and leaves the room, giving me a smile over his shoulder as he goes.

I fall to my back in the bed and stare up at the ceiling, feeling nothing but happiness. No fear, no worry about the unknown, just happiness. Smiling, I

get up and finish getting ready for work, and then head out with that same smile still on my lips.

“Hey, you,” Mimi says, and I look up from the chart I’m working on and meet her gaze. Mimi and I started working here a few weeks apart, but she’s been a nurse for over six years. The first time I saw her, I didn’t know what to think. She’s edgier than any other nurse I’ve met. She has lots of tattoos, black hair that’s cut in a short bob with sharp bangs that brush her almond-shaped, and unusual colored blue-green eyes. I wouldn’t have guessed she’s as sweet as she is by just looking at her, but she is, even if she is a little blunt.

“What’s up?” I ask as she rolls her chair closer to mine.

“I’m exhausted.” She yawns, grabbing her coffee and taking a sip. “These hours are kicking my ass.”

“I hear you,” I concur, picking up my Coke and twisting off the lid. “We only have a couple more hours left though, so not much longer.”

“Thank God. I feel like I could fall asleep standing up.” She yawns again. “This coffee isn’t doing it for me anymore,” she mutters as she pushes out of the chair to stand, sending it rolling back a few feet. “I’m going to go grab a 5-hour ENERGY out of my bag in the break room. Do you mind watching my rooms?”

“Not at all,” I say, and she gives me a small, tired smile before she walks off. Going back to working on the chart in my hand, I lift my head when I sense someone getting close to the nurses’ station then feel myself tense when I see it’s Dr. Hofstadter. Dr. Hofstadter was one of the first doctors I met here at the hospital after I started. When I met him, he gave me the heebie-jeebies. He’s creepy when he’s trying to be charming, and even though he’s good looking, he’s the kind of man whose position as a doctor has given him a false sense of power.

“Hey, Harmony.” He winks, and I fight to keep myself from gagging.

“Hi, Dr. Hofstadter.” I give him a fake smile as he leans against the double ledge counter in front of me.

“How are you?” he asks, and I watch his eyes drop to my chest.

Total creep.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“Been good, spent part of the weekend on my boat, the other part playing golf at the country club.” He smiles what I suppose would be an attractive

smile if he didn't make my skin crawl.

"That's nice," I mutter, praying silently that one of the patient's call light turn on so I have an excuse to get away from him.

"Have you ever been out on a boat?"

"Yep," I answer, not giving him anything else, since I don't want to engage him and drag out this conversation.

"Maybe we shou—"

"Hey, Dr. Hofstadter," Mimi says, sounding upbeat and peppy, and I watch his eyes go to her and twitch with annoyance.

"Mimi." He lifts his chin in her direction.

"Did you see the football game?" she asks, moving herself to stand between my chair and the counter, blocking him from view.

"I didn't," he mutters.

"Bummer, it was a great game."

"Yeah." He clears his throat. "I gotta head out. If you ladies need me, you know my number."

"Yep," Mimi agrees, and I see his eyes come to me from around her shoulder and watch him smile.

"Have a good night."

"You too." I don't smile back. I just watch him turn and leave.

"God, he's so creepy," Mimi says, turning to face me once he's disappeared down the hall and through the double swinging doors at the end.

"I know," I agree, because he is, and I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks so.

"Was he going to ask you out?"

"I don't know, but I hope not."

"You don't want to be on his radar. You need to avoid him."

"I'll avoid him," I assure her.

"Good." She opens her 5-hour ENERGY and tips it into her mouth.

"So who played in the game yesterday?" I ask with a smile, and she grins at me.

"Fuck, I don't know, but it's the only thing I could think to say when I saw

the look on your face and him leaning over the counter.”

“Thanks for saving me.”

“Don’t mention it.” She shrugs, taking a seat in her chair, pulling out a chart, and opening it up.

Looking from her to the clock on the wall, I hold in a sigh of disappointment. I still have an hour and thirty-four minutes before I can go home. Damn. With no other choice, I get back to work.

I pull into my driveway at a little after eleven p.m. and notice the lights on inside. Something I’m not use to, but something I really like. I shut my car down and grab my bags off the passenger seat. The minute I open my door, I watch Harlen step out onto the front porch with Dizzy in his arms.

“Hey.” I slam my door behind me and head his way.

The moment I’m close enough for him to reach, the arm that’s not holding Dizzy slides around my waist and his mouth drops down to mine for a soft kiss. “Hey,” he says there, and I smile. “You hungry?”

“A little,” I answer as he trades my bags for Dizzy, who’s trying to get to me, and places his hand against my lower back to lead me inside the house.

“Got you Lo Mein when I ordered Chinese for myself earlier. It’s in the microwave.”

“Cool, will you heat it up for me? I’m just going to change real quick.”

“Sure.” He drops his mouth down to mine again for another touch before taking my bags with him toward the kitchen. I go to my bedroom and kiss the top of Dizzy’s head one last time before I set him on the floor, watching him run right back out of the room as I head for the closet. I trade my scrubs for a pair of loose pajama shorts and a tank top, then grab a sweater and go to the kitchen, hearing the microwave beep.

“You want one of your ciders?” he asks.

“Sure.” I head around the island toward him then watch him open the fridge. The moment I see how stuffed full it is with food, I look at him.

“I thought you were just going to pick up the basics,” I say, raising a brow, and his eyes come to me.

“I did,” he answers, opening the cider and handing it to me. Moving around him, I open the door to the fridge and look in. I wasn’t wrong. The shelves are full, along with the meat and fruit drawer.

“I hope you plan on helping me eat all this stuff,” I tell him, opening the freezer and finding it’s just as full, with different kinds of meats and frozen vegetables.

“It’ll all get used,” he answers, and I shake my head.

“I don’t normally cook on my days off, but now I guess I’ll have to.”

“Stop complaining about having food in the fridge and come eat,” he orders as he pulls down a bowl from the microwave and hands it to me, shoving a fork into the noodles.

“I’m not complaining,” I lie, and his lips twitch. “Whatever.” I take the bowl with me to the living room and take a seat on the couch, while he comes over, sitting next to me, with his own beer.

“How was work?”

“Good.” I shrug, figuring after his statement last night about being crazy jealous, it’s probably best to leave out anything to do with Dr. Hofstadter and the creepy vibe he gives me.

“Just good?”

“Yeah, nothing much happened. We had one new patient come in, but the rest of the night was quiet.”

“Quiet’s good,” he says, reaching over and tucking a piece of hair behind my ear.

“Quiet is good, but it also means time has a tendency to drag, and since I would rather have been home hanging out with you, quiet sucked.”

“I see,” he murmurs, and I catch his smile before he takes a pull from his beer.

“What did you do today?” I ask, blowing on a forkful of noodles before taking a bite.

“Work, and your dad came by to see me.”

“What?” I choke on a noodle and start to cough. Only when I’m done does he continue.

“Apparently, he heard I took you home last night.” He shrugs like it’s not a big deal, when it is, since I wanted to be the one to tell my parents about Harlen’s and my new relationship status. I knew I should have taken time to call them this afternoon, but I didn’t, and now I’m sure they’ve heard about Harlen carrying me out of the bar, caveman style.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, then ask, “What did he say?”

“First, he told me to back off. When I ignored that suggestion, he told me that if I fucked you over, he’d have my balls.”

“He didn’t,” I whisper as anger fills the pit of my stomach.

“It’s all good. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not all good.” I drop my bowl to the coffee table with a *clank* and stand. “And it is a big deal. I can’t beli—” My words are cut off and my breath leaves on a whoosh as I’m pulled down onto his lap and his arms go around me tight.

“Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. I can’t believe he’d try to threaten you to stay away from me,” I say trying to get out of his hold that only seems to grow tighter.

“Am I here?” he asks, and I let out a frustrated huff then glare at him.

“That’s not the point.” Even though it does make me happy that he is here and not running for the hills to get away from me and my crazy father.

“It is the point.”

“It isn’t the point.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Sheesh.”

“Christ, you’re cute when you’re pissed on my behalf.” He grins, and I continue to glare. Then he laughs hard, so hard his body shakes, and even though I love hearing it and feeling it, I’m still pissed.

“This isn’t funny, Harlen. This is serious,” I say, and he laughs harder, tucking his face into my neck and continuing to laugh there. “I’m serious.”

“I see that, Angel,” he tells me through his laughter, and I growl.

“It’s not funny! He shouldn’t have done that. He shouldn’t have done it the first time, and he really shouldn’t have tried it again.”

“You’re right. It’s not funny.” He sobers, pulling back to look at me, and I brace when I see the look in his eyes. “It’s not okay for your dad to try to scare me off, but if we have girls one day, I’ll end up doing the same shit. So like I said, it’s all good.”

Holy shit. He said *we*. Oh God, I can’t breathe.

“Fuck,” he mutters, giving me a squeeze. “Do not even start overthinking that shit.”

“I’m not.” I wheeze out my lie, and he shakes his head.

“What the fuck am I going to do with you?” he asks with a soft look in his

eyes, and I shift on his lap. “Let’s focus on the good shit before we start worrying about weddings and kids,” he says, and my eyes widen on the word *weddings* then my breath leaves on the word *kids*. “Fuck.” He smiles, and I close my eyes, deep breathing. “Guess that’s one way to get you to be quiet.”

“Shut up,” I whisper, and he laughs.

“Eat your food.”

“Don’t boss me around.”

“I see you’re in the mood to argue,” he mutters, looking at the ceiling and letting out a heavy, exaggerated sigh.

“Shut up.” I fight back a smile then let out a shriek of laughter as he tosses me off him, putting my back on the couch and coming down over me.

“If you’re not hungry, I have plenty of other ways to keep your mouth busy,” he tells me, dropping his mouth to my neck and touching his tongue against the skin there, making me shiver.

“I don’t think I’m hungry anymore,” I whisper, locking my fingers into his hair, and I feel him smile against my skin before he nips my neck. Pulling back, his eyes search mine. “What?”

“Nothing.” He shakes his head then I lose his eyes when his head dips and his lips touch mine. As I open my mouth, his tongue slides in and I whimper, tasting him and the beer he was drinking. Shifting, I wrap one leg over the back of his thigh and tighten my hold on his hair.

His hand cups my breast through my tank and my back arches off the couch into his touch. Then he pulls down the cotton material and his fingers pull my nipple, sending a jolt of electricity through me, forcing me to rip my mouth from his so I can moan, “Harlen.”

“Right here.” He dips his head then his lips close around my nipple, that warm, wet heat making me gasp and grind my hips into his. “Fuck.” His mouth leaves me and his hand locks around my hip so he can hold me down. My eyes spring open and I stare at him, panting. “Angel.” I see the heat in his eyes and I lick my bottom lip, watching his eyes drop there.

“Take me to bed, Harlen,” I whisper, and lucky me, I don’t have to ask twice.

He grabs both my ankles and pulls my legs around his waist, ordering “Lock them, baby.” I do, then his hand slides under my back and he stands, taking me with him.

The second we’re up, I drop my mouth to his as he walks us back to the

bedroom. Feeling his hardness through his jeans and my sleep shorts, I nip his lip then moan when his hand smacks my ass hard, so hard I gasp as my clit vibrates and my core clenches. I don't see it when we enter my room, but I know when he puts his knees in the bed with me still wrapped around him. My back hits the bed and his weight settles on top of me, and then we lose each other as I force his shirt up over his head and he does the same with my sweater and tank top. His chest drops back down to mine and the hair covering his torso scrapes across my nipples, making me realize the reality of him is way better than anything I could have imagined in my head.

I lift my head to get to his mouth, but he pulls back. "Get out of your shorts, Angel."

Quickly, I shove my thumbs into the waistband of my shorts and tug them down, kicking them off. Still sitting back on his calves in his jeans, his eyes wander over me lazily. "Christ, where the fuck do I start?" he asks roughly as his large, rough hands slide up my smooth skin from my ankles to my thighs where he pulls my knees apart. Leaning forward, his beard scrapes across my skin before his lips touch my belly at the same time as his fingers slide down my inner thighs.

My lungs burn with anticipation, knowing what's coming, and I fight myself to keep still, to wait for his touch, when all I want to do is lift my hips and beg. "Harlen," I pant when his fingers part my slick folds, and his eyes come to me through his thick, dark lashes as his mouth dips between my legs. "Oh God." The first touch of his tongue against my clit makes my hands and toes curl into the bedding under me. I lose his stare completely when I dig my head into the pillow behind my head and lift my hips into his talented mouth as he goes from tasting me to eating me like a man starved, nipping and licking every part of me spread open to him. When his thumb slides inside me, I lose hold on my sanity and come hard, so hard that I scream as my body convulses and I see bright lights. Breathing heavy, I lift my head and watch him pull out a condom from his wallet and kick off his jeans. Sitting up as best as I can, I start to wrap my hand around his thick length, but he stops me grabbing my wrist.

"You touch me, I won't last," he growls, ripping open the condom with his teeth. He drops the wrapper to the bed then slides the condom down his length. He's big. Long and thick. Perfect.

"I feel like this is when I should ask if it's going to fit," I whisper, and his eyes meet mine then he grins at me.

"It will fit." He leans over me, forcing me back down onto the bed and kissing me again. He thrusts his tongue into my mouth while he slides his

cock up and down through my wetness. Squirming under him, I gasp into his mouth when he fills me up in one deep stroke. “You okay?”

“Yes,” I exhale, circling his hips with my legs, and he slides out then back in, slow at first before picking up speed. Capturing both my wrists, he pulls them up above my head and pounds into me while taking my mouth in another deep kiss. I try to move with him, but it seems all I can do is hang on for the ride. Just when I’m getting close, he lets my hands go, flips me to my belly, pulls up my hips, and slides back in. My neck arches and my hair flies, whipping against my back as he wraps one hand around my hip and the other cups my breast.

“Touch yourself. Help me get you there.” He nips my shoulder, and I moan, pulling one hand from the bed and bringing it between my legs. Circling my clit, his fingers join mine between my legs and I hear him groan as I start to come around his length while he fucks me. *God!* My forehead drops down to the mattress and both my hands slide out in front of me as he fucks me through my orgasm, never letting up on my clit, even when he pulls me up so I’m sitting on his thighs and impaled on his cock.

“Harlen,” I moan as he thrusts into me hard, rolling my clit and sending me over the edge once more before my last orgasm has even washed away. Feeling his teeth sink into my shoulder, I listen to him groan as his hips jerk and he comes. I close my eyes and let my head fall back to his shoulder, spent, out of breath, and exhausted.

Feeling his lips kiss my shoulder where he bit me, I open my eyes and turn my head to look at him. “You’re gonna have a mark.” He touches the spot gently with his lips and I shake my head.

“I don’t care,” I reply, and he smiles then slides his hand up to circle my neck. He brings my face closer to his for a soft, intimate kiss that ends when he slides out of me and I mewl from the loss of him.

“Be right back.” He kisses my shoulder before letting me go. I fall down onto the bed and feel my stomach melt when he pulls the blanket out from under my hip to toss it over me. Watching him walk naked to the bathroom, I close my eyes and curl myself around my pillow, needing to rest for just a minute.

“What the fuck?” I hear Harlen growl, then I feel the bed move. Opening one eye then the other, I see that the room is filled with light—not light from the overhead light, but sunlight.

Shit, I must’ve passed out last night. I don’t even remember falling asleep.

“What’s going on?” I put my elbow in the bed, and Harlen turns to look at me over his naked shoulder from the doorway. Watching his eyes wander over me and get soft, I feel my belly get warm.

Before he can answer my question, I hear the doorbell go off and watch the softness slide out of his eyes and aggravation slide in. “Someone’s at the door.”

“Crap, it’s probably my mom.” I hop out of the bed and look down at myself. I’m still very much naked. I never sleep naked. I’ve tried but always found I couldn’t do it; I just wasn’t ever comfortable enough to get to sleep and stay that way. Then again, I had never had two orgasms in a row before trying.

“I’ll answer the door. You get dressed,” he says, bringing me out of my thoughts, and my head flies up.

“But—” I don’t have a chance to tell him he should put on his shirt before he’s gone, disappearing out of sight. Running naked to my bathroom, I take care of business quickly then go to my closet, grab a pair of sweats and a tank top, and put both on before running out of the room. When I make it to the kitchen, I find out I was right. My mom is sitting at the island with a smile on her face, and Harlen is filling the coffee pot, shirtless, giving my mom a reason to smile.

“Mom,” I say, probably a little too loudly, and her head spins in my direction then her eyes do a mom sweep.

“Hey, honey.” She does another sweep then gives me a knowing smile.

“Uh... hey.” I go to her, kissing her cheek. “I was going to call you when I got up today.”

“I was in town, figured I’d stop by to check on you,” she explains, and then her eyes go to Harlen before coming back to me. “I see you’re okay.”

“Ugh... Yeah.” I bite my lip, not sure what to say to her. I know she and my dad heard what happened the other night... but still.

“You want coffee, Mrs. Mayson?” Harlen asks, and my mom turns to look at him.

“Call me Sophie, Harlen, and yes, I’d love a cup,” she replies, smiling at him.

“Right,” he mutters, looking at her before his eyes come to me. “Angel?”

“Yes, please.” I take a seat on the stool next to my mom and watch his back muscles flex as he pulls down three mugs from the cupboard above the coffee

pot.

Feeling my mom nudge my shoulder, I pull my eyes from Harlen's shirtless back to look at her. "Friends, huh?"

"It just happened, Mom. I was going to tell you about it, but yesterday got away from me, and then you showed up today before I could call you."

"I'm not upset," she says quietly, and then adds, "Your dad might take some convincing."

"Coffee," Harlen interjects, setting down two full cups on the island. "I'll be back, gonna go put on a shirt," he mutters, and I nod then hold in a sigh when he comes around the island, stopping to give the side of my head a kiss.

I wait until he's gone to look at my mom. "Dad's going to have to get over it. I'm mad at him," I whisper.

"You're mad at him?" she repeats, studying me like I've grown a third head. I don't think I've ever been mad at my dad. Even growing up, I don't remember ever being mad at him.

"Yes, I'm mad at him. He told Harlen to back off. That is not okay," I gripe, and her eyes narrow.

"He did that?"

"Yes."

"He just cannot be believed," she whispers, looking angry.

Shit.

"Mom."

"I'll talk to him," she says, and I feel my eyes widen. Crap, Mom pissed at Dad is never a good thing.

"Let me handle it."

"I told him to stay out of it, to let things play out," she tells me with a jerk of her head. "And then he goes and does that."

"Mom." I grab her hand and force her to focus on me. "Let me deal with Dad."

Studying me, she finally relents. "Fine."

"Thank you." I breathe out a sigh of relief then pick up my coffee and take a sip.

"I think he sees a lot of himself in Harlen, and that scares the bejesus out of

him,” she admits after a moment, and I turn my head, meeting her gaze. “It will be okay.”

“I know it will,” I agree. It will be okay; it might take some time for my dad to come around, but I know he will eventually and if he doesn’t then... Well I hope I never have to think about that.

“So did he really toss you over his shoulder?” she asks dreamily, and I laugh so hard my body shakes.

“Yes, he really did.”

“Wow.” She grins, and I roll my eyes at her then watch Harlen come back out of the bedroom dressed.

“You gonna stay for breakfast, Sophie?” he asks, and she turns her smiling eyes to him.

“I’d love to.”

“Good,” he says softly, and then his eyes come to me. “Babe, you wanna feed Dizzy while I cook?”

“Sure.” I hop down off the stool, informing my mom, “Harlen bought the whole grocery store yesterday.”

“Did he?” she asks, looking between the two of us.

“Yeah, now I won’t be able to have takeout for at least a month, and I love takeout.”

“Worse things a man can do than keep your fridge stocked and your belly full,” Mom mummurs, smiling into her coffee mug, and I feel Harlen’s fingers give my hip a squeeze, so I turn my attention to him.

“You gonna bitch about me, or are you gonna help me out by feeding your dog?”

“I’m going to help you out, and you shouldn’t curse in front of my mom,” I tell him, resting my hand on my hip, and his eyes drop there and I watch his lips twitch.

“Know your dad and your brothers, Angel. Doubt your mom hasn’t heard worse.”

“This is true,” she confirms.

“Whatever, still,” I huff.

His fingers dig into my hip then he lowers his head and kisses me hard and quick.

“Feed your dog,” he orders as he lets me go.

“Bossy,” I grumble under my breath, and I hear my mom laugh, which makes me smile. I look at her and see her eyes are soft, not on me but on Harlen. One down, one to go.

Chapter 6

Harmony

“SAID I’D GIVE HER YOUR message,” I hear Harlen clip angrily as I walk toward the kitchen, where I left him a little over fifteen minutes ago so I could go get changed for work. “Yeah, and I said I’d tell her,” he growls as I round the island. Sensing me like he always does, his head turns toward me and our eyes lock. “Yeah, later.” He pulls his cell phone from his ear and drops it to the top of the counter near his hip.

“Who was that?” I ask, seeing the pissed off look on his face and knowing the answer before he even opens his mouth to tell me who was on the phone.

“Your dad says you need to call him back, that if you don’t, you won’t like the consequences.”

“He said that?” I whisper, feeling annoyance turn my stomach, and his face softens.

“Babe, I get why you haven’t talked to him, but you *need* to speak to him.”

“I’m not ready to talk to him yet,” I say, tying my hair up into a ponytail, and he takes a step toward me, wrapping his hand around my hip and giving it a squeeze.

“It’s been a week, Angel,” he tells me, something I already know, since it’s the longest I’ve ever gone without talking to my dad. It’s been exactly seven days since my mom came over and stayed for an impromptu waffle breakfast cooked by Harlen. If he hadn’t already won my mom over, I know his waffles would have done the trick. They’re that good. My dad, however, is a whole other story. He’s called; I haven’t answered. He’s kept calling; I’ve kept ignoring him, which I know is pissing him off. But I need time to figure out how to deal with him without losing my mind and saying something I’ll regret. “Seriously, baby, it’s time,” he continues when I don’t reply.

“Whose side are you on?” I narrow my eyes on his and he grins, showing off his perfectly straight smile.

“Your side,” he says, pulling me against him. “That said, you still need to speak with your dad.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “I’ll tell him to meet me for coffee tomorrow.”

“Good.” He dips his head, brushing his mouth over mine. “You want me to go with you when you talk to him?”

“Will you beat him up if I ask you to?” I question, and he chuckles like I’m joking—which I’m not, since my dad might actually need some sense knocked into him.

“No.”

“Then no, since you’re going to be of no use to me,” I mutter, and he gathers me against him and shoves his face into my neck, laughing so hard my body shakes with the force of it. “It’s not really that funny.” I smile, and he gives me a squeeze and gets control of himself before pulling his face out of my neck to look at me, running his fingers along the apple of my cheek.

“Before you leave for work, pack a bag. We’re staying at my place tonight,” he orders, and I blink at him.

“Your place?”

“Yeah, the place I’m paying rent on, where I keep my clothes and get my mail. My place.”

“I forgot you don’t actually live with me,” I mumble, and his arms tighten around me. My eyes widen and I hurry out, “I mean, I know you don’t live with me, obviously, but—”

“Babe, shut up,” he cuts me off, smiling, and I glare at him.

“Don’t tell me to shut up, Harlen,” I snap, and he smiles.

“You okay with staying at my place?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” He brushes his nose across mine. Gah! I really hate when he’s annoying and sweet.

“Can Dizzy come?” I keep my tone snippy to cover up how much I love him being sweet, and his smile turns into a grin.

“Yeah.”

“Then yes,” I agree.

“Good, I’ll pick up Dizzy when I get off work and take him to my place.”

“How? Do you have one of those fancy white baskets with yellow plastic daisies on it for him to ride in on your bike?”

“No, smart ass, but I do own an SUV.”

“You do?” I question, surprised, and he brushes his lips against mine.

“It’s parked up for the summer, but yeah, I’ve got an SUV.”

“Hm.”

“Go pack your bag then come kiss me before you leave for work.”

“You know what you can do?” I ask scrunching up my nose, watching his eyes crinkle in the corners like he’s trying not to laugh.

“No, what’s that?”

“You can stop bossing me around.”

“You like it when I’m bossy.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I do,” I deny, and he dips his head and brushes his lips over my ear.

“Yeah, baby, I know you do. Whenever I’m bossy, you don’t just get wet; you get drenched, and your pussy latches onto me, to whatever part of me it’s gotten ahold of.”

“Whatever.” I fight back a shiver, listening to him chuckle before he places a kiss against the shell of my ear and neck.

“Go, and then come back and kiss me.”

“Maybe I will; maybe I won’t.” I pull from his hold and head for my room. I pack a bag then take it with me, dropping it by the door before heading back to the kitchen. “I’ll see you tonight.” I lift my hand and wave, and his eyes narrow on me across the island.

“You better get your ass over here and kiss me.”

“And if I don’t?” I raise a brow, holding his stare while crossing my arms over my chest.

“Do you really wanna find out?”

“Maybe.” I shrug, and his eyes darken, causing me to brace.

“You feel like playing, baby? I got no problem with that. I’ll like the consequences of it, and so will you... after I finally give you what you want. But believe me, I’ll make you work for it before that happens,” he warns gruffly, and my nipples harden while the space between my legs tingles with anticipation. “What’s it gonna be?”

Without a word, and without telling myself to do it, I grab my purse and launch off the island, and turn for the door where I dropped my overnight bag. Picking it up, I hook it over my shoulder then look behind me to see Harlen has moved to the mouth of the living room, his dark, heated eyes on me. Swallowing, I pull open the door and leave, knowing I’m playing with fire.

“Harmony,” Dr. Hofstadter says, startling me as I walk out of one of my patients’ rooms. I stumble over my own feet, falling into him and letting out a squeak when he grabs hold of my hips to steady me. “Didn’t mean to scare you.” He laughs, squeezing my waist pulling me against him, and I fight back a shiver of revulsion as I push against his chest to free myself from his embrace.

“It’s okay.” I quickly take a step back out of his space. “Did you need something?”

“Did you read over the details I left for Ms. Robinson?” he asks, referring to my patient who had hip surgery early this morning.

“I did. Has there been a change made to her care plan?” I question, looking over her information on my cart, and I feel him get close to my side. Too close, so close his body brushes mine.

“No, actually, I’m just using that as an excuse to speak with you alone,” he says, and I look at him, feeling my stomach drop as he dips his chin and lowers his voice. “I wanted to see if you’d like to get dinner with me tomorrow.”

Shit.

“I... um... That’s really sweet, but I can’t. I’m sorry.” I shake my head, watching something shift in his gaze, that something making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“If it’s about policy, I won’t tell if you won’t,” he whispers, and the soup I had for lunch turns in my stomach.

“Harmony,” Mimi calls loudly before I can tell him that I have a boyfriend, and I turn my head to look at her, hearing Dr. Hofstadter let out an audible huff of frustration from my side. “Do you mind helping me?” She asks.

“Sure.” I smile at her then turn to look at Dr. Hofstadter, and mutter, “Sorry, I gotta work.” I drop my gaze from his, lock up my cart, and head down the hall toward Mimi, who doesn’t move until I’m at her side. “Thank you,” I murmur under my breath once I’m close.

“I see you’re having trouble staying off his radar,” she whispers back, and I let out a sigh. “What did he want this time?”

“He asked me out,” I tell her as we enter her patient’s room, and she takes hold of my arm, stopping me along with her just outside view of her patient.

“You should tell HR about that.”

“Tell them what? That he makes me feel weird and that he asked me out?” I shake my head.

She looks over my shoulder toward the open door before meeting my gaze once more. “I think you should make a formal complaint so it’s in your file. That way, if anything happens, you’re protected, and it’s not his word against yours.”

“I just started working here. I don’t want to make enemies,” I explain gently, and she shakes her head, reaching out and grabbing my arm again.

“Promise you’ll go to HR if he doesn’t stop.” She pleads.

“Is there something I should know?” I ask, seeing the look in her eyes, and she shakes her head.

“I’ve just heard rumors about him,” she whispers, holding my gaze. “What I’ve heard, I don’t like very much.”

My heart plummets. “What rumors?”

“Just that he’s played a few nurses and they’ve ended up losing their jobs while he kept his.”

“Really?”

“We’ve been here the same amount of time, which isn’t long. I don’t know any of those nurses or if those rumors are true. All I’m saying is be careful when it comes to him.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promise her, and she nods, still looking worried, but there is nothing I can do right now to assure her that things will be okay. “Did you really need my help?”

“Yeah, I need to start a catheter,” she mutters, and then without another word, she leads me into the room and introduces me to her patient. Once I’m done helping her, I go back to my cart and finish passing out meds. After that, I finish up my charts until it’s time for me to go home, and thankfully, I don’t see Dr. Hofstadter again.

Pulling up in front of Harlen’s apartment at twenty after eleven, I park in the empty space next to his bike, and before I even have a chance to shut down the engine, I watch Harlen come out of his apartment on the first floor. The moment our eyes lock through my windshield and I see the look in his, my stomach fills with butterflies and my mind swirls with doubts about my play this morning. *I should have kissed him before I left.* When he opens my door, I hold my breath as he reaches across me, skimming my nipples with the back

of his hand before unhooking my seat belt.

“Hand me your bags,” he orders, keeping his eyes locked on mine.

I swallow from the intensity in his stare. “Harlen—”

“Hand me your bags, baby.” Blindly, I reach over and grab my overnight bag, purse, and lunch sack from the passenger seat, handing all three to him. “Come on.” He holds out his hand toward me and I hesitate. “Harmony.” I hear the warning in his tone, so I place my hand in his, allowing him to pull me from the car. The second I clear the door, he slams it closed and drags me with him toward his apartment.

“Harlen, I...”

I stop speaking when his eyes come to me, and he growls, “You made your choice this morning. Now I get to play.” He opens the door to his apartment, and before he even has it shut behind us, he presses me against the wall, his big body pinning me in place. Absently, I hear my bags hit the floor as his mouth crashes down on mine, and I whimper as he takes hold of my wrists, dragging them high above my head, so high I’m forced to stand on the tips of my toes. Taking both my wrists in one of his big hands, he holds them there while his mouth devours mine. His free hand squeezes one breast then the other before sliding down my stomach, straight into my panties.

The moment two of his fingers thrust into me, I whimper into his mouth, “Please.”

“Haven’t even gotten my mouth on you and you’re already drenched and begging for it.” He nips my chin, then my neck while working me over, two fingers thrusting deep while his thumb circles my clit. My head thrashes and my legs start to give out from under me as my pussy starts to convulse around him. “No,” he growls, removing his fingers and cupping my sex, and my eyes fly open.

“I—” Before I can say anything, his mouth captures mine again and his fingers thrust deep, sending my back sliding up the wall.

“*Fuck*, do you know how much I love this fucking pussy?” he asks against my mouth, and I moan, digging my head back against the wall. “I’ll be working, and all of a sudden, I’ll think about it—how tight it is, how wet it is, how fucking good it tastes, and I have to fight myself from going hard.” He groans, and my pussy starts to clamp around his fingers once more, and just like before, he removes them, making me cry out in frustration.

“Harlen, please,” I beg, and his eyes lock on mine. “Please make me come.”

“How do you want me to make you come, Angel?” he asks, and I swallow.

“However you want,” I whisper, and he smiles a scary smile at me then pulls me from the wall and picks me up. Carrying me down the hall to his room, he sets me on my feet at the side of his bed, and orders, “Clothes off, on the bed, and spread those legs for me.” Studying him, my chest rising and falling quickly, I hesitate while I watch him get undressed. “Now,” he commands.

Pulling off my top, I drop it to the floor, kick off my sneakers, drag off my pants and panties, and then reach back to take off my bra. Once it’s added to the pile on the floor and I’m completely naked, I sit on the bed then pull myself back with my hands behind me, lying back.

“Open up for me,” he growls. Swallowing, I watch him wrap his hand around his cock as I spread my legs, and his eyes drop to my center, turning even darker. “Fuck, but you really are beautiful everywhere. Even your pussy is pretty.” He reaches out one finger, sliding it over my clit and causing my hips to buck into his touch. “Your clit is just begging me to play with it,” he says thickly, holding me open and blowing across my wet sex.

“Oh God,” I gasp, and he licks, circling my clit with his tongue. Grabbing hold of his hair, I raise my hips higher into his mouth and he locks his lips around my clit, sucking hard. My back arches and my eyes slide closed as a breathless “Yes!” leaves my mouth. Grinding myself against him, I start to come, but then cry out when his mouth leaves me and he flips me to my belly.

“You on birth control?” he asks as he crawls up onto the bed behind me, and I turn my head to look at him over my shoulder, locking my eyes with his.

“Yes,” I whisper, and without any warning, he pulls my hips up and thrusts into me from behind, doing it so hard that my hands slide out in front of me and my ass tips back toward him. My head flies and my hands knot in the bedding as he rides me hard and fast, sending me spiraling closer to an orgasm that I know will be the death of me.

Trying to be quiet so he doesn’t know I’m about to come, I cry out in despair as he flips me to my back and plunges into me, tossing my leg over his shoulder and wrapping his hand around my inner thigh to hold me open. “You don’t get to come until I feel like making you come.” He nips my bottom lip, and I dig my nails into his back, listening to him groan in approval. “So fucking hot, and tight.” He slams into me, and my head thrashes as he builds me up and knocks me down over and over again, bringing me to the edge but never pushing me over.

Feeling tears well in my eyes, I lift my mouth to his. “Please, honey, please

stop teasing me. I can't take anymore," I whisper hoarsely, and he studies me for a moment before his fingers go to work on my clit.

"You wanna come?" he asks, slowing his strokes but speeding up his thumb on my clit, and I nod.

"Yes, please."

"So fucking sweet." He drops his mouth to mine and quickens his thrusts along with his thumb on my clit. He drinks every single whimper and sound I make down his throat then pulls his mouth from mine. "Come for me, Angel," he orders, and I let go, not even realizing I had been holding on, waiting for him to tell me it was okay.

The feeling is sudden. My body shakes and my mind splinters as I come hard listening to him grunt, feeling his hips jerk erratically before he plants himself deep inside of me and comes himself. Breathing heavy, my heart thunders hard against my rib cage, and my legs and arms tighten around him. I hold on, needing him to keep me tethered to earth so I don't fly away.

Gathering me against him, he rolls us until I'm sprawled out over his chest, and his fingers lazily run down the damp skin on my back, making me shiver. "Cold?" he questions, and I shake my head, feeling my eyes get heavy. "You okay?"

Still unable to talk, I nod against his chest and tighten my hold on him, listening to his breathing even out and his heartbeat return to normal.

"I should clean up," I whisper, and his hold on me tightens.

"I'll clean you up." He kisses the top of my head then rolls us to our sides, pulling out of me gently. He scoots down the mattress, placing a kiss to my stomach then my hip before getting off the bed. He tosses a blanket over me, and I lose sight of him when my eyes slide closed, too heavy to keep open any longer.

A few minutes later, I feel a wet cloth between my legs, and my eyes open to meet his warm gaze. "I think you killed me," I tell him, and he smiles, bending to kiss my bare shoulder, neck, and then lips. "Death by orgasm," I continue, and he laughs, tossing the wet rag toward the open bathroom door. I hear it land with a soggy plop as he gets into bed with me and pulls me against his side. "Just so you know, I might not ever kiss you again before I leave for work."

"Jesus."

"I'm not joking," I inform him, lifting my head to look at him.

He runs his fingers through my hair, studying me as something works in his

beautiful eyes, something that makes me want to hold onto him a little tighter. “As much as I enjoyed what we just did, I need you to kiss me before you leave.”

The gently spoken demand makes my heart clench in my chest. “I...” I want to ask him why, but I don’t. Instead, I whisper, “Okay,”

“Okay.” He dips his chin and kisses my forehead, asking there, “You hungry?”

“A little.”

“Want me to make you a sandwich?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll be back. Gonna take Dizzy out one more time. You rest.”

“Is he all right?”

“He’s been busy checking out my place since he got here.” He tucks some hair behind my ear and I nod, not at all surprised that Dizzy is more interested in exploring than greeting me. “Be back.” He kisses my forehead before sliding out of bed. I watch him put on his jeans without his boxers and pull his tee over his head. Once he’s dressed, he turns on the TV and hands me the remote before disappearing.

Lying in his bed, cocooned in his scent, I stare at the TV, pondering what that was about—the kiss. I wonder if it had something to do with losing his parents. I haven’t spoken to him about them since the day he told me they passed when he was young. I should talk to him about it; I know I should. I just don’t know how to bring it up. When I hear the front door open and close, I get up out of bed and go grab my overnight bag, which he moved to the couch in the living room. I drop it to the end of his bed and get out my nightgown and a pair of panties. Going into the bathroom, I take care of business and get dressed.

When I walk back into his bedroom, retying my hair, I stop dead. His room at the compound might be dirty and gross, but his room here is clean and surprisingly well put together. A black leather headboard with brushed metal grommets nailed into the material is a focal point in the room. Black nightstands sit on either side of the bed, with brushed metal lamps on top of each. A dresser against the wall by the door is also black with a dark blue and silver bowl on top, where he obviously drops all the odds and ends from his pockets. Looking at his bedding, which I know is soft, I realize it matches that bowl. It’s the same dark blue with silver, but with cream running through it in a horizontal stripe. The walls are bare, but they don’t really need anything on

them. The headboard is high enough to look like a piece of art, and the curtains he has up give the room a finished look.

Hearing the front door open, I realize I've been standing in his bedroom taking everything in for a while. Looking around, I spy one of his flannel shirts, so I grab it, slip it on over my nightgown, and then head for the living room. As soon as Dizzy spots me, he runs across the room and I bend, scooping him up and kissing the top of his head.

"Did you call your dad?" Harlen asks from the kitchen, and I turn to look at him.

"Yeah, I'm meeting him for coffee at eleven tomorrow morning."

"Good." He smiles softly at me then goes back to making me a sandwich.

I walk into the living room. The furniture isn't as nice as in his bedroom, but it's still nice and really great quality. A black leather sectional with deep, wide cushions is situated in front of a black low-profile coffee table, where a beer bottle and remote are sitting. On the wall is the biggest TV I have ever seen in my life. Just like the bedroom, there is no art on the walls, but there are a few pictures in nice frames on an entertainment stand under the TV. I set Dizzy down on the couch then walk across the room to get a closer look at the photos.

I pick the biggest one up, and my heart clenches the same way it did earlier. Without asking, I know the man and woman in the photo are his parents. His dad looks so much like him that it's almost startling, with the same dark hair, beautiful dark eyes, same smile, and build. Wearing a plaid button-down and jeans, his arm is thrown around a tallish woman with dark hair. The sun above them shines down, highlighting the deep red undertones in her hair. Her face is turned up in profile, smiling at her husband, her hand resting on his stomach. Her body is tucked close to his side. Seeing them, my eyes start to burn and my breath goes funny.

"My mom and dad," Harlen says, and I feel a tear slide down my cheek, watching it land on the photo, and I quickly swipe the drop away. "Christ, baby." His voice is gruff as he gathers me against his big frame, and a sob rips up the back of my throat. He takes the photo from me, sets it down, and then picks me up, carrying me to the couch and settling me sideways in his lap. "Please don't cry."

"They look so happy," I whisper, trying to get myself under control.

"They were happy. I never saw them argue. Mom used to bicker, but Dad thought that shit was cute. He used to laugh about it, which would make her laugh."

“What happened to them?” I ask, lifting my head to look at him, and his body gets tight under me. Feeling that, I tuck my face against his neck. “Never mind. Forget I asked.” I wrap my arms around his middle, ignoring the disappointment I feel while listening to him pull in a deep breath.

“It was right before Christmas,” he begins, and my muscles bunch. “I was out with friends. My parents never locked the door. A guy walked right into the house while Mom and Dad were upstairs. The guy was in the middle of cleaning out the gifts from under the tree, when my dad confronted him. All Dad had was a baseball bat. Didn’t know the guy was armed. He shot Dad twice in the chest. Mom was hiding, but when she heard the shots, she came out, and since he didn’t want to leave a witness, he killed her too.

“God,” I breathe, closing my eyes as the pain for him wraps around my heart and lungs, making it hard to breathe. “I’m so, so sorry,” I choke out, knowing that isn’t even an adequate word. Him losing his parents was bad enough. Him losing them the way he did, is tragic. “Please tell me they caught the guy.”

“They caught him. He tried to pawn the necklace Dad got Mom for Christmas. I was with him when he bought it, so I knew it was missing and put a description in the report. Cops were able to track and catch him, since he used his ID with the pawn shop.”

“Good,” I whisper, tucking my face into his neck when I realize his history is exactly why he flipped out about my door not being locked the first time he came over to my house. “You were still a kid when you lost them,” I say after a moment, and he pulls my face out of his neck and runs his thumbs under my eyes, swiping away the wetness there.

“I was a kid, but lucky for me, my mom’s sister, Patricia, lived in the same town, so I went to live with her. She wasn’t a replacement for my parents, but we were close, and losing them brought us closer. We’re still tight; she comes to visit often. That’s why I had to get this place. She wasn’t cool with sleeping at the compound.”

“I bet not.” I scrunch up my face, and he smiles then shakes his head.

“She knows about you,” he tells me quietly, and my heart squeezes.

“What?” I whisper.

He slides his fingers across my cheek and up into my hair. “Like I said, we’re close. She knows about you, has known about you for a while now.”

“Will I get to meet her?”

“She’ll be here at Christmas, so yeah.” He nods, and my stomach dips.

“Awesome.”

“Yeah, awesome.” He smiles then leans in, kissing my forehead. “As much as I enjoy having you in my lap, you need to eat and we need to get to bed. I got work tomorrow.”

“Right,” I agree, but I don’t move. I lock my arms around him. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve had years to deal with their loss. Sucks sometimes when something good happens in my life and I don’t get to share it with them, but I’m okay.”

“Promise?” I press, and his face softens.

“Promise, baby.”

“Okay.”

He dips his face close to mine. “You all right?” he asks, and I feel my face match his softness.

“You are, so yeah, I am.” I run my fingers down the column of his throat. “I hurt for you and all you lost, but as long as you’re okay, I’m okay. But if you ever feel like talking to anyone, I’m here.”

“So damn sweet,” he murmurs, then his mouth is on mine, his lips firm and demanding while still being sweet and soft.

Running my hands through his hair, I hold on and kiss him back, trying to pour into that kiss how deeply I feel for him, how much I’ve come to care about him, and how happy I am that he’s mine. When he pulls away and our eyes lock, I swear I see my feelings staring right back at me.

“Come on.” He helps me stand then leads me into the kitchen, handing me a can of Sprite. He picks up a plate with a sandwich and chips, taking it with us back to his bedroom. Dizzy, who has made himself comfortable on the bed, pops his head up to look at us, but quickly lays it back down, closing his eyes.

I get into bed and open my soda then settle my plate on my lap before picking up the remote. “What do you want to watch?” I ask, watching him strip down to his boxers.

“Whatever you want,” he replies, and I look at the TV. Having grown up with brothers, I know that’s a lie. He probably wouldn’t be into one of the dance shows I like, or *The Bachelor*.

“Here, you choose.” I hand him the remote when he settles on the bed next to me, his back to the headboard and his ankles crossed.

“Baby, I’m really good with whatever you want to watch,” he tells me as I

take a bite of my sandwich—ham and cheese with the perfect amount of mayo and mustard.

“You’d be okay with watching *The Bachelor*?” I raise a brow, and a pained look crosses his face. Laughing, I mutter, “You pick,” popping a chip into my mouth.

He settles on a crime drama. I finish eating, and as soon as I’m done, he takes my plate away and curls me into his side. I rest my head against his chest, my arm over his abs and my thigh over his, and watch TV with him until I eventually fall asleep.

Sitting at a small booth at the back of the coffee shop the next morning, my stomach knots when I see my dad walk by the windows at the front. I pick up my coffee and take a sip as he enters, and his eyes come to me. Seeing him close in on the table I’m sitting at, I realize his guard is up and he’s nervous. Realizing that, the knot in my stomach loosens. My dad doesn’t get scared or nervous, so I know he must be feeling guilty, and even though I’m still upset with him, I don’t want that for him.

“I got you your usual,” I say when he takes a seat across from me, and his eyes go from guarded to soft in an instant.

“Did you poison it?”

“No.” I shake my head, then continue, “Only because I didn’t have any arsenic handy.”

“Fair enough.” He picks up the white paper cup and takes a sip then sets it down, keeping his hand wrapped around it. He scans the coffee shop, and then his eyes meet mine. “You know I love you, right?”

God, that question kills me, because I have never, not once in all my life, questioned my father’s love for me. Never.

“I know that,” I reply softly, holding his gaze.

“Know I’d do anything for you? Protect you with my dying breath?”

“I know.” My lungs burn, and I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat.

“When did you grow up?” The question is whispered, and tears I can’t fight start to form in my eyes. “You’re my baby girl. Christ, I look at you now, know you’re a woman, but... you’re still my baby in here,” he says gruffly, placing his hand over his heart.

A lone tear escapes and slides down my cheek. “Dad,” I whisper as he sits

forward, wiping the tear from my cheek and studying me.

“Your mom says she’s never seen you as happy as when she saw you with him.” God, I love my mom. I close my eyes, and he grabs my chin, shaking it gently. “Are you happy?”

“Yes.” I open my eyes back up and meet his gaze. “I’m happy.”

“Then I’ll find a way to deal.” He lets go of my chin and sits back.

“That easy?” I ask, and he shrugs his big shoulders.

“Tried to convince him three times to move on, and three times he’s told me what he’s thought of my suggestion. So I’m guessing he’s determined to be around a while.”

“Seriously, Dad?” My eyes narrow and he smiles.

“What? It didn’t work.” He shrugs, now grinning. “If it had worked, he wouldn’t have been worth your time anyway.”

Even though he has a point, I still continue to glare at him. “No more trying to scare him off, Dad. All it does is annoy him and piss him off.”

“He means that much to you, like I said, I’ll find a way to deal,” he says, and my eyes soften.

“Please give him a chance. I don’t know the future, or know what will happen between us, but what we have feels good. And I don’t want to feel like I’m choosing between the two of you.”

“You’d choose me, right?” he prompts, and for the first time in my life, the answer to that question isn’t an immediate yes. The truth is, I don’t know what I would do if I was forced to pick between Harlen and my dad, and I hope I never have to find out. Reading my expression, he mutters, “Fuck,” rubbing his jaw.

“I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too. But if he fucks you over, you get no say in the way I handle him.”

“Dad,” I sigh, shaking my head.

“Nope, that’s my stipulation,” he says firmly, in a tone I know all too well.

“Fine,” I mutter, rolling my eyes toward the ceiling.

When my eyes roll back down, I find him grinning. “So, when do I get to come over for breakfast?”

“Never,” I answer, and he kicks my foot with his boot and smiles at me.

Seeing that smile, I stand up and give him a hug, and as soon as his arms close tight around me, I know we're good.

"You got time to have lunch with your old man?" he asks, and I let him go and smile.

"Yep, but you're buying." I pick up my purse and settle it over my shoulder as he stands, bringing his coffee with him.

"When don't I buy?"

"I don't know." I laugh, listening to him chuckle as we head out of the coffee shop. Tossing his arm around my shoulders when we hit the sidewalk, I feel his lips touch the side of my head, and my arm around his waist squeezes tight. Nope, I hope I never ever have to choose between him and Harlen.

Chapter 7

Harmony

“DO NOT COME.” HARLEN’S harsh breath growls against my ear as he thrusts back into me hard, causing my own breath to hitch and my core to spasm.

“Harlen,” I whimper, close, so close, yet then again, I’ve been close for a while now. But each time I’m almost there, he changes positions, throwing me off balance and forcing me to build back up to it again.

“Don’t come,” he repeats, sliding his hand around my hip and zeroing in on my clit with outstanding accuracy.

“Oh God!” I cry out, and my head flies back when his fingers from one hand swirl as his other hand smacks my ass hard, so hard it sends a wave of pleasure through me. “Fuck! Take me.”

He speeds up his thrusts, and I bite my lip, trying to counteract the building pressure between my legs. “Up.” His hand slides up my hip and side then wraps under my breast, pulling me up to my knees. Licking over my shoulder, neck, then ear, he nips my earlobe. “Mouth.” I turn my head and open my mouth under his, and his tongue sweeps between my parted lips.

Whimpering down his throat, I slide my hand down his arm and join my fingers with his at my clit. “Honey, please,” I breathe against his mouth, hearing him groan.

“Come for me.” His fingers and hips pick up speed while the hand under my breast slides up. Two fingers pluck my nipple, and send a shot of heat right between my legs. My hips buck hard against his and my head falls backward against his shoulder. I turn my head and give him my mouth, coming as the tip of his tongue touches mine. I feel his hips jerk erratically then he plants himself deep, keeping himself there as he comes and groans against my tongue.

Breathing heavy, feeling my heart pounding against my rib cage, I smile against his lips then whisper there, “We beat the clock.”

“Yeah.” He pulls back enough to look at me then smiles when my alarm goes off.

Giggling, I turn my head and tuck my face into his neck, breathing in his warm scent. It’s been a week since we stayed at his house, and when he woke me this morning with his face between my legs, he told me we were going to

see how far we could get before my alarm went off. I think we did all right, since I got two orgasms before the alarm rang, the first one being from his mouth.

He gives me a squeeze, and my face comes out of his neck so I can look at him. "Are you getting up, or are you going to sleep for a while?" he asks, and I look at the clock, seeing it's still early—a little before eight. He has work today, but thankfully, I don't. Still, I do have stuff I need to get done today, which is why I set my alarm last night when we went to bed.

"I think I want to laze a bit," I tell him, and he smiles, kissing the tip of my nose.

"Turn off your alarm, baby. I'm gonna take a shower then get to the shop."

"Okay," I agree, and he gently pulls out of me and kisses my shoulder before I fall carelessly onto the bed, too tired to hold myself up. Hearing him chuckle, I reach my arm out and shut off my alarm. Then I turn to watch him saunter naked into my bathroom, enjoying the view of the muscles of his back and ass flexing until he's out of sight. I hear the shower go on and smile to myself, pull the sheet and blanket up over my shoulder, and close my eyes.

I wake, feeling my hair being slid off my forehead, and blink my eyes open, finding him dressed and sitting on the side of the bed. "Didn't want to wake you, but figured I should," he says quietly, and I nod, trying to keep my heavy, tired eyes open.

"I fed Dizzy and let him out. You're good to sleep for a while."

"Thanks, honey," I murmur.

His eyes get warm right before he dips his head so he can place a soft kiss against my lips, whispering there, "Message me when you get up."

"Kay," I agree, as I lose the battle with my eyelids and they slide closed. I feel his lips touch my hair then he tucks the blanket tighter around me. After that, I don't feel anything, because I fall back asleep.

Waking when Dizzy jumps on the bed and starts to lick my face, I groan. "Dizzy, come on. I'm tired." I try to force him to lie down and cuddle with me, but he refuses. Instead, he licks my face and bounces around on the bed and my chest until I have no choice but to get up. I sit up, pulling him into my lap, then flip him to his back and rub his belly, watching his feet kick rapidly when I hit a good spot. "Do you want to run errands with me today?" I ask, and he rolls to his feet then starts to run in circles on the bed, giving me my answer.

I look at the clock. It's a little after ten, so I still have plenty of time to get

everything I need to get done, done. Part of what I want to do is cook dinner for Harlen, since he's always cooking for me, which means I need to get to the store to buy the stuff for a cowboy casserole, one of the few things I know how to make, and make well.

I roll out of bed, find my nightgown on the floor, and pull it down over my head, and then I tug on my robe, tying the belt around my waist. I gather my hair up in a ponytail on the way into the bathroom, then clean up and brush my teeth. Grabbing my cell phone off my side table, I head out of my bedroom with Dizzy dancing at my heels. After opening the back door for him, I send Harlen a quick text letting him know I'm up before heading for the kitchen to make coffee.

Hearing my doorbell ring when I'm filling the coffeepot, I frown and shut off the water. No one I know would be here this time of day, since everyone I know works. Going to the door, I lift up on my bare feet and look out the peephole. When I see it's a guy I haven't met but know lives across the street, I open my door, staying behind it and keeping my body out of sight, since my robe is short enough to be inappropriate.

"Hey," I greet.

He gives me a tight smile then steps back, forcing two boys that are maybe seven and fourteen out of hiding to stand in front of him. "Sucks to meet you like this," he says, and I look from the boys to him. "I'm Gareth." If I didn't have Harlen, I would be finding out if he's married, because he's gorgeous, with lots of tattoos, dark, almost black hair, and piercing blue eyes. "This is Max." His large hand wraps around the younger boy's blond head, and his green eyes smile up at me. "And Mitchell." He wraps his hand around the older boy's shoulder, and I see that he looks like his dad, with the same dark hair and stunning blue eyes. "We live across the street."

"Nice to meet you guys. I'm Harmony," I reply.

Gareth nods then looks toward my driveway before turning to me once more. "The boys were playing ball in the front yard and hit your car, broke out the taillight."

"We're sorry," both boys say in unison, and I look at them and smile softly.

"It's okay." I slide my eyes from them to look at their dad. "Can you give me a few minutes to get dressed and I'll come check it out?"

"Sure." He nods.

"Thanks, be right back." I shut the door and head for my room. I go to my closet and pull on a pair of sweats, grab a bra and a long sleeved T-shirt,

putting both on before heading back toward the front door. Sliding my feet into my flip-flops, I open the door and find them still standing outside waiting for me. I follow them to the back of my car and find that the taillight is not just broken, but shattered. Even the bulb is busted.

“Who hit the ball?” I ask, and the boys look between each other while their dad goes tense at my side, probably thinking I’m going to lose my mind. “Just saying whoever did could play for the Mets.”

“It was me,” Mitchell says, his chest puffing out with pride. “But I don’t want to play for the Mets. I want to play for the Yankees.”

Smiling at him, I listen to his dad laugh then watch as he ruffles his son’s hair playfully.

“We’re really sorry about this,” Gareth says, tucking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Not sure how you wanna take care of it, but I work part time at a shop in town. If you come in, I’ll fix it, or you can bill me. Whatever works.”

“Can I let you know?” I ask, wondering if my warranty will cover the cost of having it fixed.

“Of course,” he agrees, giving me a smile, and that smile makes him even more gorgeous.

“Dad, I’m hungry,” Max says, and he pulls his eyes from me to look at his youngest boy.

“When aren’t you hungry, kid?”

“I don’t know.” Max shrugs, looking down at his feet.

“I’m hungry too, Dad. Can we go to McDonald’s?”

“Christ,” Gareth mutters, and his eyes come back to me when I laugh.

“Go feed your boys. I’ll let you know what happens with the taillight.”

“Right.” He lifts his chin. “Nice meeting you, Harmony.”

“You too, and thank you for being honest about this.” I toss out my hand toward the trunk of my car.

“Anytime. Later.” He lifts his chin once more, turning on his boots.

“Later.” I smile, watching the boys run, skip, and push each other as they cross the street and head up their walkway.

Pulling my attention from them, I look at my taillight and mentally add getting it looked at to my list of things I need to do, before I head back inside

to finish making coffee. Once the pot is done brewing, I take a cup with me outside and lean against the railing, wishing I had at least something to sit on. I need to get some chairs, a table, and maybe a barbeque for out here, but my first priority is rugs for the living room and my bedroom. Winter will be here before long, and wood floors tend to be cold, so I need something to help counteract that. I also need a bed for my guest room, and maybe a desk and chair for my third bedroom, but I still haven't decided what I want that room to be yet.

Thinking about all the things I still need to buy for the house and all the money I will eventually have to spend, I sigh. I love having a place to call my own and a house to decorate, but not having an endless supply of money to do what I want sucks. Taking a sip of coffee, I watch Dizzy for a few more minutes then go back inside, leaving the door cracked for him to get in.

I take a quick shower, leaving my hair dry so I don't have to blow it out again, then get dressed in a pair of jeans, a lavender long sleeve, scoop-neck T-shirt, and a pair of strappy cream-colored sandals. After I finish getting dressed, I do minimal makeup—mascara, bronzer, and blush—then go in search of Dizzy. Finding him still running around the backyard, I call him inside, close the door, and lock it before grabbing my bag and my keys from the island. I stop when my cell starts to ring, and I pull it out of my purse. Seeing a local number I don't recognize on the screen, I put it to my ear as I head toward the front door.

"Hello," I answer, grabbing Dizzy's leash that's wrapped around the handle of the coat closet in the hall.

"Harmony Mayson?" a woman asks, and I frown.

"Yes."

"Hi, this is Julianne Drudgery. I teach the trauma and critical care class at the hospital."

"Hi, Julianne," I say, looking down at Dizzy, who's waiting impatiently for me to hook his leash to his collar.

"I just had a student drop out of the class and wanted to know if you'd be interested in filling her spot. Of course, you'd have to make up a couple of assignments, but it shouldn't take much to get you caught up."

"Really?" I whisper in surprise and happiness.

"Really." She laughs. "Are you interested?"

"Yes!"

I hear her smile when she murmurs, "That's great news. Can you come by

the hospital today to pick up the paperwork you need to fill out and the assignments to complete by class next week?"

"Absolutely."

"Good, just come to the basement. You'll see a sign directing you to the classroom as soon as you get off the elevator. I'll see you when you get here, and we'll talk then."

"Thank you so much. See you soon." I hang up.

Staring at my phone for a moment, I smile then toss my hands up in the air and let out a loud whoop. Dizzy barks, spinning in circles at my feet, happy because I'm happy. Picking him up, I hold him to my chest. "I'm sorry, boy, but since I gotta go to the hospital, you can't come with me." I kiss the top of his head and he licks my chin. "Don't worry. I'll bring you back something special from the store." I rub behind his ears then set him back to his feet.

Hanging his leash back up on the knob, I head for the door, feeling like I'm floating on air. Getting in my car, I start it up, back out of my driveway, and head straight for the hospital. When I arrive twenty minutes later, I get in the elevator and head down to the basement, and just like Julianne said there would be, there's a sign with an arrow pointing to the classroom that's at the end of a long hall. When I reach the door, I find the lights out and the door locked.

"Harmony?" a woman calls loudly, and I turn to find a petite, older woman with lots of curly white hair coming toward me from down the hall, wearing bright blue scrubs and white clogs.

"Yes."

"Sorry, I had to run upstairs." She comes forward and sticks out her hand to me. "I'm Julianne. It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too." I smile while I wrap my hand around hers.

"Dr. Hofstadter said you were pretty. He didn't lie," she says, and the smile I'm wearing slides right off my face.

"Dr. Hofstadter?" I ask, and her head tips to the side.

"He's the one who recommended you as the replacement student for the class," she explains, and my stomach drops.

"Oh," I whisper, wondering how he knew I wanted to take the class. We never spoke about it, and I never even mentioned I want to work in the emergency room when I was around him.

"Isn't he such a nice guy?" she asks, keeping hold of my hand, and I try to

focus on her and not the unease filling my stomach.

“Uh, yeah. Nice,” I agree, and she grins.

“Well...” She gives my hand a squeeze before letting it go. “You’ll have to take him out for coffee as a thank you for the recommendation.” She turns and unlocks the door, and I stare at her back, thinking, *That is never going to happen*. “Come on in,” she calls, and I come unglued from my spot just outside the door and move into the room behind her. Looking around the empty class, my stomach turns with indecision. I know I don’t want to miss out on this opportunity, but I also don’t want to owe Dr. Hofstadter anything, and I have a feeling that if I take this class, I will be setting myself up for just that.

“Here’s the paperwork and the reading material we went over this week, along with the homework assignments you will have to complete before class starts next week.” She holds out a thick folder toward me, and I stare at it like it’s a snake ready to strike. “Are you okay?”

“Um... yeah, sorry.” I shake my head and take the folder from her, trying to smile but failing miserably.

“It’s okay.” She gives my shoulder a reassuring pat. “Class is from ten to four on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, every week for nine weeks. In your case, eight, since you missed out on class this week.”

“Okay.”

“If you have any questions, my cell number is in the packet. You can call me any time, and I’ll be more than happy to help you out with whatever you might need.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem, and...” She smiles softly. “If you’re worried about what you missed this week, don’t be. We didn’t do much in class besides get reacquainted with health and safety regulations. Next week is when the fun will start.”

“I’m looking forward to that.” I give her a small genuine smile, and she studies me for a moment like she’s trying to figure something out.

“Is your plan to work in the emergency room here at this hospital?”

“That’s my goal.”

“This class will help you get your foot in the door, and I’m sure Dr. Hofstadter will give you a recommendation. He couldn’t say enough good things about you when we spoke this morning.”

Yes, I'm totally setting myself up. *I'm so screwed.*

"Thank you for this opportunity, and I'll see you next week."

"See you next week," she agrees cheerfully, and I leave the classroom. I go back down the hall to the elevator, and once inside, I open the packet and look at the outline for the class. It all seems easy enough, and I know I won't have a problem with the workload if I take the class. I just don't know if I want to take it now.

Closing the folder when I reach the lobby, I head outside to the parking lot, and when I reach my car, I get in, start the engine, put on my seat belt, and then stare at the hospital in front of me. "What should I do?"

With no answer from the windshield, I put my car in reverse, back out of the parking space, and then drive to the grocery store, where I pick up stuff to make dinner and a frozen chocolate cream pie, because everyone knows pie makes everything okay. I also get Dizzy some peanut butter doggie ice cream from the frozen food section. When I get home, I drop the folder with the information for the class on the island and try to forget about it as I get to work on dinner, but no matter what I do, I can't seem to stop thinking about it.

Needing to talk to someone about it, I pick up my cell phone and dial Willow.

"Hey, I was just thinking about you," she says, answering on the second ring, and I smile, holding my phone between my ear and shoulder.

"Maybe our twin ESP is finally kicking in," I joke, spreading cheddar cheese over the spicy ground beef I cooked earlier.

"I doubt that." She laughs, and I grin, thinking about a game we used to play when we were younger. I'd think of a number, and she would try to guess it by reading my mind, and I'd do the same to her. It never worked, ever, but that didn't stop us from trying over and over again. "So what's going on? How are you and Harlen?"

"We're good. I just needed someone to talk to about something happening at work."

"What's that?" she asks, as I start laying out the tater tots on top of the shredded cheese.

"You know that trauma class I wanted to take at the hospital?" I question.

"The one you didn't get into?" she asks, and I nod even though she can't see me.

"Yeah. Someone dropped out of the class, so one of the doctors put in a

recommendation and I got a call this afternoon that a spot's mine if I want it," I tell her as I open the door to the oven.

"That was nice."

"It was nice, except this doctor gives me the heebie-jeebies, and now I'm not sure if I should take the class. I don't want to feel like I owe him," I tell her, putting the casserole dish in the oven.

"Are you worried that if you accept a place in the class, he's going to hold it over your head?"

"I don't know," I sigh. Hearing it said out loud from someone else makes it seem ridiculous.

"I think you should take the class, and if he says anything you're not comfortable with, just talk to HR about it."

"I guess you're right." I chew my bottom lip, wondering if I'm overthinking this, but feeling like I'm not.

"Don't overthink it."

"Now you really are reading my mind." I laugh.

"No, I just know you. You overthink everything. It's who you are. It's a good thing most of the time, but sometimes you just need to accept things as they come."

"I'll try," I agree, setting a timer on the stove.

"Good, now tell me when I get to come for a waffle breakfast?"

Apparently my mom has been bragging to everyone about Harlen's waffles.

"You know you're always welcome, waffles or not."

"Have you gotten a bed for your guest room yet?" she asks, and I let out a deep breath.

"Not yet. It's on my long list of things I still need to get for the house, but I should have one before Christmas hopefully."

"Christmas is a ways away."

"I know," I agree. I also know I might not have the money until after Christmas, depending on how much I spend on gifts for everyone.

"Well then, I'll come down before that and sleep on your couch. We can spend the day vegging out, watching movies, and drinking way too much wine."

“You got a date.” I smile, walking into the living room and taking a seat on the couch before flipping on the TV.

“Good, because I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I whisper, hating that I haven’t seen much of her since I moved.

“I hate to run, but I need to get back to work,” she says, and I look at the clock on the DVR and see it’s just after four thirty. She doesn’t normally get off until five thirty sometimes six depending on what time the bank closes.

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you too, talk soon.”

“Talk soon.” I hang up and drop the phone to the coffee table. Flipping through channels, I stop on a crime drama and end up so engulfed in the show that I scream when Harlen appears in the living room, having used the key I gave him to get in.

“Christ, what the fuck?” he asks, as Dizzy jumps off the couch and runs to him, circling and bouncing at his feet.

“You scared me.” I hold my hand to my chest, feeling my heart pound against my palm.

“I see that.” He bends to scoop up Dizzy and comes to where I’m still sitting on the couch. “What are you watching that’s got you freaked?” he asks, and I lose sight of the TV when he blocks it and I try to look around his big frame.

“A show about a girl that went missing. No one knows what happened to her. She got in a car accident and called the cops, but when the cops got to where her car was, she was gone, vanished, and she’s been missing for years now.”

“You really think you should be watching that shit?” he questions.

I shrug, looking up at him. “It’s interesting.”

“It might be interesting, but it obviously freaks you out.” He shakes his head, dropping Dizzy to the couch before bending at the waist to put his fist in the cushion on either side of my hips. “What happened to your taillight?”

“Crap.” I lean my head back and close my eyes. I totally forgot about my taillight and spaced getting it fixed after I went to the hospital and the grocery store.

“Did you get in an accident?” he asks, sounding concerned, and I open my

eyes to look at him.

“No, the boys from across the street were playing in their front yard and accidentally hit a ball into my car. I was supposed to take it to get it looked at this afternoon, but I forgot all about it being busted.”

“I’ll drop you off at work tomorrow and take it to the shop,” he says, and I smile.

“Thanks, honey.”

“No problem, Angel. Now, are you finally going to fucking kiss me?”

“I don’t know.” I grin, and he growls, lifting a hand, tangling his fingers into my hair, and bringing my mouth close to his.

“You don’t know?”

“You could kiss me,” I suggest, looking into his beautiful eyes.

“I could,” he agrees, but he doesn’t. Instead, his eyes drop to my mouth.

“Harlen?”

“Yeah, baby?” His gaze lifts to meet mine and I slide my fingers up into his hair, putting pressure on the back of his neck.

“Please kiss me,” I whisper, and he smiles right before he slants his head and places his lips against mine. Feeling his tongue touch my bottom lip, my mouth opens and he slides in. Liking that so much, I whimper into his mouth and lift myself higher to get more of him. Then I groan in annoyance when I hear the timer for the stove go off. “That’s dinner,” I tell him, after pulling my mouth from his, and he turns to look toward the kitchen.

“You cooked?” he asks, not even holding back his surprise.

“Yes.” I grin, wrapping my hands around his shoulders and pushing back, but he doesn’t budge, not even an inch.

“What’d you make?”

“Cowboy casserole.”

“Don’t know what that is, but it smells fucking amazing.”

“It tastes amazing too, unless it’s burnt, so you need to let me up so that doesn’t happen,” I say, and he kisses my nose then pulls me up from the couch to stand in front of him. I walk into the kitchen and grab a set of potholders as he goes to the fridge to grab a beer. Pulling the casserole dish out of the oven, I smile when I see the tater tots are the perfect color of golden brown and the cheese is melted and bubbling.

“You made tater tots?” he asks, and I turn to look at him, finding his brows drawn together.

“No, I made cowboy casserole. It just has tater tots on it,” I correct, setting the dish down on another potholder. Then I go to the fridge to pull out the salad I made earlier, a couple of kinds of dressing, and a tub of sour cream, which is a necessity when you’re having cowboy casserole.

“What’s this?” he asks, and I look to where he’s standing at the island and see him leafing through the folder for the class that I left there.

“That trauma class I wanted to take, the one I didn’t get into.” He nods, knowing what class I’m talking about, since I told him when I found out I didn’t get accepted. “A student dropped out, so I have a spot if I want it,” I finish, watching him take a swig from his beer and his eyes come back to me.

“You don’t seem excited,” he observes, and I turn to grab two plates from the cupboard.

“I don’t know how I feel about it yet,” I say, avoiding looking at him.

“Why’s that?” he pushes, and I wonder how to tell him, or what to tell him exactly.

“There’s a doctor at work, and he kinda makes me uncomfortable. He’s the one who recommended me for the open spot in the class,” I confess, placing scoops of the casserole on each plate along with some salad.

“Look at me,” he growls, and even though I don’t really want to look at him, because the energy in the room has shifted and he sounds angry, I still turn my head to meet his gaze. “How’s he make you uncomfortable?”

“I just don’t like the way he makes me feel. And one of the nurses I work with says she’s heard rumors about him and that there are other nurses who have lost their jobs while he’s kept his,” I admit quietly, and his jaw clenches.

“You never mentioned this before.”

“I know.” I watch his knuckles turn white around the beer in his hand. “I didn’t want you to worry.” I take a step toward him, watching him pull in a deep breath, and I rest my hands against his chest. “I’m probably just overthinking this, and who knows if the rumors are even true?”

“Who is he?” he asks, and my stomach twists.

“I’m probably overthinking this and worried about nothing,” I try again, and he dips his face closer to mine.

“Who is he?” he repeats, ignoring me.

“Harlen—”

“Who the fuck is he, Harmony?”

“His name is Hofstadter, but you can’t do anything to him. The only thing he’s done is ask me out. That’s it. He hasn’t technically done anything wrong.”

“He asked you out?” he clarifies, his voice dropping to a sinister whisper, and my eyes slide closed. *Shit*. “He asked you out?” he repeats once more, and my eyes open, meeting his.

“I... yes, but I told him no, obviously.”

“So you turned him down, and in return, he got you into a class that was full and has already started,” he surmises, and I feel my stomach drop. “Fuck,” he clips, and his eyes go over my head.

I slide my arms around his waist and rest my ear over his T-shirt covered chest, listening to his heart as it pounds heavily against his rib cage.

“Please calm down,” I whisper, and his arms slide around me, one going around my waist, the other around my shoulders, holding me tightly against his frame.

“You tell me if he does anything. I don’t give a fuck if it’s him offering you a fucking tissue after you sneeze, or a piece of gum. You tell me about it,” he orders, and I nod my head. “Take the class.”

“What?” I tip my head back to look up at him, and his face dips to meet my gaze.

“He might have given a recommendation, but you would have gotten in on your own eventually. He can’t hold that shit over your head, and if he tries, I’ll deal with him personally.”

“Harlen,” I sigh, dropping my eyes from his, and his arms give me a squeeze.

“He know you got a man?” he asks, and my body locks. “He doesn’t know,” he mutters, and I bite my lip.

“I didn’t have a chance to tell him,” I admit quietly, keeping my eyes off his.

“Right.”

“I was going to,” I defend quietly, not wanting him to think I wouldn’t tell him that I have a boyfriend.

“I believe you, baby.”

“Promise?” I question, tipping my head back to look at him, and the moment our eyes lock, his search mine.

“Promise.” He dips his head, brushing his lips across mine.

“Good.” I wrap my fingers around the side of his neck then lift up on my tiptoes to touch my mouth to his, and his arms tighten around me.

“You need me to help with anything?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No, I got it covered.”

“All right, finish up, babe. Let’s eat before it’s cold.” His lips touch mine then the top of my head before his arms loosen. I study him for a moment before I let him go and finish making our plates while he watches, leaning against the counter and drinking his beer.

Laying sprawled out on top of him, three hours and two servings of casserole and a slice of chocolate pie later, I stare blindly at the TV, trying not to think about what he meant when he said he would deal with Dr. Hofstadter personally, and failing miserably.

“Thanks for dinner, baby.” His words whisper across the top of my hair, and I lift my head off his chest to look at him.

“You’re welcome.” I run my fingers across his bearded jaw.

“It was the shit, even if it was tater tots.” He grins.

Laughing, I say, “Thank you. But I kinda guessed that when you finished off three servings.”

Smiling, his fingers run along my cheek then his voice drops. “Stop overthinking what I said earlier.”

“Are you a mind reader?”

“No, I just know you and that brain of yours.” He taps my temple with his index finger.

“Whatever,” I mutter, annoyed that he can read me just as easily as my sister can. Dropping my temple back to his chest, I look at the TV.

“Babe,” he calls, wrapping his fingers around my ear and sliding them around my lower jaw, forcing me to look at him again. “It will be okay.” Studying the soft look in his eyes, I believe him. “Promise.” He drags me up his body with his hands under my arms then puts pressure on the back of my head until our mouths touch. “You believe me?” he asks, against my mouth, and my eyes close.

“I believe you,” I whisper, knowing that even if it’s not okay, he will do everything he can to make it all right for me. And on that thought, I press my mouth to his then curl myself deeper into his chest, letting worry from earlier wash clean away.

Chapter 8

Harlen

WATCHING HARMONY HEAD down the sidewalk toward the double doors that will lead her into the hospital, I feel my scalp prickle. I look to the left and feel my jaw clench when I see the guy I spotted earlier with his eyes on Harmony. I clocked him sitting in his car when we pulled up, noted his brand new black Mercedes SUV is parked in one of the spots reserved for doctors. I also noted, even with the distance between us, his eyes are locked on Harmony and me through his windshield. Seeing that, I knew who he was without needing confirmation. I also knew that him realizing the fact that Harmony had a man, didn't sit real well with him.

Locking my eyes with his, I lift my chin, watching his chin shoot back and his eyes narrow. *Fuck but he's gonna be a problem.* Putting her car in drive, I take off toward the hospital exit and head across town to the shop. As soon as I arrive, I pull her car up and park in the lot out front, so I can fix her taillight at some point today.

I shut down the engine and get out, slamming the door and pulling my cell out of my back pocket. Finding a number I never thought I'd call, I hit send and press my phone to my ear, listening to it ring two times.

"Yo," Nico answers, and my jaw clenches.

Fuck, I don't want to talk to him, but I have no choice.

"You got time to meet me this evening?"

"Is Harmony okay?" he asks, and I wrap my hand around the back of my neck, thinking about the way she woke me this morning and the kiss she left me with when I dropped her off. She's definitely okay, but I want to keep her that way.

"She's fine."

"Where do you want to meet?" he asks after a moment of silence, and I stare down at my boots.

"Skitter's, at six."

"See you then." He disconnects and I shove my phone back into my pocket. Going into the garage, I pull a pair of coveralls on over my jeans and tee then get to work on an engine I've been rebuilding for the last two weeks.

Later that evening, I tag my cell off the top of my toolbox, pull up Harmony's number in my phone, and put it to my ear as I head out the open bay door and away from the loud noise in the shop.

"Hey, honey," she answers after the fourth ring, and I feel a smile twitch my lips. I never thought I'd like a woman calling me honey, but coming from Harmony, in her soft, sweet voice, I not only like it; I fucking love it.

"You got a second to talk?"

"Yep, just walked into the break room to warm up my lunch. Is everything okay?"

"Your light's fixed."

"That was quick. How much do I need to tell Gareth it cost?"

"It's on me," I say, knowing Gareth personally, and also knowing his ex left him over two years ago, abandoning him and his two boys behind. She also abandoned him with a mortgage and a shitload of bills, which is why he not only works full time at one of the local tattoo parlors, but also part time at a mechanic shop in town that his uncle owns.

"Are you sure?" she asks, and I can picture her biting her bottom lip—something she does when she's indecisive or overthinking shit.

"Baby, he's on his own raising two boys. He doesn't need a hit to his pocket for fixing your taillight when it cost me almost nothing to do it."

"So he is single," she mutters, sounding far too curious, and I frown at my boots.

"Yeah, he's single, but I'll remind you—you most definitely are not."

"I know that," she grumbles, and I shake my head. Christ, I don't know when I turned into the kind of man who gets jealous over petty bullshit. But with her, the word *mine* is constantly rolling around in my head, along with the urge to tattoo my name across her forehead.

"Since I got your car, I'll stop by your place, grab Dizzy, and bring him with me to pick you up. We'll stay at my place tonight. You good with that?"

"As long as I get to go to sleep with you and wake up with you, I don't care where I actually sleep," she answers, and my chest gets tight. She's not just saying that shit to say it. She doesn't give a fuck where she stays, as long as we're together. Fuck but I've fallen for her, and done it hard. "Besides, I like your bed more than I like mine anyway."

"You do?" I ask, surprised.

“Yeah, it’s like sleeping on a fluffy cloud of marshmallow goodness,” she says, and I laugh, shaking my head. “Seriously, it’s awesome,” she adds, and I smile.

“All right, Angel. I’ll be there when you get off. Everything been okay today?”

“It’s been quiet,” she murmurs, and her telling me she hates when it’s quiet ‘cause the day drags and she’d rather be home with me filters through my head. Yeah, I’m falling hard for her. “But things should pick up. I have two patients coming in soon.” She quiets when the microwave on her end of the line dings.

“Okay, eat. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“See you when I get off.” She hangs up, and I shove my cell into my back pocket.

Going back inside, I head for the office, where I find Wes sitting at the desk, glaring at a stack of papers in front of him. “We need to hire someone to run the office, so you can get back to work,” I tell him, and his eyes come to me as I lean against the doorjamb.

Rolling back from the desk, he runs his hands over his head and sighs. “Ten interviews in one week, man, and swear to God every single one of the chicks who applied came in here looking like they just rolled off the set of a nineties rock ‘n’ roll video. I don’t know about your woman, but July would lose her goddamn mind if she came here and saw a chick wearing a tube top, jean skirt, and heels prancing around the office, playing secretary.”

“Maybe we can convince one of them to throw on a cardigan over their tube top,” I suggest, and his lips twitch.

“You can sit in on the next interview and suggest that shit.” He laughs, then asks, “You taking off?”

“Yeah, I’m meeting up with Nico at Skitter’s in about thirty minutes.”

“You having a beer to bond, or do you need backup?”

“No bonding, it’s about Harmony,” I say, and his eyes narrow.

“What’s going on?”

“Doctor at the hospital asked Harmony out. He makes her uncomfortable. Didn’t like it much, but figured it wasn’t a big deal. Then today, I saw him, saw the way he watched her, and I didn’t like the vibe I was getting from him. As you know, the Mayson name tends to bring drama, so I’m trying to prevent that shit from happening before anything actually does happen.”

“You didn’t like the vibe you were getting?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “Don’t know what it was, just know I didn’t like the way he was watching her.”

“I’d never felt jealousy until I met July. It’s not a comfortable feeling, not even something I’d recognize before. Now, it’s an old friend, but at the beginning, I didn’t know what it was. Didn’t know what to do with it.”

“It’s not jealousy.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’ve accepted those feelings. This is different, and if she’s telling me that he makes her feel uncomfortable and there are rumors of nurses losing their jobs because of him, I need to make sure she’s protected.”

“That’s probably smart. With everything that’s happened with Dillon and Ashlyn recently, you can’t take a chance.”

“You’re right.” I lift my chin in agreement.

“You’ve fallen for her.”

“Hard and fast, brother,” I mutter, and he smiles.

“It’s a good ride. Hold on tight and enjoy it,” he murmurs back. He would know; him and his wife July fell hard and fast for each other. It wasn’t always easy and they had their own dramas, but things between them are solid and have been that way from pretty much the beginning. I’ve never seen my friend as happy as he is now.

“When did you turn so sentimental?”

“I do not fucking know. But it probably happened around the time I moved into a house and became the owner of a bird, a dog and a fucking cat.” He laughs and I smile. “I’ll go with you to Skitter’s.” He stands, but I shake my head.

“I’m good going alone. Go home to your wife.”

“I know you’re good.” He claps my shoulder. “But I also remember a time when you had my back when I needed it. I’ll never forget that. Haven’t had a chance to return the favor until now. So I’m going with you. Besides, I need a beer and some entertainment, and I figure I’ll get both if I go. I don’t imagine Nico’s warmed up to the idea of you with his daughter in the last week, regardless of what he’s told her.”

“You’d probably be right about that,” I chuckle.

“Let’s roll. Don’t want to make a bad first impression on your future father-in-law,” he says, walking through the door, and I laugh while following him out to my bike.

Parking in the dirt lot of Skitter's at ten to six, I shut down my bike as Wes pulls up and parks next to me. Skitter's is in the middle of nowhere, off one of the back-country roads in town. Three years ago, it was nothing more than a rundown cabin. Then a couple from Montana bought it and the surrounding fifteen acres. They put thousands of dollars into the renovations, with plans to turn it into a small winery.

They didn't take into account the two well-established wineries in the area, both on hundreds of acres set on hilltops with views of nothing but open land, rolling hills, and pure beauty. Knowing they had no way of contending with the competition, they changed the name from Sovon's to Skitter's and started serving beer and bar food. The place immediately became popular with bikers, locals, and those just passing through.

Climbing off my bike, I tuck my keys into the front pocket of my jeans and head toward the front porch of the bar, where there are a few people standing outside smoking and watching the TV that's chained to the wall. I enter after Wes and I scan the room. Even on a weeknight, the place is packed; every stool lining the bar is taken up, along with most of the tables on the floor.

"Gonna get a beer. You want one?" Wes asks, and I lift my chin in the affirmative then watch him head toward the bar while I go in search of a table. I find one in the back near the jukebox that's playing some country song about a man, his pickup truck, and his dog. Taking a seat, Wes comes over handing me my beer and sitting in the chair on the opposite side of the table from me. "Was thinking on the way over here, man. We should talk to Evan about this, see if he can find anything out about the rumors and if any of it's true."

"I thought about that too. I'll give him a call tomorrow," I say at the same time I spot Nico at the bar getting a beer from the bartender. The second our eyes lock, he walks our way, his long stride eating up the distance quickly. It doesn't surprise me that he tried to convince me to leave Harmony alone, and if I were anyone else, it might have worked. Even at his age, he's fit with an air of intimidation that's hard not to notice when you're around him. It's not his tattoos or piercings. It's more than that. It's how he carries himself, how you know just by looking at him that if you cross him, he will have no problem taking you out with a bullet between your eyes. What he didn't account for when he came at me is I would have no problem doing the same, without even blinking.

"Wes... Harlen." Nico lifts his chin to Wes then me before taking a seat, resting his beer on the top of his knee. "What's going on?"

"I need a favor," I tell him, and he lets out a bark of laughter, tossing back

his head and leaning back in his chair.

“You need a favor from me?” He lifts his head and his hand holding his beer, pointing at himself with his index finger.

Fuck.

My jaw clenches, and it takes everything in me to stay seated and to not walk away from him. If this didn’t have to do with my woman’s safety, I would walk away, but only after laying his ass out.

Gritting my teeth, I lean forward in my chair. “There’s a doctor at the hospital who makes Harmony uncomfortable. Rumor is he’s gotten a couple of nurses fired. I don’t know if those rumors are true, but I do know all rumors have a little bit of truth to them. He asked her out, and she turned him down. Yesterday, she got into the class she wanted to take. He got her in by giving a recommendation. She tells me that it’s not a big deal, but seeing how drama is constantly swirling around the Mayson family name, I’m ignoring her and following my gut. My gut says this guy is bad news.” I lean even closer. “I came to you, because you’re her dad and a cop. Personally, I don’t mind dealing with him myself, but I figured you might like me even less if I’m in prison for beating the shit out of a motherfucker. So yeah, I’m here asking you for a favor.”

“Jesus,” Wes mutters, but I ignore him and keep my eyes locked on Nico’s.

“He makes her uncomfortable?” Nico questions, and I lift my chin. “Fuck.” He lifts his free hand, running it through his hair. “Who is he?”

“Last name’s Hofstadter. He drives a G63 Mercedes. Besides that, I don’t know much about him.”

“Fuck,” he clips again, shaking his head. “She didn’t tell me about this.”

“She wasn’t exactly an open book when I found out about it,” I mutter, taking a pull from my beer, and his eyes change, causing me to brace.

“How close are you two?”

“Close.”

“How close?” he presses.

“What exactly are you asking me?”

“Do you love my daughter?”

Studying him for a long moment, I make a decision then lean forward once more. “No disrespect, but the first person who’ll hear that information come out of my mouth is not fucking you.”

“Fuck me.” He sighs, shaking his head. “I knew it. Fuck.” He looks away.

“Look at us, one big happy fucking family,” Wes mutters, and I fight back a smile.

“I hope you both have daughters one day, so you can experience the pain I’m feeling right now,” Nico says, looking between Wes and me, and an image of a little girl with lots of golden-brown hair and eyes just like Harmony’s fills my mind. Until Harmony, I never thought about the future. I always lived one day at a time, not putting much thought into where I was going. But with her, I want that. I want to make plans, I want her to be my wife, to have my ring on her finger, and my last name attached to hers. I want to have kids, at least a couple of them. I want to wake up early on Saturday mornings and run out for doughnuts then lounge around all day in our pajamas like I used to do with my parents before I lost them. Fuck but I want that with a hunger that is almost unbearable.

“You marry my girl, you better not even fucking think about taking her to the courthouse.”

I raise a brow at him, and ask, “You givin’ me your blessing to marry your daughter?”

“Would you even ask me?” he counters.

“Probably not,” I reply, and his eyes narrow.

“I see I should have laid off the kid she was dating a few years ago. At least he knew when to back the fuck down.”

“You’d want that kind of man for your girl?” Wes asks. Nico looks at him, and Wes shakes his head, holding up his beer in Nico’s direction with his finger out. “You wouldn’t. Him”—he points at me—“having your girl’s back means you don’t have to worry about her going it alone, carrying the weight a man should help her carry. And in the future, if I do have a daughter, I pray to God she finds a man who’s a *man*, not a fucking pussy that leaves her to deal with all the shit life throws her way on her own. Your daughter might be able to find someone you like more for her, but I guaran-fucking-tee you she won’t find anyone better than the man she has right now.” With that, Wes pushes back from the table and stands, not understanding the blow he just dealt. “Now, I need another beer. Either of you want one?”

“I’m good,” Nico says, and Wes nods at him then looks at me.

“I’ll take one.”

He lifts his chin and heads for the bar.

“He’s right,” Nico grumbles, and my eyes go to him. “I don’t like it, but

he's right." He takes a pull from his beer, sets the half empty bottle on top of the table, and stands. "I'll let you know what I find out. In the meantime, take care of my girl."

"Always."

"Sophie wants you two over for dinner on Harmony's next day off. Make sure that happens," he murmurs, and I lift my chin, getting the same gesture from him in return before he disappears into the crowded bar.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself, taking a pull from my almost empty beer. "Fuck." That shit did not go as planned, but then again, I'm thinkin' it went way fucking better. On that thought, I grin.

Lying on Harmony's couch, Dizzy sprawled out on my chest, eyes pointed to the TV, I hear Harmony's car pull up. Dizzy, who hears it too, jumps up to stand on my chest, bounces once making me grunt, and then hops off me and the couch, taking off toward the door.

It's Tuesday, five days since I met with Nico. The day after I met with him, I spoke with Evan to see if he could find out any information for me, and this morning while Harmony was in the shower, he called. He was able to find out that there have been way more than two nurses at the hospital who got fired unexpectedly, but he's having trouble finding out why. Still, he's digging, and hopefully, I will know something soon.

Harmony's told me that Hofstadter hasn't approached her again and that she hasn't seen him around the hospital, which could mean he's either decided to back down or is trying to come up with a new game plan. I'm hoping for the first and preparing for the second.

Coming out of my head when the front door opens, I watch Harmony walk in carrying an iced coffee in one hand and two reusable grocery bags in the other.

"Angel, I just went grocery shopping yesterday," I remind her, something she should remember, since she bitched about all the food in the fridge—like she's done every time I've stocked it. She complains she won't be able to order takeout and will have to cook, when she hardly ever cooks, since I do it most of the time.

"I know." She smiles. "This is for Mom and Dad's." She heads to the kitchen, dropping the bags to the counter before coming to me.

"I thought we were going to their place for dinner?"

"We are, but I'm making crab cream cheese delight to take with us," she

says. I have no idea what that is, but I have no doubt it will be really fucking good. She hasn't cooked much, but when she does, it always tastes amazing. Seeing she's close but not close enough, I do a half ab curl, wrap my hands around her hips, and pull her down on top of me, kissing her hard and fast. I listen to her whimper before pulling my mouth from hers and lying my head back against the arm of the couch.

"How was class?" I question, sifting my fingers through her hair, and she rests her chin on one hand at my chest, her other hand curving around my neck.

"Good." She shrugs. "Easy."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I still wish I could have spent the morning in bed with you then been here when you got home," she says quietly, while she studies her fingers that are lazily running down my throat.

Hearing her call this home, my hand on her hip tightens. "I'll take Thursday off. We'll spend the day together, maybe go for a ride on my bike, and then out to dinner."

"Really?" she whispers, her eyes locked on mine, and her hand slides up to cup my cheek as her thumb skims over my cheekbone.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because I don't know what to do with you," she answers.

"Why's that?"

"I don't know." She shrugs, glancing away before looking back at me and continuing. "I never knew I could have this with someone, this easiness, this kind of bone-deep happiness. But with you, I feel it everyday, and everyday, it gets better and better. So when you do sweet things like say you're going to take time off work so we can spend time together, that better is *way* better." She pulls in a deep breath before finishing quietly, having already knocked me on my ass. "And I don't know what to do with that."

"Fuck." I sit up, forcing her to her back, then loom over her with my face close to hers. "How long is it going to take you to cook the shit you bought to take to your parents?" I ask, and she blinks up at me, looking a little stunned by our new position.

"I... wha— Why?"

"Because I want to eat you and fuck you, so I need to know how much time I got. Need to know if I got time to take you with my mouth, or if I need to

just fuck you, leaving the eating you part for later.”

“Oh,” she breathes, then she turns her head and looks at the DVR player and the time there.

“Angel,” I growl impatiently, and her eyes come back to me. The raw, primal desire there, is hard to miss.

“I... I don’t think you have time to eat me,” she whispers, and fuck me, my mouth actually waters at the idea of tasting her.

“That’s all right.” I run my tongue up her neck, then whisper in her ear, “Means I get to take my time eating dessert when we get home.”

“Oh,” she moans, her hips lifting into mine. Raising my head above hers, I look into her beautiful eyes then lose sight of them as I slant my head and take her mouth in a deep, long, hot kiss before I fuck her on the couch. After we’ve both come, I watch her walk naked toward her bedroom carrying her clothes, and yank up my jeans.

“Want a beer?” she asks, coming out a few minutes later wearing no bra, a white tank, and sweats cut off as shorts, running her fingers across the back of my neck.

I tip my head back to look at her upside down. “Yeah, baby.”

“Kay.” She bends over, kissing me upside down, then leans back and smiles before heading to the fridge, coming back a second later with a beer. She hands it to me with another kiss before disappearing into the kitchen.

Sitting on her couch, bare feet up on the coffee table, beer in my hand, listening to her in the kitchen, I know without the shadow of a doubt that every single moment in my life led me right to her, that not only am I in love, but I’m in love with her in a way I will be until the day I die.

Chapter 9

Harmony

HEADING TO MY PARENTS', sitting next to Harlen in the passenger seat of his SUV—an SUV that should have been towed to a junkyard about a century ago—I shift, hearing the worn, dried, and cracked leather crunch under me.

“Honey, exactly how old is this thing?” I ask.

He glances over at me quickly before looking at the road once more. “Why?”

“Just wondering how long it takes leather to go from...” I pause, trying to figure out how not to hurt his feelings. “Well... leather to dust,” I say, and he laughs, loud, squeezing my fingers that are threaded through his.

“It’s a ninety-two,”

“A ninety-two?” I repeat on a whisper, looking around the interior. The back seats look just as bad as the front, maybe even worse, the material ripped and flaking off in spots. The carpet on the floor is missing in huge chunks, the metal showing through, and the outside is mostly rust. Sheesh, it’s not just old; it’s really old.

“Yeah a ninety-two.”

“Do you think maybe it’s time for an upgrade? I mean, it doesn’t have to be anything crazy. It can even be like a two thousand or something.”

“I don’t need anything newer. I only drive this when I can’t ride my bike, and luckily, that’s not often.”

“So you’re saying I’ll probably ride in this thing more than just this once,” I surmise, thinking I should update my tetanus shot sooner rather than later.

Laughing, he lifts my hand to his lips, kissing my fingers. “Yeah, baby, that’s what I’m saying.”

“Are you opposed to seat covers?” I ask, and he smiles at the windshield.

“No.”

“Well at least there’s that,” I mumble, enjoying the sound of his laughter when he does it again, and then his eyes come to me briefly as we pull onto the road that will take us to my parents’ house.

“You worried about dinner?”

“A little.” I pull in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I want tonight to go well. I want my dad to see me with you, and see how happy you make me, and maybe, just maybe, be happy for me that I found this,” I confess, and his fingers tighten around mine. “Are you nervous?”

He glances over at me and frowns. “No.”

I’m not even a little surprised by the firmness of his answer. I can’t imagine he’d be nervous about anything. He’d probably be just as blasé if he was the one who had to decide whether or not to press the button that would set off a nuclear bomb that could possibly start World War III.

“Should I be nervous?”

“I don’t know.”

“You gonna end things with me if things don’t go well?” he asks as we pull up and park in front of their house.

I laugh. “No.”

“It’ll be okay. It’s dinner, and your mom will be there. Even if your dad’s unhappy, he won’t let that show in front of her.”

“How do you know that?” I whisper, stunned. I know that, because I have spent my life around my parents. Dad always shields Mom from anything that could make her uncomfortable or upset her. But Harlen hasn’t been around my parents enough to know Dad will do that for her.

“I know, ‘cause I’ll do whatever I need to make sure tonight is good for you.”

“You and my dad are a lot alike,” I tell him as he shuts off the engine and looks at me doubtfully. “It’s true.” I slip off my seat belt then lean over the middle console between us, resting the hand that’s not holding his, against his chest. “You’re both protective of the people you care about. Gentle, even though looking at you, you’d never know you could be gentle. You’re both sweet, and kind.” I hold his eyes then whisper, “You’re the best men I know.”

“You love me.” It’s not a question; it’s a statement. And looking into his eyes, I realize I do. Holy shit, when did that happen? Holy shit, *how* did that happen?

“I...” I try to sit back, but before I can get away, he drags me out of my seat and settles me on his lap between him and the steering wheel.

Framing my face with his big hands, he pulls me close—so close, all I see is him. “I love you.”

“What?” I breathe, staring into his beautiful eyes, his breath mingling with

mine between us.

“I love you,” he repeats, and I shake my head, trying to wrap my head around the fact that he’s telling me he loves me, when I just realized I’m in love with him.

“How?” I close my eyes, dropping my forehead to his chin, feeling like an idiot for asking that question.

“Do you want a list of reasons?” he asks, sifting his fingers through the hair at the side of my head, and I know from his tone he’s smiling.

“No.”

“That’s good, since it’s a long fucking list.” I open my eyes and tip my head back to look at him, finding he’s still smiling, and also finding his eyes soft and a look, that can only be described as love, shining brightly back at me. Sliding his hand down my cheek then neck, his fingers circle my throat then slide back into my hair, and he pulls me in, pressing his forehead to mine, where he whispers, “You love me.”

“Yes.” That one word comes out in a rush, and I feel my nose and eyes start to sting. I grip his shirt at his sides as my chin wobbles. “I’m going to cry.”

“No, you’re gonna kiss me.”

“No,” I deny, shaking my head. “I think I’m seriously going to cry.”

Using his hand in my hair, he tips my head to the side and brings my mouth closer to his, and then his tongue slides across my bottom lip. Feeling that, my lips part automatically and I taste him and kiss him back, completely forgetting about crying.

Ripping his mouth from mine, he mutters, “Fuck,” and I realize there is a light blinking on and off through my closed lids.

“What th—” I open my eyes and turn my head, feeling my eyes widen when I see my dad standing on the front porch with a flashlight directed our way—something he used to do when I was in high school and had a date drop me off and we were making out. “Seriously?”

“Fuck me,” Harlen grumbles, and I fight back the laughter I feel bubbling up inside my chest and look at him.

“We should go in,” I whisper, knowing just by looking at him that he does not want to go in to have dinner, but is doing this for me.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “Come on.” He opens his door then helps me get out, which is a little awkward, seeing how my back is to the door. Once my feet are on the ground, he gets out, slams the door, and then grabs the crab dip I

made from the back seat.

I smile up at him, and he grins before his eyes go to the front porch and his smile disappears.

Seeing his smile fade away, I look at my dad, who's watching us, looking—you guessed it—still pissed, and I do something I never ever in a million years would have done before. I grab Harlen's hand firmly in mine and walk toward my dad, saying loudly, "I just realized I'm in love, so if you're going to be a jerk, don't be. I like my bubble right now, and I don't want you to pop it."

"Christ." Harlen chuckles, and I look up at him, finding his eyes on his boots and a grin on his lips. Better.

"Boom," I hear a familiar voice rumble, and my eyes widen and shoot back to the porch.

"Shut it, Dad," my dad growls, and I keep scanning the dark until I find him, my grandpa sitting in one of the rocking chairs with a beer in his hand. The second our eyes lock, he smiles at me.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Grandpa," I whisper, and he stands, taking three steps across the porch and stopping at the top of the stairs. "What?" I look at my dad and back again. "What are you doing here?"

"Me and your grandma are here for a visit. Your grandma was gonna call to tell you we were in town, but your ma said you'd be here tonight for dinner, so we thought we'd surprise you," he says, and I rush up the stairs and wrap my arms around his waist. His arms close around me while his lips touch the top of my hair. "You doin' okay?"

"Yes!" I squeeze his waist then tip my head back to look up at him. "Even better now." I grin then whisper, "I'd like you to meet someone."

"All right." He touches his lips to my forehead again, then wraps his arm around my shoulders, tucking me into his side as I slide mine around the back of his waist.

Turning him to face Harlen, I smile huge and throw my hand out. "Grandpa, this is Harlen. Harlen, my grandpa." I wave my hand between them.

"Nice to meet you, sir." Harlen sticks out his hand, and Grandpa takes it, smiling at him.

"You too." Grandpa looks from Harlen to my dad, and something I don't

get passes between them before he releases Harlen, looks down at me, and smiles.

Okay, super weird, but whatever.

“Is grandma inside?” I ask on a squeeze of his waist, and he shakes his head.

“Nope, your mom and her had to run to town to pick something up.”

“Oh.” I frown, and he grins.

“They’ll be back soon.”

“How long are you in town for?”

“About a week.”

“Are you here to look for a place to live?” I ask hopefully, and he shakes his head.

“No, sweetheart.”

“Darn,” I whisper. “I’ll keep wishing.”

“Or you could bring your man and come for a visit,” he suggests, hugging me into his side.

“Yeah,” I agree, looking at Harlen and wondering if he’s ever been to Florida before. Then I wonder what he would look like in swim trunks. Probably hot.

“Can your old man get a hug?” Dad asks, sounding impatient.

My eyes fly over to meet his. “Are you gonna be nice?”

“Yes,” he grits out, and I roll my eyes and go to him. Wrapping my arms around his middle, I hug him tightly. “In love?” he asks the top of my head, and I nod. “Fuck.”

“Dad.”

“I know, your bubble,” he mutters, sounding amused and annoyed, and I let out a short laugh before giving him a squeeze and letting go.

As I move close to Harlen, his eyes come to me and I take the dish we brought from his hands. “You want a beer?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“Kay, be right back.” I slide up on my tiptoes, kiss his bearded jaw, and then head inside. Setting the dish on the counter in the kitchen, I go to the fridge and grab a beer for Harlen and a soda for myself, taking both toward

the front door. Just as I step out onto the porch, Mom and Grandma pull up and park. Seeing my Grandma wave through the windshield, I grin, hand Harlen his beer, and then skip down the steps right for the passenger door, swinging it open.

“My baby!” Grandma cries, getting out of the car and wrapping her arms around me in a warm, tight embrace, rocking me side-to-side the same way she’s done all my life.

“Hey, Grandma.” I lean back to look at her, and her hands frame my face. I’ve missed her. I’ve missed Grandpa too, but I’ve really missed my grandma. We’ve always been close, which made it really hard when the two of them moved away to Florida.

“You’ve been holding out on me, young lady,” she scolds, still smiling. “Your mom filled me in on this new man of yours when I got in this morning.”

“Sorry.” I look over the roof of the car at my mom, who smiles at us before slamming her door. “I hope she told you how awesome he is.”

“She did,” Grandma confirms, and my eyes go back to her. “Though, your dad does not seem to agree.” She winks, and I laugh.

“You can tell me what you think of him yourself, since he’s here,” I say, and she looks toward the porch, her eyes widening when they land on Harlen in his uniform of biker boots, dark jeans, and a long-sleeved navy blue Henley that fits him like a second skin showing off every one of his muscles.

“He’s big,” she whispers.

“Yeah,” I agree.

“And handsome,” she whispers again, and I smile.

“Yeah.”

“Perfect for my girl,” she finishes, and I feel my heart squeeze.

“I’m in love with him.”

“You didn’t have to tell me that.” She turns to me, cupping my cheek. “I see it in your eyes.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

“I just realized tonight,” I admit, and she smiles knowingly.

“Sometimes us women get so caught up in what’s happening that we don’t

notice *what's actually happening.*"

"This is true," I murmur, and she laughs, wrapping her arm around my waist and pulling me into her side.

"Come on, introduce me to your guy." She leads me toward the stairs, where my dad is taking the bags from my mom while she is greeting Harlen with a kiss to his cheek, something that seems to annoy Dad even more. Fighting back laughter, I head up the steps and look at Harlen as my mom and dad head inside, with Grandpa following behind them.

"Harlen, I'd like to introduce you to my grandma. Grandma, Harlen, my boyfriend," I say, and she lets me go and takes a step toward Harlen, who rests his hand on her upper arm and bends low to kiss her cheek.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"You too." She pats his arm, smiling, and then she comes back to me, getting close to wrap her hand around my cheek.

"Manners, and he's handsome. Yes. Perfect for my girl," she says quietly, and I bite my lip so I don't cry. "Love you, sweetheart."

"Love you too, Grandma," I whisper, and her fingers squeeze then let go.

Turning toward the door, she smiles at us over her shoulder, saying, "Let's eat. Harlen, I want to hear all about you."

He places his hand at the small of my back and I smile up at him and he smiles back as leads me inside the house. We head into the dining room, where there is food already on the table—a huge roast, potatoes, salad, and rolls. Harlen waits for me to sit then takes the seat next to me, while Grandma sits on the opposite side of him next to Grandpa. Looking around the table at my parents and grandparents, feeling Harlen close, I smile to myself.

"Harlen, tell me about your parents. Where do they live?" Mom asks, putting food on Dad's plate, and my stomach, which was full of happiness and warmth only seconds ago, drops.

"Lost both my mom and dad at fifteen," Harlen answers softly, and the table goes quiet. Everyone stops what they're doing to look at him. Wrapping my hand around the top of his jean-covered thigh, I squeeze then feel his fingers slide down my arm and wrist before he flips my hand over, threading our fingers together.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea," Mom whispers, and I watch her eyes fill with sadness and pain for him.

"It was a long time ago, Sophie. I'm okay, but thank you," he replies

quietly, and my mom nods then looks away from him. I watch her pull in a deep breath as Dad wraps his hand around the back of her neck, giving her a gentle squeeze. Catching my dad's gaze across the table, I see remorse in his eyes.

Knowing dinner will be awkward, no one knowing what to say or do if I don't do something to get us all out from under the dark cloud that's blanketed the table, I squeeze Harlen's fingers. "Harlen was raised by his aunt after his parents passed away. They're close," I insert, and all eyes come to me. "She'll be here at Christmas."

"That's nice. She will have to come over while she's here," Mom says, and I nod.

"I plan on asking her for permission to marry her nephew while she's here," I joke, and my dad's eyes widen while Harlen's fingers tense around mine. "What do you think she'll say?" I look at Harlen, and he shakes his head, his lips twitching.

"Hate to burst your bubble, Angel, but no way is my woman gonna propose to me," he murmurs, and I fight back a grin and narrow my eyes in mock annoyance.

"Is this an alpha rule?"

"Fuck yeah."

"We'll see." I shrug, hearing my mom and grandma both laugh, that sound filling me with relief.

"We won't," Harlen disagrees, forcing me to release his hand and wrapping his fingers around my upper thigh to squeeze.

"Would you say no?" I question, and his eyes narrow.

"You're not asking me to marry you," he replies without answering my question.

"Would you say no?" I repeat, and his fingers dig in, in a way that makes me squirm.

"It's not happening," he states firmly, making my spine straighten in real annoyance.

"You can't tell me that I can't ask you to marry me. I can do whatever I want."

"Fuck, are we really gonna argue about this?" he asks, and I hear my dad laugh but I don't look at him, even though I really, really want to look at him.

“It’s a new day, a new age. Women ask men to marry them all the time,” I state matter-of-factly, having no idea if that statement is true. I have a lot of girlfriends and a lot of female cousins, and none of them have ever proposed to a man before. At least, not that I know of, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.

“This argument is pointless, since that shit is not happening,” he says, pulling his eyes from mine. Looking at my mom and dad, he states, “Your daughter’s a nut.”

“I am not!” I cry, listening to everyone at the table laugh.

“Honey,” Dad calls, and I turn my head and focus on him. “You’re not asking him to marry you.”

“Seriously, you can’t tell me what to do either,” I snap, feeling like a dork, because I sound like a dork. But then again, everyone is smiling, and no one is thinking about the fact that Harlen lost his parents way too early in life, so I’m okay with being a dork right now. “Mom, you wanna help me out here?”

“Honey, I’m sorry, but no.” She shakes her head. “I think a man should be the one to ask a woman to marry him.” She smiles, and I look around Harlen at Grandma, raising a brow.

“Grandma?”

“Gotta agree with your mom, honey. Any man I’d want with my girl better be the one to ask that question, not the other way around.”

“What happened to girl power?” I mutter, and Harlen lets my thigh go then slides his arm around my shoulders, pulling me deep into his side.

“It’s okay. Pack it in, baby, and fight another day for womankind.” He kisses the side of my head. I tip my head back, and he brushes his lips softly over mine before leaning back in his chair and smiling. Seeing him smile, I look around the table and notice that everyone, including my dad, has the same happy expression. Thank God. And thankfully, the rest of dinner goes off without a hitch, but I still wonder what Harlen’s answer would be if I did ask him to marry me.

Lying naked on top of Harlen, breathing heavily, my pussy still convulsing around his cock from the orgasm I just had, I lift my head off his chest and sit up. Looking down into his handsome face, I finally understand why people go to such great lengths to find what we have. It’s not about the sex, even though the sex is awesome. It’s about feeling like you belong somewhere, that you belong to someone, that no matter how insane or hard life gets, you have

someone in your corner who is always rooting for you, always looking out for you.

His hand wraps around my hip and his other slides up my side, his fingers coming to rest just under my breast. "You okay?"

"Yes," I whisper, studying my hands as I slide them down then up his defined abs, watching his muscles bunch and shift under my touch.

"What are you thinking?" he asks quietly, and I lift my head to look at him then lean forward, sliding my hands back up his chest until I'm pressed fully against him.

"Until you, I didn't really understand why people did what they did for love," I whisper, then continue softly running my thumb lightly over his bottom lip. "I finally understand why someone would do whatever they had to do to find this, why they would risk everything for this. Thank you for giving it to me."

"Christ," he mutters, sitting up, gathering me against him, one arm going around my back, and his other hand sliding into my hair.

"I love you," I add, and his eyes flash right before his mouth lands on mine for a deep, hard kiss.

"Love you too, Angel." He tucks my face into his neck, and I wrap my legs around his hips and my arms around his shoulders, holding him just as tightly as he's holding me.

"I do have a question," I say after a long moment, and he pulls his head back to look down at me.

"What's that?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

"Hypothetically speaking." I squeeze him with all four of my limbs, then ask quietly, "If I were to ask you to marry me, would you say yes?"

"Hypothetically speaking." He grins. "You'll never know," he answers just as quietly.

"Gah, you're annoying."

"Yeah, but you love me."

"Which means I must be crazy," I mutter, and he laughs, shoving his face in my neck. "It's not that funny," I grumble, and he laughs harder. "I need to shower."

"You can shower tomorrow," he says through his laughter, and I smack his back lightly.

“Harlen, I need a shower.”

“Tomorrow, Angel.”

“No, tonight,” I gripe, and his head comes out of my neck and his eyes meet mine, the humor gone. In its place, there’s an intensity that makes me hold my breath.

“Tonight, you’re going to sleep filled with me. You can shower tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I whisper immediately, and his face softens, his fingers sliding out of my hair to run along the underside of my jaw before he shifts us up in the bed and turns out the light. Once that’s done, he rolls to his back, with me draped across his chest, my hips wide as my legs rest on either side of his. Jerking the covers up and over us, he holds me to him, one hand on the back of my head and the other just above my ass. I lie there in the dark, listening to him breathe, to his heartbeat against my ear, doubting I will be able to sleep with him still inside me and leaking out. But before long, my eyes slide closed and I fall asleep filled with him in every way possible.

Hearing what sounds like a power saw, I come out of sleep and blink my eyes open, finding the bed next to me empty and the sheets cold. It’s Thursday, the day Harlen took off work to spend with me. I thought we would start out our day together in bed then spend most of the day right here, so I don’t know why he’s not here with me. I listen to the noise shut off and close my eyes, only to have them spring back open when I hear pounding start up. “What the hell is going on?” I ask no one as I sit up.

Looking toward the closed bedroom door like I have the power to see through it, my brows pull together when the pounding stops and the noise from earlier starts back up again. “What the hell is he doing?” I toss back the covers, scooting out of bed. I put my feet on the floor, grabbing Harlen’s shirt that he had on yesterday, and pull it down over my head as I go to the door. Opening it, I head down the hall, stopping dead in my tracks, blinking when I see Everret and another man I don’t know standing near my backdoor and Harlen through a hole in the wall. Yes, a hole in the wall near the floor. His eyes come to me through the hole and scan from my bare feet up my bare thighs to his shirt I have on, before he meets my gaze.

Seeing the look he gives me, I bite my lip then feel my eyes widen when heat hits my thighs—that heat not coming from him. I look up at Everett and the guy standing next to him, and I find them both looking at me, or more accurately, looking at my bare legs. “Babe, clothes,” Harlen orders, appearing suddenly at the open sliding glass door, and my glare shoots to him.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Clothes, now,” he growls, and my nose scrunches in annoyance. “Harmony.”

“Gah! Fine.” I spin on my bare feet and go back to my room, ignoring the laughter I hear behind me. Grabbing a bra from my dresser, I put it on under his shirt then pull on a pair of my sweats before I head into the bathroom. Bent over the sink, brushing my teeth, I look at Harlen in the mirror when he fits himself to my back.

“Not real fond of men I know, knowing exactly how good you look wearing nothing but my tee,” he says, and my nose scrunches up once more.

“I didn’t know that anyone was here besides you,” I retort through a mouthful of foam before spitting and rinsing my mouth. I shut off the water then dry my face with the hand towel I take off the hook and turn to face him. “What exactly are you guys doing? I thought we were going to spend the day in bed.”

On the word bed, the fingers of his hands wrapped around my hips dig in and his eyes darken in a really good way. “Putting in a dog door for Dizzy.”

“What?” I breathe.

“Been meaning to do it for a while now but didn’t have the time. Today, I have the time, so I asked Mic and Everret to help me get it done.”

“Oh,” I say softly, resting my hands against his chest, melting into him, and feeling my chest get warm. He heard me mention putting in a doggie door for Dizzy and went about getting it done. Yes, I love him.

“It shouldn’t take us to long. Once we’re done, you and I can get back in bed.” He grins, and I smile.

“Okay.”

“Made you a cup of coffee. It’s on the island.”

“You are so getting lucky,” I whisper, leaning deeper into him, and he laughs—only I’m not joking, not even a little bit.

“I’ll remember that.” He dips his head, brushing his mouth over mine, then grabs my hand and pulls me out of the bathroom and bedroom. “Baby, you know Everett, and that’s Mic.” He lifts his chin toward Mic, and I smile at him, seeing him return the expression.

“Hey, guys.” I give them a wave then bend to pick up Dizzy, who’s finally noticed I exist. Holding him to my chest, I look at the hole in the wall then the box leaning against the side of the door. “Thank you, guys, for helping with that.” I nod toward it.

“No problem,” Everett mutters, looking between Harlen and me.

“Not a big deal,” Mic states with a shrug, having no idea he’s saving me thousands of dollars, so it’s not just a big deal; it’s a huge one. Now, instead of saving for the door, I can buy a bed for my guest room.

“How much do I owe for this?” I ask, and Harlen’s fingers dig into my hip, so I look up at him.

“Babe.” He shakes his head in what I guess is an answer. It’s just one I don’t get.

“Babe what?”

His eyes search mine, then he mutters, “We’ll talk about it later.” He brushes his lips over mine before letting me go and heading toward the door.

“Does anyone want coffee?” I question the room at large. Getting three no’s in return, I climb up on the stool holding Dizzy and sip my coffee, watching the guys work. An hour in, I get bored and decide I should be productive, so I start a load of laundry and pull out the dry mop and my other cleaning supplies to start cleaning my house.

Pulling yet another load of laundry out of the dryer, I take it back to the bedroom and empty the basket, dumping the clothes on the bed. Picking up one of Harlen’s shirts from the pile I just dumped, I look at the bed and the laundry I’ve already folded, and seeing the piles of his clothes mixed in with mine, warmth settles over me.

“Guys are gone,” Harlen says, stepping into the bedroom, and I stop folding his shirt in my hands. Looking from him to the clock, I see it’s already after three. The guys were here before I got up at nine, so they were here for over six hours. I ordered them pizza at one, but they still deserved more than that—like me being able to tell them thank you before they left.

“I didn’t get to thank them.”

“You said it earlier, and said it again when you got them pizza and beer.”

“Yeah, but that was before it was done.” I finish with his shirt then drop it onto a pile of his other ones that I already folded.

“They know you appreciate what they did,” he replies, getting close and touching his lips to the top of my head. “Dizzy’s been in and out a dozen times already, so he appreciates it too.”

“You have a lot of stuff in my laundry,” I blurt, and his body goes solid next to mine.

“What?”

“Um... I... You have a lot of stuff in my laundry.” I wave my hand at the bed and he looks to where I’m pointing.

“Okay.”

“Should I clean out a few drawers for you?” I ask, and his eyes come back to me, completely blank. “Ignore me. It’s too soon. That was stupid.” I shake my head then let out a loud squeak when I’m no longer on my feet but flying through the air and landing on the bed, bouncing with clothes scattering around me.

“Harlen, you just messed up the clothes I spent all day folding!”

“I don’t fucking care,” he growls, ripping my sweats and panties down my legs.

“I’m not refold— oh God!” I cry out, as his big hands spread my legs and he dips his head, licking up between my folds then pulling my clit into his mouth.

“Like I said, I don’t fucking care,” he repeats, before diving at me again, this time using his fingers and his mouth. Tossing one leg then the other over his shoulders, he devours me. “Fuck yes, ride my face,” he urges, and I do. I lift my hips, grinding myself against his mouth until I come, and do it hard, with my hands in his hair, holding him to me. Coming back to myself, my eyes flutter open and I watch him get undressed, then watch him crawl up onto the bed. My legs spread to make room for him, but he shakes his head. “You’re gonna sit on my face and suck me off.”

“What?” I whisper, holding his stare, and he moves, adjusting me until he has me where he wants me, sitting with my legs spread over his mouth and my hands to his thighs. He leans up, licking me, then leans back to order, “Suck me off, Harmony.”

Oh God. Swallowing, I look at his cock in front of me and wrap my fingers around him. Hot, hard, and silky smooth, we’ve never done this before. I’ve given him head, but never like this. “Harmony.” Hearing the warning in his tone and seeing his hips lift, I lower my head, taking him deep then sliding him out, circling my tongue around the head of his cock. “Fuck yeah.”

He pulls my hips down to his mouth and I whimper around his cock as he flicks his tongue over my clit. “Oh God,” I breathe, after I release him from my mouth with a pop as his fingers join his mouth.

“Suck me,” he growls against me. The sound sending a jolt of pleasure right between my legs and through every single inch of me. “Now.”

Sliding my hand down and up, I take him deep, all the way to the back of

my throat before sliding him back out and going back for more. Every time I take him deep, he rewards me with his mouth, so I go for it over and over until my pussy starts to spasm and his cock starts to throb against my tongue.

Yes! My mind screams, as he sends me over the edge, and then he's lifting me off his mouth and impaling me on his cock, my pussy still contracting from my orgasm. I lift and fall down on him hard, leaning forward my hands to his knees, feeling his hands on my ass spreading me open, too far gone to be embarrassed about this position. I ride him frantically until I hear him groan and know he's coming. I'm coming too, so I pick up the pace and ride it out of him and myself, and only once I'm completely spent, do I slow down to a glide.

Falling forward, my body exhausted, I close my eyes.

"I'm moving in," I hear him rumble behind me, and my eyes open. He sits up, pulling me off him, and then he turns me to straddle his lap. "Lease is up in two months. I'm moving in when that happens."

"You are?" I whisper, really happy about that plan.

"You okay with that?" he asks, studying me, and my nose stings.

"Yes."

"Good." He runs his fingers through my hair, and I fall into him, resting my head against his chest under his chin and wrapping my arms around him under his.

"We can trade out your bedroom set for mine," I whisper into his skin, and his arms tighten around me.

"Works for me." I figured it would. My bed is nice, but his bed is awesome; plus, his is a California King. It will take up more room, but it will be worth it.

"So two months?"

"I gotta pay rent for two more months. Doesn't mean we can't start getting things sorted."

"You're moving in." I repeat feeling tears sting my nose.

"Yeah, baby."

"This makes me happy," I whisper, seeing his eyes smile right before I lose them when he kisses me and I kiss him back. Yes I totally love him.

Chapter 10

Harlen

TAKING A PULL FROM MY BEER, I laugh at something Wes says to Everret then look down at my cell when it starts to vibrate on top of the bar.

“Hey, Angel,” I answer, standing from the chair and lifting my middle finger to the men around me when they start to talk shit.

“Hey, honey. I... oh God... don’t freak out.”

“What is it?” I bark, hearing the freaked tone of her voice, and the vibe around me shifts, going alert, the noise in the room coming to a halt.

“I went to the bathroom—not the bathroom on my floor, but the one on the first floor, because I wanted to get a coffee from the gift shop, and that bathroom is closer to the gift shop.”

“Do I need to know all this for you to get to the point?” I ask, dropping my eyes to my boots and losing patience.

“Well... I guess not,” she mutters, the line going quiet.

“Harmony?” I grit out through my teeth. Wes raises a brow and I shake my head.

“I overheard two nurses talking about Dr. Hofstadter in the restrooms. One of them was crying—not normal crying, she was sobbing. She said that he cornered her and touched her. Then he told her that if she told anyone about what he did, he’d have her fired.”

“Fuck.” I tip my head back, my fist flexing. It’s been three weeks since we had dinner with her parents and grandparents, three weeks since Evan started digging into things at the hospital, and he still hasn’t found out why those nurses lost their jobs. He did find out there are three men with the last name Hofstadter on the board at the hospital. One of them is the CEO, which is probably why Dr. Dick thinks he can do whatever the fuck he wants without any kind of blowback.

“I... I don’t know what to do.” Her worry-filled voice breaks into my thoughts, and I grab the back of my neck, fighting against the anger eating at my gut.

Pulling in a breath through my nose, I gentle my voice, and ask, “Do you know either of the nurses who were talking about him?”

“No, they were in a stall when I went in, and they were still in there when I

left. I didn't see them, and I don't work on that floor, so I didn't recognize their voices either."

Fuck.

"I hate to say this, baby, but there's nothin' you can do."

"Harlen," she breathes, and that shit kills me. If she knew them, she might be able to convince them to file a complaint against him, but without that, her hands are tied. "She said he touched her."

Fuck, I don't know what I would do if he ever did that shit to her. Probably lose my goddamn mind and kill the motherfucker.

Fuck

"I know, baby," I whisper.

"I hate this," she whispers back, and my jaw tightens.

"I know you do, but there is nothing you can do. Just avoid him while you're there."

"Okay," she agrees quietly.

Fuck.

"Love you."

"Love you too," she replies, still sounding quiet, and my jaw clenches tighter.

"See you at home, Angel." I listen to the phone go dead, and I pull it away from my ear and fist it in my hand so I don't toss it across the fucking room.

"What was that?" Wes questions, and I lift my head to look at him and my boys. Men who have always had my back. Men who I know will always have my back.

"Harmony overheard two nurses talking. Hofstadter got handsy with one of them then threatened her with losing her job if she told anyone."

"Fuck." Wes's jaw clenches, his eyes flashing.

"Is Harmony okay?" Everret asks, and my eyes go to him, seeing he looks just as pissed as I feel.

"She's freaked and feeling like shit that she can't do anything to help."

"I bet," Mic mutters, his jaw clenching.

Fuck it

"You guys feel like going with me to deliver a message to that

motherfucker?" I ask, and they all reply with scary grins.

Rolling up to the house three days later, I feel my jaw clench when I see Nico's truck parked in the driveway. Him leaning against the back of it with his arms crossed over his chest and his feet crossed at the ankles. I know he knows Harmony's at work, so he's not here to see her. I park, shut down the engine on my bike, kick down the stand, and get off, keeping my eyes locked on his even as I take off my helmet.

"Dr. Hofstadter had an accident a few days ago. Black eye, broken nose, and two broken ribs," he says, pushing off the tailgate of his truck and walking toward me.

"Sucks, but accidents do happen," I mutter, heading toward the house with him following behind me. Putting my key in the lock, I open the door and head in, with Dizzy bouncing at my feet. Scooping him up off the ground, I give his ears a scratch.

"I can't protect you, Harlen," Nico says quietly, as I go to the island. I drop my helmet then grab Dizzy a treat, giving it to him before putting him down. "If he presses charges, I can't protect you, and neither can Cobi." Cobi, his nephew who is also a cop, one I've only met twice, because he's always working since he moved back to town.

"Is he pressing charges?" I ask, and his jaw clenches. I know Dr. Dick won't press charges. I also know he cried like a bitch when I got in his face, and then he cried like an even bigger bitch when I laid hands on him. I've never been about using my size or fists for intimidation, but with him, I was happy to do both.

"Don't do anything like that again," he tells me.

"Lost my dad a long fucking time ago, Nico. Just sayin' I'm not in the market for a new one."

"I'm trying to help you," he grits out, and I shake my head, running my fingers through my hair.

"Yeah, and who's helping out the women he's been intimidating? Who's helping them when he's got them so freaked out about losing their jobs that they don't want to talk about what he's doing to them?"

"Fuck," he says, and I head toward the fridge, grabbing two beers and hand him one before opening mine.

"He needed to learn a lesson," I tell him, handing him the bottle opener.

“And you taught him that lesson?”

“Not sure, but if he forgets or veers off the path I put him on, I have no problem showing him the right way again, however I gotta go about doing that.”

“He’s got money. His family has money, Harlen. You need to be careful when it comes to men like that.”

“Yeah.” I smile, shaking my head, and his eyes narrow.

“What?”

“My dad was the owner of MacCabe Lumber,” I state, and his eyes flash with realization. MacCabe Lumber is famous in California. Not so much outside of it, but if you work in the construction industry, which I know Nico did for years, then you know of it. Everyone who works in the industry does.

“The company was given to me when my parents passed. It’s still mine, even though I have no interest in working it. I got more money sitting in the bank than me, my kids, my grandkids, and their kids’ kids could ever spend in a lifetime. Money is just fucking money.”

“Does Harmony know?”

My brows jerk together, and I ask, “About what?”

“That you have that kinda money?” he prompts, looking thoughtful.

“No.”

“Fuck me,” he whispers. “You need to tell her.”

“I’ll tell her when it’s time to tell her. It won’t change anything. I don’t use that money. I work, make a living with my hands doing something I like doing. Our kids, when we have them, will live just like I did growing up, having it all but not having it all handed to them. I’m not worried about Dr. Dick, his money, or him pressing charges. What I am worried about is my woman feeling like she’s got her back to a wall, her calling me freaked the fuck out after overhearing a nurse say that fucker touched her, but she couldn’t do anything because she didn’t want to lose her job.”

“Fuck, I don’t know whether to hug you or smack you upside the head.”

“Just saying either of those things will likely piss me off,” I say, taking a pull from my beer, and he grins.

Fuck me.

“She’s in love with you. Think she should know you’re a multimillionaire.”

“She’ll know after I ask her to marry me, before I am forced to have her sign a shitload of paperwork,” I tell him.

He blinks, his eyes remaining narrowed. “A prenup?”

“Fuck no,” I deny. “Once I get my ring on her finger, that shit is not coming off, so there’s no reason for a prenup. But since she will be my wife, she will become part owner of MacCabe Lumber.”

“Christ, better watch it. You might not like to spend money, but my girl does.”

“And there is plenty to spend. Not even she could make dent in what I got.”

“Your truck is a piece of shit.”

“Yep, but it was also my dad’s, so it means something to me. Money doesn’t mean anything. I’ve had money my whole life, never went without anything until the day I had to go on living without my parents. That taught me what’s really important in life, and it’s not shit you can buy at a store,” I say, and his eyes change, respect shining so bright, it’s almost blinding.

“Couldn’t have chosen better for my girl, even if I tried.” He shakes his head, taking a pull from his beer.

Fuck. But even though I could have carried on with the rest of my life without hearing that shit from him, it still feels good, knowing I’m good enough for his girl.

“When are you asking her to marry you?”

“Tomorrow,” I answer, and his chin snaps back.

“What?”

“She’s got a few days off work and class, so I’m driving us up to the mountains and asking her when we get there.”

“You weren’t gonna ask me?”

“Do I have your blessing?”

“I don’t know,” he grits out, and I fight back a smile.

“Just sayin’ I’m asking her one way or another, but she’d probably love it if she knew I had your permission,” I say, and then set my beer down and lean into the counter between us. “I love your daughter, Nico. I’ll work my ass off to protect her, to keep her happy, and to make sure every day she’s on this earth is a good one. Part of her being happy is you and me getting along, but in order for that to happen, you need to back down when it comes to us. I get that she’s your girl, but you need to understand that now, she’s mine.”

“You have my permission.”

“Fucking finally,” I mutter, picking my beer back up and putting it to my mouth.

“Are things with you always gonna be a pain in my ass?”

“Probably.” I shrug, telling the God’s honest truth. My dad taught me that respect is earned and with Nico that goes both ways.

“Fuck me,” he mutters, taking a pull from his beer. “You got a ring?” he asks after a minute.

I grin. “Yeah.”

“Can I see it?” he asks, and I think about it for a second then head back to the bedroom. I get the box out of the bag I shoved up in the top of the closet out of her reach. Pulling the ring out, I toss the box on the bed then head back to the kitchen.

“I see you didn’t fuck around with spending money on her ring,” he remarks, taking it from me. He’s not wrong. It cost a mint to have a designer in L.A. make the ring for me from scratch, but I knew what I wanted for her and knew it would be perfect when it was done, so it was worth it. “How long before I have a grandbaby to dote on?”

“I want time with her before we start having babies, and I know she has things she wants to do before that too.”

“Her goals,” he says quietly, his eyes on the ring he’s still holding.

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Her goals are important to her, which means they are important to me.”

He pulls his eyes off the ring to look at me. “You’re making it hard for me not to like you, Harlen.”

“What can I say? I’m a likeable guy,” I mutter, and he shakes his head.

Handing me the ring, he picks up his beer and finishes it off. “If anything else happens with Hofstadter, call me before you go in to deliver another message.”

“Sure.”

“I’m serious. This isn’t me being a dick; this is me looking out for my family.”

His family

Fuck me

“I’ll call.”

“Good, and Sophie will expect a call from our daughter after you ask her.”

“I’ll make sure that happens,” I agree, and he lifts his chin then turns for the door, walking right out without another word as it closes behind him.

Picking my beer back up, I slug it back then head for the bedroom to return the ring to the box and put my bag back in the top of the closet. After that’s done, I go to the kitchen to start dinner.

Standing on the back deck, I pick up the ball Dizzy dropped at my feet, pull my arm back, and let it fly. I watch Dizzy jump over the two steps, down into the yard, and race for the ball. Picking up my cup of coffee off the rail. I chuckle as Dizzy races back toward me, the ball in his mouth as he comes up the steps, dropping it at my feet again. I throw it once more then turn, hearing the sliding glass door swish open.

I scan Harmony from her wet hair to her pink painted toes, feeling my cock jump when I see she’s got nothing on but one of my tees. My eyes focus on hers, searching. I know from just one look that she’s still worried, and that shit makes my anger come back almost full force. Last night when we were lying in bed, it took everything in me not to lose my mind when she started talking about searching for another job. That’s how much this shit is upsetting her. Since almost the moment we met, she’s talked about how happy she is to be working at the hospital, and then hopefully transferring to the emergency room. Every time she’s spoken about one of her goals, her eyes light up with hopeful excitement. That motherfucker took that from her. No I absolutely do not feel bad about putting my hands on him.

“It’s cold out,” she says, and I come out of my head, seeing goose bumps rising on her bare arms.

“You shouldn’t be standing in the open door with wet hair, baby,” I tell her, and her nose scrunches up, something it does whenever she thinks I’m bossing her around—something I think is adorable, which means half the time I boss her around just to see it.

“You shouldn’t be standing outside in a T-shirt and jeans without shoes,” she shoots back, and I grin, watching her eyes drop to my mouth. “Are you packed?”

“No.”

“Harlen, we’re leaving in an hour. You should pack.”

“It’ll take me two minutes to pack.”

“Two minutes?” Her eyes widen, and I take a sip of my coffee to hide my smile.

“I just gotta throw a couple tees and jeans into a bag, babe. So yeah, two minutes.”

“Where’s your bag?” she asks, resting her hands on her hips. “I’ll pack for you after I finish packing for myself.”

“You’re not packing for me. Go blow-dry your hair and finish getting ready. I’ll be in to pack in a few minutes.”

“Honey, we’re going away for three days,” she tells me, something I already know, since I’m the one who booked the cabin for those days.

“And?”

“And... the weather up in the mountains can change. You need more than just a couple T-shirts and jeans.”

“Baby, I’ll pack my shit when I come in. Just get yourself sorted.”

“What if you don’t pack enough stuff?” she questions, her eyes narrowing on mine.

“Angel, first, I don’t plan on us spending much time out of the bed while we’re there, so I don’t need to pack a ton of shit. And second, I’m pretty fucking sure they have stores. If I need something, I can pick it up.”

“Fine,” she huffs, crossing her arms under her breasts, causing her hard nipples to show through the material. “I’ll go finish getting ready, but only because I was going to do that anyway.”

“Right,” I mutter, fighting back a smile, and her eyes drop to my mouth before she lets out another huff then spins around, her hair flying behind her as she goes.

I watch, enjoying the view of her long legs, the back of her thighs, and my tee riding up to just under her ass until she’s out of sight. I then look down at Dizzy, pick up the ball, and throw it again a few more times before it’s time to go in and pack.

“Oh my God,” Harmony whispers. She sits forward in the passenger seat to look out the windshield at the cabin in front of us as I pull into the driveway and park. This isn’t the only cabin around. We must’ve passed at least a dozen if not more on the way up the mountain, but it’s the only one for a mile. It’s secluded and private, surrounded by full-grown trees and right on the edge of

a cliff. "It's beautiful."

"It is," I agree, scanning the large lower deck and huge picture windows. I know from the listing online that there is also a deck off the master bedroom with a hot tub on it.

"I can't wait to see the inside. Is someone meeting us here to drop off a key?" she asks as I shut down the engine, and she unbuckles her belt.

"Door should be open. Owners said they'd leave the key on the counter in the kitchen," I tell her, and she grins then leans in, touching her mouth to mine. Pulling away way too fucking quickly, she pushes open the door and gets out. I open my door and get out to meet her at the trunk, where I grab both my duffle and her large suitcase. I follow behind her up to the deck and into the house when she opens the door.

I drop our bags by the stairs that lead to the bedroom on the second floor, then take her hand and pull her into the house. Releasing her so she can keep going into the living room, I stop at the kitchen to grab the keys off the counter and read the note the owners left with rules for the garbage, since there are black bears around, and instructions on how to use the hot tub. Checking the fridge, I scan the items inside to make sure they got everything I asked for, including two bottles of champagne.

It's all there, so I make my way to Harmony, who's standing in front of the floor to ceiling windows in the living room. I walk up behind her, curling my arms around her middle and dropping my chin to the top of her head. Looking out at the view, I see nothing but serenity, nothing but forest, nothing but peace. I know this is the right place to ask her to spend the rest of her life with me.

"Did I see that you stocked the fridge?" she asks, turning in my arms and raising a brow.

I pull her impossibly closer, sliding my hands down to rest just above her ass. "Yep."

"So we're not going out to eat?"

"Told you I don't plan on us spending much time out of bed while we're here," I answer, and she smiles, running her hands up my chest.

"Do you feel like giving me a tour of the bedroom now?" She drops her eyes to my mouth as I slide my hands down over her ass and pick her up, her legs wrapping around my hips and her mouth dropping to mine. After I carry her up the stairs to the bedroom, neither of us even bother looking around.

Hours later, feeling Harmony shift, I look down at her and see that her eyes are open, the moonlight shining into the room through the large windows, casting a soft glow on her naked skin. After we both came, her twice—once with my mouth, the other right before I came hard and deep inside of her—I made us dinner, steaks I cooked on the grill on the back deck, baked potatoes, and fresh green beans. We ate outside, laughed, drank—me beer, her wine—and then we came back upstairs, where I made love to her again.

I wasn't lying when I told her I didn't plan on us spending much time out of the bed. I don't get her time as often as I want right now, not with her schedule of long days and the extra classes on her days off. I know in the end it will pay off for both of us, but right now, that shit sucks.

"There's a hot tub."

The quietly spoken words bring me out of my head, and I tip my head to look down at her, finding hers tilted back to look up at me.

"Yeah."

"You didn't tell me there would be a hot tub."

"It was part of the surprise."

"It would be an even better surprise if I had brought a suit so I could use it."

"Angel." I roll her to her back and look down at her. "You don't need a suit."

"I do," she argues, and then gasps as I nip her bottom lip.

"You don't." I cover her mouth with mine, feeling her fingers slide through my hair. Deepening the kiss and taking everything she's willing to give me, I take more. Fuck, I love her mouth. I love her body. I love her. Sliding one hand up her outer thigh then across her stomach and down between her legs, I groan when I find her already wet.

"Fuck, I need another taste of you already," I say, tugging my mouth from hers and kissing down her neck to her breast. Stopping there, I pull her nipple into my mouth, sucking hard then flicking the tip with my tongue. Her back arches off the bed and she moans loudly. Rolling her clit with my thumb, my hips jerk when her warm, soft hand wraps around my cock. I groan, lean back, and slide my hands down her sides to her thighs, opening them up.

Pulling myself from her grasp, I toss her leg over my shoulder then drop my face between her legs and lick, listening to her moan as her taste hits my tongue. Sweet, so fucking sweet. Her back arches and her hips surge off the bed, sending her deeper into my mouth. Thrusting two fingers into her wet,

tight heat, I lift them, rubbing against her G-spot.

“Harlen!” she cries out as her pussy starts to convulse. Fuck but hearing her, smelling her, seeing her come is enough to send me close to the edge. Sitting back, I wrap my hand around my cock and slowly slide my fingers from her, watching her eyes flutter open and attempt to focus on mine. “I need you,” she whispers, lifting her hips.

“You’ll get me, baby,” I tell her, rubbing the head of my dick through her folds then I grit my teeth as I slowly sink into her. Her legs wrap around the back of my thighs and her hands wrap around my back and slide down to my ass, pulling me close. I drop forward, sliding my hand under her ass, pulling her hips up into mine as I drop my mouth to hers. “Perfect, so fucking perfect,” I breathe against her mouth, as I pull out and thrust in slow, over and over, her pussy pulling me right back in every time I slide out.

“I love you,” she pants, and I lace our fingers together, pulling them up above her head and giving her my weight, which she takes without complaint, holding me closer and tighter. We work in perfect sync, my hips thrusting into hers, her hips circling until it starts to build.

“Jesus.” I speed up and lean back to look down at her beautiful face then slide my hand out from under her. I place my thumb to her clit, circling, listening to her whimper and moan as her pussy starts to contract. Her already drenched heat gets hotter and wetter. Feeling her start to come again, I lean forward and take her mouth as my hips start to jerk and my spine starts to tingle. Coming hard, I plant myself deep inside of her, and her limbs tighten around me, her hands moving over my back and up through my hair. “I love you too.” I kiss her collarbone then lean back to look into her eyes. “What do you say we shower then get in the hot tub?”

“Really?” she whispers, and I grin.

“Yeah, really, come on.” I pull out of her, kiss her stomach, and then get off the bed, dragging her with me toward the bathroom. Walking into the shower that has just a short glass wall separating it from the rest of the bathroom, I turn on the water and pull her in with me, making quick work of cleaning us both up.

Once we’re done, I shut off the water and wrap a towel around her. “I’ll uncover the hot tub. Be right back.” I kiss her, leaving her where she is while walking out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my hips. Sliding open the door in the bedroom, the cold air hits my skin. I push past the shock of it and walk the three feet across the deck to pull off the cover on the hot tub, turning on the lights and the jets. I go back into the bedroom, dig through my bag for what I need, and then go into the bathroom, seeing it’s empty. I

start to go in search of her, but just as I hit the stairs, I see her climbing them, carrying a bottle of champagne.

“I didn’t bring glasses.” She waves the bottle at me. “I figured we could drink right out of the bottle.” She grins, and I smile, taking the bottle from her, and then I twist off the metal and pop the cork.

“Fair warning: it’s fucking cold out, baby,” I tell her, as I open the door and step out onto the deck with her at my back.

“Oh my God.” She laughs, running past me, climbing the steps quickly, and then ripping off her towel at the last second before taking a seat in the hot, steaming water.

Chuckling, I hand her the bottle of champagne, strip off my towel, and then get in with her, watching her eyes roam up my thighs, cock, and chest. Once I’m seated, I pull her across the space between us to straddle my lap.

“Hold on a sec.” I steal the bottle of champagne from her before she can take a drink, and set it on the side of the hot tub. Taking her hips in my hands, I look up at her. “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” she whispers, smiling as her eyes search mine, her hands coming up to rest on either side of my neck.

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?”

“Yes,” she repeats on another whisper, her body melting deeper into mine.

“Will you marry me?” I ask, taking her left hand in mine and sliding the ring on her finger, feeling her body tighten.

“Harlen.” Her voice shakes, and I look up at her, finding her eyes on the ring. The perfect ring for her, a five-carat cushion-cut diamond with a halo of smaller diamonds around it, set in platinum. My mom’s diamond. Big, but not too big, low enough profile that she should have no problem wearing it at work while taking off gloves and putting them on.

“Will you marry me, baby?”

“Oh my God.” She lifts her right hand, covering her mouth as her eyes, still on her ring, fill with tears.

“Baby.” I squeeze her hips, and her eyes finally come to me. “Will you?”

“Yes!” She leans in, pressing her mouth to mine. “God, yes, yes,” she says as the tears spill over. Taking my face between her hands, she rests her forehead to mine. “I love you, Harlen, so, so, so much.”

“I love you too, Angel.” I touch my lips to hers and pull her against my

chest when she suddenly sobs. “I don’t really like hearing you cry.” I slide my hand up and down her back, and she laughs through her tears, tucking her face deeper against my throat.

“Sorry, I... I... I’ll stop in a second,” she says, and I close my eyes, feeling her tears wet the skin of my neck. Fuck, I wish my mom and dad were alive to meet her, to see I did good, that I found an amazing woman to share my life with, to build a family with.

“I wish my parents could have met you,” I whisper aloud, and her arms tighten around me and her body bucks on a loud sob that’s painful to hear. “They would have loved you baby, fucking loved you for me.”

“I wish... I... I wish I could have met them.” She hiccups, and I kiss her hair, running my hand down her back. “They made you the way you are, so they had to be amazing, so amazing. I know I would have loved them.”

Killing me. Fucking killing me.

“Baby,” I whisper against her ear, holding her tighter.

“I love you. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for making it easy for me to trust you, to fall in love with you.”

Yes, totally fucking killing me.

“I gotta tell you something,” I say, and her head comes out of my neck, her eyes searching mine.

“What is it?” she asks, worry filling her voice.

“My last name’s MacCabe.”

“Yeah, I know,” She smiles, leaning in to touch her mouth to mine, but I pull back, keeping her where she is.

“You ever hear that name before?”

“Aside from you, no.” She shakes her head then shrugs. “I don’t know, maybe in a romance novel or something. Why?”

“My parents owned MacCabe Lumber in California. When they passed, they left the company to me.”

“Okay,” she drawls, sounding confused, and I give her waist a squeeze.

“What I’m trying to say is I’ve got money, a lot of it.”

“You have money?” she repeats, her brows drawing together.

“Yeah.”

“A lot of it,” she adds, and I nod. “What do you mean ‘a lot of it’?”

“I mean I’ve got enough money to take care of you, any kids we have, buy a mansion, this place, a beach house, take trips, and live large, still never making a dent in that money.”

“Holy shit,” she breathes, eyes wide with shock and her lips parting as she stares at me.

“We won’t be doing any of those things,” I tell her, and she blinks. “We’ll go on trips, yes, buy a bigger place when we need to, again yes, but the rest, no.” I shake my head, feeling her fingers dig into my shoulders.

“I don’t care about your money,” she whispers, and I slide my hand up into her hair and pull her closer.

“I know you don’t, since until a second ago you didn’t even know I had any. I’m telling you, because I needed you to know. It’s part of who I am, but not *who* I am.”

“All I want is you.”

“And you got me, all of me. Always.”

Her eyes close, and when they open, her hands slide from my shoulders to my neck then up into my hair. “Then I don’t care about anything else.”

“Love you, Angel.”

“I don’t love you, Harlen. Whatever this is, it isn’t love. I don’t think there’s a word in the English language to describe how I feel for you,” she confesses, and my arms tighten around her as I shove my face between her neck and shoulder and I hold onto her, doing it tightly, knowing I’ll have this for the rest of my life. This contentment, this peace, and this happiness, as long as I have her.

“It’s beautiful, perfect Mom more than that it’s special, he made it using his mom’s diamond... I know but just wait until you see it,” I hear Harmony say, as I step out onto the front deck of the cabin the next morning. Seeing her curled up in one of the chairs with the phone to her ear and her hand out in front of her, moving her finger and watching the light catch on her ring, I smile. “No, I’m not upset I didn’t get to ask him to marry me.” She laughs then her head lifts, her eyes meeting mine, as her smile gets brighter.

Grinning back, I hand her a cup of coffee, and she tips her head farther back for a kiss. Bending at the waist, I softly place my mouth to hers then take a seat next to her in the empty chair. “Yeah, we come home tomorrow.”

She sighs, then continues, "I'm not ready. I wish I could live here forever." She might think she could live here, but she couldn't. It's too quiet, and she'd miss her family after a few weeks. I don't mind solitude, and I still couldn't live here forever. "I'll tell him. Tell Dad I love him. Yeah, we'll be there. I'll let you know when. Love you too, Mom." She whispers the last four words then pulls the phone from her ear and drops it to her side.

"Everything okay?"

"Mom's ecstatic. She said to give you a hug and to tell you she's happy for us and expects us at dinner when we get back and I have a day off."

"Good, and we'll make that happen," I promise, lifting my feet to the rail in front of me.

"Dad said welcome to the family," she whispers, studying me.

I smile, grabbing her hand and bringing it to my mouth. "Told you we talked and that it's all good between us."

"I thought you were lying," she murmurs, and I laugh, doing it loud, and she grins at me then sets her coffee on the ground. She stands, coming to me, settling herself in my lap, wrapping her arms around my sides, and resting her head on my chest. "I don't want to go home tomorrow."

"We can come back anytime."

"Something to look forward to."

"Yeah, Angel." I kiss the top of her head then ask, "Do you want a big wedding or a small one?"

"I don't know."

"What?" I lean back to look at her, and her eyes meet mine.

"I never really thought about it before." She shrugs.

"You plan everything, baby."

"Until you, I didn't think I'd find a man who I'd want to spend my life with. All my other goals have been attainable. Finding a man who loves me the way you love me seemed outlandish, completely impossible. So I never put much thought into what my life would look like if I did find a man to spend it with."

"Time to change that," I tell her gently, and she nods.

"What kind of wedding do you want?" she asks after a long moment of us just staring out into the forest surrounding us, soaking in the peace and just being us.

“The kind where, at the end of it, you’re my wife,” I tell her honestly, giving her a squeeze, and she laughs.

“I can do that, but when your aunt comes for Christmas, maybe she, Mom, and I can start getting some ideas together,” she says quietly, causing my chest to get warm and my gut to tighten.

“She’ll love that.”

“Good.” She leans up and kisses my jaw. “We have a plan.”

“We have a plan,” I agree as her words from earlier wash over me, ripping me open and putting me back together again. *I didn’t think I’d find a man who I’d want to spend my life with. All my other goals have been attainable. Finding a man who loves me the way you love me seemed outlandish, completely impossible.*

Outlandish, completely impossible. I thought the same thing—that there was no way I’d find someone perfect for me. But right when I wasn’t looking, she walked into my life, proving that every fucking thing happens for a reason.

Chapter 11

Harmony

STOPPING IN FRONT OF THE nurses' station I look over the top at Mimi, who's bent over a stack of papers with her head in one hand and a pen in the other as she writes. "I'm going to the gift shop to get a coffee before they close. Do you want one?" I ask.

She looks up then leans back in her chair, stretching her arms over her head. "Yes please, milk and three sugars."

"Got it, can you keep an eye on my rooms?"

"Sure," she agrees, and I smile.

"Be right back." I head down the hall and out of the double doors. Stopping at the elevator, I press the down arrow, my ring catching my attention like it's done every day for the last week. I love my ring; it's perfect—more than perfect—I still want to pinch myself every time it catches my eye. Getting on the elevator when the doors open, I go down to the first floor, get off, and then head for the gift shop, smiling at people as I pass.

Glimpsing Dr. Hofstadter as he stands at the end of the hall talking to another doctor, I blink. His nose is swollen, there is purple and yellow bruising under his eyes, and there's an ugly yellow-green bruise on the underside of his jaw. His eyes come to me, and as soon as our gazes lock, my stomach twists when I see the look on his face.

Ducking my head, I enter the gift shop, and then my head flies back up when I hear a woman ahead of me in line give her order. I know her voice. I know her voice, because she's the woman I heard crying and talking to her friend in the bathroom. Placing my order, I wonder what I should do. Should I talk to her? Should I tell her I heard her talking about Hofstadter? Going to stand at the end of the counter, I get close to where she is, my heart pounding hard against my rib cage.

"Hi," I blurt, and her eyes swing to me.

"Uh... hi." She smiles a small, awkward smile, and I bite my lip when she looks away.

"Do you work on this floor?" I ask.

She looks at me once more. "Yeah, I'm in the emergency department."

"Awesome. My dream is to work in the emergency room," I tell her.

She smiles genuinely then sticks out her hand toward me. "Amy Sheldon."

"Harmony Mayson." I shake her hand. "It's so nice to meet you."

"Yeah." She nods. "You too. Have you applied for the emergency room yet?"

"When I first applied at the hospital, yes, but I didn't get accepted. Right now, I'm taking the trauma and critical care class here, in hopes to transfer to emergency when a spot opens up."

"We'll have to exchange numbers. I'll let you know if I hear anything," she says.

I stare at her. "You'd do that?"

"Totally."

"Wow." As I pull out my cell phone and she does the same with hers, my skin prickles, and I turn to find Hofstadter in line to get coffee, his eyes on us. Feeling Amy tense, my stomach twists, but I fight through it and return my attention back to her. "What's your number?" I ask, and she gives it to me then shoves her phone in her pocket, saying a quick goodbye before taking off.

Picking up Mimi's and my coffees when they are done, I take them to the elevator and up to the second floor. "Dr. Hofstadter has a broken nose," I blurt out, and Mimi looks up at me, her brows pulling together. "He also has a few other bruises."

"Yeah, I saw that a few days ago." She grabs her coffee from me, taking a sip of it.

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"No idea. My guess: he pissed someone off." She shrugs, and I bite my lip. The bruising looked a week old, maybe a little older. I told Harlen what I overheard a week or so ago, but would he do that? "I wish I knew who did it. I would walk right up to them and give them a high five."

Mimi's admission breaks through my thoughts, and I smile at her then look at the board when a ding starts and a light flashes. "Be right back." I lean over the counter to set my coffee down then head for my patient's room. After helping them to the bathroom and back to bed, I walk back out to the nurses' station, seeing Hofstadter talking to Mimi when I get there. I slow my steps, but when he sees me, he doesn't acknowledge me. He takes off.

"What was that?" Mimi asks as soon as I reach the station, her eyes on the door Hofstadter just left through.

“What?”

“As soon as Dr. Hofstadter saw you, he couldn’t get away quick enough. What was that?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter, but my stomach twists once again.

“Weird.” She shrugs, and I bite my lip. It’s not weird; I have a feeling I know what’s going on, and as soon as I get home, I plan on finding out from my fiancé exactly what he did.

Walking out of the hospital four hours later, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and I scan the dark, mostly empty lot. Since I started working here, it’s always dark when I leave, but I’ve never felt the way I do right now. Hurrying to my car, I get in and lock the doors, scanning the lot as I start the engine. I put on my seat belt, back out of my parking spot, and then see a car a few spaces down from mine pull out too.

Shaking off the weird feeling sitting in my gut, I turn right onto the main road and see the car do the same. Then I stop at a stoplight and look in my rearview mirror. Seeing the person in the light from the streetlamps above, my heart starts to beat strangely. It’s night, completely dark outside, and they have on a black beanie, which wouldn’t be weird normally, since it’s cold, but they also have on sunglasses, those also black, hiding their face from view.

Reaching over into my passenger seat, I search through my purse until I find my phone then drop it in my lap. The light turns green, and when it does, I make a last second decision, and instead of going left, I go straight, seeing the car’s blinker shut off as they follow me.

Okay, maybe they didn’t want to go left either. Driving straight, I bite my lip then pull into one of the turn lanes. The car follows, pulling up behind me. Panicked now, I wait for two cars to pass then turn and pick up my cell, dialing Harlen.

“Hey, Angel, you off?” he answers, sounding like I woke him up, and I’m sure I did. He probably fell asleep on the couch with Dizzy, something he does often when he’s waiting for me to get home.

“I think I’m being followed,” I whisper, wondering if I’m losing my mind. Looking in the rearview, I see the car still there, still close. Shit.

“What?”

“I just left the hospital, got a weird feeling. When I pulled out, a car pulled out with me. I turned; they turned. I don’t know, but I think they’re following me.”

“Where are you?” he asks, and I hear him moving around doing it quickly.

Looking at the streets as I pass, I answer. “Right now, on Main,” I say, as my breathing starts to turn ragged with worry and fear.

“Breathe for me, baby. It’s going to be okay. Just keep your speed, stay on Main, I’m gonna get on my bike and find you.”

“I want to come home,” I whisper, as tears start to blur my vision.

“I know you do, and you will. But right now, I want you to keep your speed and stay on Main. I’ll find you. Promise.”

Promise. Yes, he will find me.

“Okay.”

“I gotta let you go so I can get on my bike. Call your dad and tell him to notify the cops so they can be on the lookout for you.”

“Harlen,” I whisper, fear audible in my voice that’s now shaking.

“Angel, it’s gonna be okay. Stay on Main. Call your dad as soon as we hang up. I’m on my way to you now.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Love you.”

“I love you too.” I see the light ahead of me turn red, and with no choice, I slow to a stop as the line goes dead. With blurred vision, I pull up my dad’s number in my phone and press Send.

“Honey, what’s going on?” Dad asks, sounding like I woke him up.

“I think someone is following me,” I whisper into the phone once again, looking from the rearview mirror to the light ahead of me.

“What?”

“I think someone is following me,” I repeat, pressing down on the gas as soon as the light turns green.

“Where are you?”

“On Main Street. I just passed Veterans. Harlen is coming, but he will have to find me. He’s home, so it will take him a few minutes to get to this side of town. He said to call you.”

“I’m gonna call dispatch and let them know to be on the lookout for your car. Keep driving. Do not get off Main.”

“I won’t.”

“Is the person still tailing you?” he asks, and I look in the rearview mirror.

“Yes.”

“What kind of car is it?”

“It’s black and small. I don’t know what kind of car it is.”

“All right,” he says softly, then I hear him relay that information to someone else and I don’t close my eyes, even though I really want to. “Can you see the driver?”

I look in the rearview mirror again and see nothing but the same beanie and sunglasses. “Yes, but I can’t see their face, they have on sunglasses.”

“Okay, take a breath. People are looking for you,” he tells me, and I swallow over the sharp lump forming in my throat.

Then I see red and blue lights coming from the opposite direction. “I see lights, but they’re going the wrong way,” I say into the phone, watching two cop cars pass me before dropping my eyes to the side view mirror and watch them get further away. When my eyes fly to the rearview mirror again I see the car that was behind me is gone. Looking back over my shoulder, my stomach drops. They are gone. They must’ve seen the cops too and taken off, or they were never following me to begin with and I’m just paranoid.

“They’re gone,” I whisper into the phone, checking my mirror again.

“Pardon?” Dad asks, and I clear my throat, fighting back my relief filled tears.

“They’re gone. I’m not being followed anymore.”

“Got spooked,” Dad mumbles, as a whimper climbs up the back of my throat when I hear the sound of motorcycle pipes close by. “What is it?” His voice sounds worried.

“Harlen found me,” I tell him, looking behind me and watching one headlight get closer and closer. Relief, like I’ve never felt in my life, overwhelms me. I pull over into a gas station parking lot and put my car in park, rip off my seat belt, and open my door. Before I even have a chance to get out, Harlen drags me from my seat, and wraps his arms around me. Burying my face against his chest, I sob, my body shaking with adrenalin and fear. Lifting me into his arms, he carries me to the back of my car and settles me on the trunk, placing himself between my legs and wrapping his arms around me.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” he whispers, his big hand running down my hair and my back.

“I was so scared.”

“I know, Angel but you’re okay. It’s okay.” He kisses my hair, and I wrap my arms around his waist as tightly as I can. Even as he shifts back to reach his phone when it rings, I don’t let him get far. “Yeah, I got her. She’s shaking, but she’s okay. We’re at the gas station at the corner of Main and Vermont,” he says, and I know instantly he’s talking to my dad. “Didn’t see anyone. Have someone check the tapes at the hospital. Yeah. Good. Right. See you soon.” He shifts again, and I look up at him when his fingers touch my chin.

“It’s gonna be okay.”

“Okay.”

“Promise.”

“Okay,” I repeat, dropping my forehead to his chest as a fresh wave of tears climbs up my throat. I don’t try to fight them; I let them fall. Hearing sirens, and seeing lights through my closed lids, I open my eyes and watch two police cruisers pull into the parking lot. Then I watch the officers start to get out of their cars.

Scanning the men as they get close, my eyes land on my cousin Cobi. He moved home about a year ago and joined the police force in town after being discharged from the military, where he was a military police officer. I haven’t seen him much since he’s been back; no one has. I watch his eyes come to me and his jaw go hard, and then I see his eyes go to Harlen as he lifts his chin while the other men stand back.

“Did you guys see anyone?” Harlen asks.

Cobi shakes his head. “After we knew you were with her, we spread out. Didn’t find anything,” he says, then his eyes come back to me. “You sure you were being followed?”

“I...” I pull in a breath then shake my head. “I don’t know. I thought so, but now I don’t know,” I admit, and his face softens.

“Someone needs to check the tapes at the hospital,” Harlen orders, his body going tense against mine.

“Already on it,” Cobi agrees, then he turns his head as my dad’s truck pulls into the lot and he parks.

As soon as Dad’s out his door, his worry-filled eyes come to me, and Harlen shifts, pulling me off the trunk. Before my feet even touch the ground, my dad’s arms wrap around me. “You okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper, hugging him back just as tightly.

“Don’t worry me like that again,” he demands, and I attempt to smile but it feels forced.

“I’ll try not to,” I agree.

He pulls back to look down at me before he presses a kiss to my forehead. Keeping his arm wrapped around my shoulders, he turns us and claps Harlen on the shoulder then looks at Cobi. “Did you find anything?”

“Nothing,” Cobi replies, and Dad’s chest expands on a deep breath. “I’ll file a report, but right now, that’s all that can be done.”

“I’m gonna take Harmony home,” Harlen inserts, and my eyes go to him as he looks at my cousin. “Do you or your boys know how to ride?”

“Yeah,” Cobi says, and his answer surprises me.

“You mind getting my bike home for me?”

“Not at all.” Cobi grins, holding out his hand, and I watch Harlen hand over his key.

“You find anything, call my cell. Nico has my number,” he demands, and Cobi once again lifts his chin right before Harlen’s eyes come back to me and soften. “Come on, Angel. Let’s get you home.” He says gently and I look up at my dad.

“Go on, get some rest.” Dad squeezes me into his side then kisses my temple.

Taking Harlen’s hand, I let him lead me to the passenger side of my car and help me in, then slam the door. I put on my seat belt then watch him in the mirror talking to my dad and Cobi for a few minutes before he gives them a chin lift and opens the driver’s door, getting behind the wheel of my car, pushing the seat back as far as it can go, and adjusting the steering wheel.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as he pulls out of the parking lot, and his eyes come to me.

“Sorry for what?”

“For this. I... I must have imagined it and freaked myself out.”

“Angel, you did or you didn’t. I’m glad you had the sense to call me,” he says, reaching over, picking up my hand, and bringing it back to his lap. “I’d rather be safe than sorry when it comes to your safety.”

I don’t agree or disagree. I stare out of the window, wondering if I imagined being followed then completely freaked myself out because of it.

As soon as we get home, I go inside and pick up Dizzy, who greets me at the door. I give him a cuddle then go to the bedroom. I change into a nightgown, go through my nightly routine, and get into bed. Resting my head on my pillow, I listen to Harlen shut down the house then watch him when he comes into the room, disappearing into the bathroom.

“You wanna watch something on TV?” he asks, getting into bed next to me wearing a pair of dark blue, almost-black boxers.

“No, but you can.” I scan his big beautiful body, his thick biceps, toned chest and abs. Once he’s in bed with the sheet around his waist, I look at his hands. His hands have made me feel beautiful, and cherished, have made me feel loved and sexy, and have been nothing but gentle with me. But I know without a doubt they could inflict pain on someone if he wanted them to.

“Did you beat up Dr. Hofstadter?” I ask, and his head dips down toward me, his eyes going guarded, his body going alert. “Please don’t lie to me if you did do it.”

“Angel.”

“Harlen,” I whisper, and he rolls until he’s half on top of me then tangles his legs with mine.

“Yes,” he replies, and my eyes slide closed. “I won’t apologize for what I did to him, Angel. He deserved to know how it felt to have hands on him that he did not want, that he did not like. He needed to know his voice would not be heard no matter how loud or how much he pleaded for help.”

Bile crawls up the back of my throat from his words. Hofstadter did that to at least one woman, and who knows if there are more? There could be countless more women who felt that their choice was taken from them, felt backed into a corner because of what he did, what he told them he would do.

“I won’t apologize,” he repeats.

I open my eyes and meet his gaze. “He deserved that,” I whisper, and his eyes slide closed while his forehead comes to rest against mine. “You’re right. He deserved to know how it felt.” I slide my hand up his side to rest against his neck, and his eyes open. “I... I just wish you would have told me.”

“I should have told you,” he agrees, touching his mouth to mine. “I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“Okay,” I say, hearing the honesty in his voice, and he pulls back to look at me.

“That easy?” His eyes search mine. “We’re not going to fight about this?”

“I understand why you did it. I’m not happy you did it, but I get it, since if I could have done it myself, I would have. I just...” I pull in a breath, letting it out while moving my hand to his cheek. “Next time, just talk to me so I’m prepared.”

“There better not be a next time,” he growls, and I hear the warning in his voice, that warning sending a shiver down my spine. I hope for Hofstadter’s sake there really isn’t a next time.

“You’re kinda scary,” I tell him softly running my hand up his chest to rest on his shoulder.

His hand comes up to cup my cheek, and his fingers glide softly across my skin. “I’d never hurt you.”

“I know.” And I do know that. I know it with every fiber of my being.

“I’d never let anything hurt you,” he adds, and I raise my head up off the bed and place my mouth against his.

“I know that too.” The moment our lips meet, I touch my tongue to his bottom lip and he takes over the kiss. Then he proves what I already knew to be true. His hands have the power to make me feel a million different things, all of them good.

“I’m not drunk. You are.” Willow laughs, pointing at me, and I shake my head, grinning at her.

“No, you are!” I giggle, lifting one of the pillows off the couch, shoving my face into it, and laughing so hard my sides hurt. It’s safe to say we are both drunk, but after drinking two bottles of wine, anyone would be. I needed this. I needed to eat junk food, drink too much and relax and laugh with my sister. I needed to forget about what happened last week when I thought I was being followed home. And I needed to forget about what’s going on at the hospital.

I’ve talked to Amy a few times since the first time we met and over coffee one day, I finally told her what I overheard her saying. She was visibly shaken as she informed me that she went to HR and filed a complaint along with three other nurses, who had similar things happen with Hofstadter, and none of them have heard anything back.

When I told Harlen this news, he was pissed... or *more* pissed than he already had been. He called Evan, my dad, and Cobi, and told them they needed to get in contact with Amy and find out who the other nurses were. I learned after his phone call with my dad that Dr. Hofstadter’s family is on the board at the hospital and that his uncle is CEO. That was news to me—big

scary news. That information means that not only does Dr. Hofstadter have power because he's a doctor, but he also has it because his family will no doubt look out for him.

"I miss this," Willow says, bringing me out of my thoughts.

I pull the pillow away from my face to look at her, feeling my eyes get soft at her admission. "Me too."

"We need to do this more often."

"We do, and we will, especially now that I have a bed in the guest room." A bed Harlen told me to pick out no matter the cost and have it delivered. At first, I wasn't sure how I felt about using his money to pay for it, until he told me, "It's not a private jet, Angel. It's a bed for our home, a bed your sister will sleep in, and my aunt when she comes for Christmas. Pick something, or I will." When he said that, I forgot about feeling weird about it and just ordered the perfect bed for the room, a double daybed that fits perfectly in the small space. While I was shopping online I also picked out rugs for the bedrooms and the living room since I had the money I saved up to use for the dog door.

"Even after you're married?" she asks, and I focus on her.

"Yes, even after I'm married." I smile then watch as she picks up my newest snow globe off the coffee table. When Harlen and I were coming home from the cabin two weeks ago he stopped at a small pompom-and-pop store to get gas. When he came out he handed me the clear glass ball with a cabin in the middle of the woods inside of it not knowing that it meant just as much as the ring he put on my finger.

"You're so lucky," she murmurs.

"You'll find someone," I tell her instantly and she looks up at me doubtfully. "You will when the time is right. It will happen. I didn't expect to find Harlen. It just happened, and it will for you too."

"Maybe." She shrugs, putting the globe back down and picking up her almost empty wine glass before downing the rest of it.

Hearing the front door open, I look that way then smile when I see Harlen walk in. Taking him in, I fight back a girly sigh. He's always handsome, but with the colder weather, he's wearing his normal jeans and boots but adding flannel shirts and his leather jacket, he looks like he just walked off the pages of a magazine for bikers. In other words, he looks beyond hot. And he's mine.

"Hey, Angel." He smiles at me, and then his eyes go to my sister. "Hey, Willow." He lifts his chin to her, and she grins as her eyes come to me, her

expression silently telling me she really is happy for me.

“I’m gonna head to bed,” he says. His eyes go from me, to the empty bottles of wine on the coffee table, to the half-eaten pizza, and then finally the bags of opened Hershey’s chocolate. Moving his gaze back to me, he smiles, and I tip my chin back when he gets close, then feel his fingers curve around my jaw right before he softly touches his mouth to mine. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I grin, and his eyes search mine.

“Drunk?”

“A little.” I shrug.

His lips twitch. “All right, enjoy your time with your sister,” he says quietly.

“Thanks, honey,” I murmur, and his lips tip up right before he touches his smiling mouth to mine once more before he lets me go and starts to move away.

“See you in the morning, Willow. I’m making waffles,” he tells her over his shoulder.

“I can’t wait,” she replies, and I look at her and see her eyes on his retreating back, and she doesn’t stop watching until he’s down the hall and closing the bedroom door behind himself and Dizzy, who decided to go with him. “I’m so jealous that you have that,” she tells me, and I feel my stomach melt.

“I’m lucky,” I agree.

She smiles then looks at the mess on the coffee table. “We should clean this up and get to bed.”

“Are you tired?” I ask, looking at the clock. It’s not even midnight yet.

“No, but if I had that man waiting in bed for me, I would leave your ass quicker than you could say ‘Bye, Felicia,’” she tells me, and I laugh. “Plus, I want to enjoy his waffles, and I don’t think that will happen if I have a hangover. And I will have a hangover if we drink any more.”

“Good point.” I get up off the couch, picking up the empty bottles while she grabs the pizza box. Once we have everything cleaned up, I shut off the lights and head down the hall, watching her disappear into the guestroom with a quiet, “Goodnight,” before she shuts the door.

Going into my bedroom, I find Harlen in bed with his back to the headboard, his eyes leaving the TV and coming to me when I walk in. I strip out of my clothes then dig through the dresser. I find a simple nightgown at

the bottom of the pile, black cotton with thin straps and small details just under my breasts. I slip it on over my head and climb into bed next to him, tucking myself into his side.

“You didn’t have to come to bed, Angel.”

“I know.” I snuggle closer to him, resting my cheek to his chest and my thigh over his. Looking at the TV, I notice he’s watching one of his detective shows that I have never been able to get into.

“Did you have fun?”

“Yeah,” I whisper, my eyes already getting heavy. “Tomorrow night, we’re shopping, going out to dinner then going to a movie—a really girly one,” I tell him, and he laughs.

“Glad I’m spared from that.” He kisses the top of my head, and I give him a squeeze right before I lose the battle with my eyelids and fall asleep.

Waking to the sound of laughter, I force my eyes open then roll to look at the clock. It’s already after nine. I slept in. Not only did I sleep in, I slept longer than I have in a while. Forcing myself to get out of bed, I get dressed, brush my teeth, and then tie my hair up into a ponytail. I leave the bedroom and stop dead, staring at not only Harlen, but also Willow, my mom, and my dad all standing around in the kitchen, plates and coffee cups littering the surface of the butcher-block island.

“Hey, honey.” Dad smiles at me, and I come unstuck, moving further into the room. “Harlen called and said he was making breakfast,” he tells me, and my eyes go from my dad to Harlen, who’s leaning against the counter near the stove with a cup of coffee in his hands, a small smile playing on his lips, his bare feet crossed at his ankles. I still haven’t gotten used to my dad and Harlen getting along, and I’m not sure I ever will.

Seeing Harlen’s eyes soften on me, I give him a small smile then go to my dad and give him a hug. I then do the same with my mom, getting a kiss to my cheek from her before she lets me go.

“You ready for a waffle, baby?” Harlen asks, as I tuck myself against his side, and he slides his arm around me, kissing the top of my head.

I look up at him. “You should have woken me up.”

“You needed to sleep. You haven’t had a chance to sleep in, in a while.” That’s not a lie; with class, work, studying, and spending every second I can with Harlen, sleep has been a rare commodity.

“Mom didn’t lie. Harlen is the master of waffles,” Willow inserts, and my eyes go to where she’s sitting at the island, an empty plate in front of her that still has remnants of syrup on it.

“They’re good,” Dad agrees.

“The best,” Mom counters, and I grin at her.

“Kiss me then let me go so I can make you one, baby,” Harlen orders on a squeeze.

I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss him then let him go before I head for the coffeepot to make myself a cup. Taking a sip, I lean against the counter and watch him as he puts the batter into the waffle machine. I feel warmth hit my side, and I look at my dad as he wraps his arm around me, leaning into him as his lips touch the top of my head.

“So what are you and Willow doing today?” Mom asks, and I look at my sister then my mom.

“We’re going shopping, out to dinner, eating sushi, and then going to a movie.”

“That’s fun.”

“You wanna come, Mom?” Willow asks.

Mom’s eyes go to her and soften. “No, honey, you and your sister have fun. Your dad’s taking me to Nashville tonight to see a show.”

“Really? What are you guys seeing?” Willow perks up.

“The King and I,” Mom replies, and I look up at my dad and smile when I see he doesn’t exactly look as happy as Mom does. He’s going, because Mom wants to go, because he loves her. My eyes go to Harlen, and I feel my chest get warm and my belly dip. He’d do the same thing for me. He’d take me to a show, take me shopping, take me to the moon if I asked him to, and do it without complaint, because he loves me. If I had made a list of traits I’d want in a husband and checked each item off one at a time, Harlen would check every single box. Every single one of them.

Chapter 12

Harmony

“I’LL BE RIGHT BACK. I’M just going to the bathroom real quick,” I whisper to Willow, and she takes her eyes off the screen to look at me.

“I told you not to get the extra-large soda,” she mutters, and I grin at her.

“Whatever.” I stand and duck out of the theater, hearing everyone laugh behind when something funny happens. Wanting to get back so I don’t miss anything, I hurry toward the bathrooms then stop when I run into a huge body. “Sorry.”

I look up, feeling my lungs tighten and my heart stutter when I see my own reflection staring back at me through a pair of dark sunglasses. I turn to get away and start to scream, but before I can even make a sound or take a breath, my mouth is covered by a large hand holding a cloth.

I suck in a lungful of air that burns my throat and buck back, feeling my feet come off the floor. Feeling something jab into the side of my neck, my eyes that are suddenly too heavy to keep open start to close, and my body feeling like deadweight falls. I hear people chatting and try to fight, try to open my mouth to yell, but it’s useless as I’m dragged into the darkness.

Hadley

As the credits on the screen start to roll, I stand from my seat, grabbing my purse, my half-eaten bag of popcorn, and my empty soda cup. I smile at the couple that had taken up the seats next to me and scoot past them, not bothering to stick around for the extra feature. Heading down the steps and out of the theater with the crowd, I toss my cup in the garbage and tuck my popcorn away in my bag, figuring I paid close to ten dollars for it, so I might as well pretend like I will eat it later.

Stopping at the restrooms, I wait in line forever for a stall, and by the time it’s my turn, the bathroom is almost empty, so I quickly use one of the stalls, wash my hands, and leave. Going to the exit closest to where my car is parked, I push the door open and start down the sidewalk, hugging my jacket around me to ward off the cold night air. When I see movement out of the corner of my eye, I turn my head and my heart drops into my stomach as I watch a figure dump what looks like an unconscious woman into the trunk of their car and slam it shut.

“Oh, God,” I breathe, covering my mouth with my hand, and then I quickly

duck behind the hood of a truck when the person stops and turns my way at the sound of my voice.

Did that just happen? No. No way. I close my eyes, trying to convince myself that I'm imagining things. Hearing a car start up, my lungs compress and I take off at a run without thinking, crouching low behind two cars and down an aisle to where I parked. When I get into my car, I start the engine and grab my cell phone out of my purse. I don't even know what I'm doing as I pull out after the car, but something in my gut urges me to follow it.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

"I just witnessed a man put a woman in the trunk of his car!" I shout into my phone hysterically.

"Where are you, ma'am?" the woman asks, and I tell her the theater name then hold my breath when the light in front of me goes from red to green.

"The light just turned green. We're leaving the theater parking lot now!" I cry, holding on to my steering wheel tightly as I press down on my gas.

"Which way are you heading?"

"I don't know. Can't you track my cell phone or something?" I yell, panicking as the car in front of me speeds up.

"Ma'am, please calm down. Do you see any street signs?" Calm down - is she crazy?

I scan the road, but there is nothing. "I don't see anything. I'm in a bright blue Nissan Altima. He's in a black Ford."

"We're looking for you," she says, and I swallow then jerk my head to the right, seeing a sign.

"We're on Bitterknot Road. I don't know what direction we're going, but I just passed mile marker five."

"Good, that's good." She sounds relieved, and I let out a deep breath while sending up a silent prayer. "Ma'am, I'm transferring you over to an officer," she tells me, and I nod. "Are you still there, ma'am?"

"Yes, sorry, I'm still here."

"Transferring you now," she says, the line going quiet.

"This is Detective Cobi Mayson. Who am I speaking with?" a deep voice rumbles in my ear, and I swallow. Cobi Mayson. I know him—or knew him—when I was in high school. Okay, I hadn't actually known him, but I knew *of* him. Everyone did. At least, every person with a vagina did, and since I have

one of those, I knew him. “Hello.”

“Sorry... Um... Hadley... um... Hadley Emmerson,” I whisper, clutching the phone to my ear.

“Where are you now Hadley?” he asks, and I look for a mile marker on the side of the road.

“Mile maker eighteen.”

“Good, that’s very good. I’m about five minutes behind you,” he says, and I don’t close my eyes in relief even though I want to.

“Thank God,” I whisper.

“You holding up okay?” he asks softly.

I shake my head, then answer, “I just saw someone put a woman in the trunk of a car. It’s dark, scary dark, and now I’m following them, so I’m going to go with no, I’m not okay,” I reply.

I swear I hear a smile in his voice, when he mutters, “Good point.”

Keeping back so I’m close but not too close to the car in front of me, I watch as their brakes light up and they slow, then I watch as they pull off the highway, onto a small dirt road surrounded by trees.

“They just pulled off the road,” I whisper through the fear that has suddenly lodged in my throat.

“Pardon?”

“They just pulled off onto a dirt road!” I yell. “Oh, God, what do I do?”

“Keep driving, we’re on our way,” he orders.

“I can’t do that,” I whisper, blinking away the tears filling my eyes.

“Hadley, pull off the road. Me and other officers are en route. We’re close. Pull over.”

Shaking my head, I hang up the phone and drop it into my cup holder. The idea of something happening to that woman before the cops can get to her, and me just driving by and not doing anything to help, would kill me. Turning off my headlights, I slow down and turn onto the dark road I saw the car pull onto.

Harlen

Hearing my cell ring, I pick it up off the coffee table and look at the screen. Not recognizing the number, I’m half tempted to let it go to voicemail, but with Harmony out at the movies with Willow, I answer. “Yeah.”

“Harlen?”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck... okay... it’s Cobi. Willow called. Harmony went to the bathroom during the movie and didn’t come back.”

“Pardon?” I sit up, and Dizzy, who had been lying on my lap, jumps off me and then the couch.

“About two minutes after I got the call from Willow, Dispatch called. A witness saw a man dump a woman in his trunk, and they have been following them.”

“Where are they?” I growl, pulling on my boots.

“On Bitterknot Road. I’ll call and let you know when I locate Harmony.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Harlen—”

“I’m heading that way.” I hang up then dial Wes, Everett, and Mic, letting them know I might need them, and each of them instantly agrees to have my back.

Going to the bedroom, I open my safe in the bottom of the closet, grab my gun, and shove it in the back of my jeans before going to the kitchen. Snatching my keys off the counter, I grab my leather jacket off the back of the stool at the bar, put it on, and then head out the door, not bothering to lock it behind me. As I kick my leg over the seat of my bike, I start the engine, put on my helmet, and back out of the driveway, fear and rage warring in my gut as I take off to find my woman and bring her home.

Harmony

My body feels heavy, my limbs feel stiff and awkward. I blink my eyes open, seeing nothing but darkness while smelling oil, gas, and dirt. It takes a second for my brain to start working, for me to remember what happened. Deep breathing, I look around the dark confined space. I know I’m in the trunk of a car and that the car is moving on what must be a dirt road. The ride is too rough to be paved.

Feeling around my pockets for my phone, my stomach starts to turn with nausea and tears fill my eyes when I don’t find it. *Harlen*. God, if he knows I’m missing, he’s probably losing his mind with worry right now. No, he’s probably looking for me, and he won’t stop until he has me. I know he won’t.

My lungs burn to scream, and my hands itch to pound against the trunk, but I don’t do that. I don’t want him to know I’m awake. I don’t want to draw

attention to myself. If I'm going to make it out of this, I need to use every advantage I have, and one of those is surprise.

"Think." My eyes close, and I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. My eyes fly open, and I tip my head back, scanning the trunk as my hands feel along the walls. I know I watched a news story a while ago that said all cars are required to have an emergency trunk releases. I just need to find it, which is awkward, since there isn't a lot of space to move. My legs are bent, my neck crooked. Finding the pull switch, my heart starts to pound. I won't have long when I pull it to get out and run. I also have no idea where we are, if there is somewhere for me to run to for cover, or if I will be a sitting duck. But running is better than going to wherever he's taking me right now.

Pulling in another deep breath, I wrap my hand firmly around the lever and pull down. A gust of air fills the trunk, but I don't let go, I hold it tight and try to peek out. I can't see much, but I can see it's dark—that darkness partly because of the trees on either side of the car.

Heart pounding, I let the lever go and throw myself out of the trunk. The car's not going fast, but I still fall hard, my body rolling across the rocky ground and my knees and hands scraping against the earth. When I see red from the brake lights bounce off the trees around me, I push myself up off the ground and start to run in the opposite direction of the car.

Suddenly, I scream when a car comes out of nowhere without headlights. My eyes meet those of a woman's through the windshield, and her eyes widen, right before she jerks her car to the side and runs into a tree with a crunch. I watch her airbags deploy, filling the small interior of her car, then see the driver's door open.

"What are you doing?" she screams, her face pale as a small trickle of blood runs down her forehead. "Run!" she wails, right before the sound of a gun going off fills the woods, bouncing off the trees surrounding us. I run toward her, grab her shaking hand, and pull her with me into the trees, hearing another shot, this one so close I feel bits of wood splinter off a tree.

"He has a gun," I pant stupidly, fear filling my stomach as adrenalin rushes through my veins.

"I know." She trips over a fallen tree and cries out, crashing to her knees. I help her up, dragging her with me. "I..." she starts, but I hear her breathing go strangled, like she can't get any oxygen into her lungs. Hearing that, I know that even if I don't want to, she needs me to slow down.

I look behind us and don't see anything, just trees and darkness. I try to listen, but all I can hear is the sound of my heart pounding hard, sending

blood rushing through my veins, and our heavy breathing. Seeing a large tree, I lead us there hoping it will provide enough cover for us to stop for a couple minutes. She falls against it when we reach it, her body doubling over, her breathing harsher than before. I scan the trees, my eyes searching for any sign of movement.

“Do you have a phone?” I whisper to her, and she jerks her head side to side. “Of course not.”

“C-cops,” she chokes out harshly.

“I know,” I whisper. “We need to get to a road and flag someone down.”

“No... I... I called. Coming.”

“You called them?” I ask, and she nods. “Do they know where we are?” She nods again, and relief fills me, but it only lasts a second. I hear a branch break close to where we are, *too* close to where we are. She hears it too; her head comes up and her already pale face loses color. Holding my finger to my lip, I watch her eyes widen.

“I hear you breathing,” we both hear at the same time, and my lungs get tight, my body locking at the sound of a deep voice—a voice I know. “There’s nowhere for you to run,” Dr. Hofstadter calls, and another branch breaks, this time even closer than before. “Do you really think I’d let you ruin my life?” Another branch breaks even closer. “Let your fucking boyfriend beat me up and not pay you back for that?”

We need to run. I just don’t know where to run to. Looking down at the woman, when her eyes meet mine, she must read my thoughts, because she nods. I motion to the side away from his voice, and her eyes close right before she nods, taking my hand I hold out to her.

Harlen

I slow down my bike and pull off on the side of the road behind two police cruisers that are parked blocking the entrance of a dirt road cut between the trees. I shut down my engine and listen to Wes, Everett, and Mic’s bikes shut off when mine does.

“Harlen?” an officer asks, as I prowl toward him, lifting my chin. “Cobi said you need to stay out here.”

“I bet he did.” I move past him and head for the road that he’s trying to block with his body. Unfortunately for him, he’s about a foot and sixty pounds smaller than me, making it easy for me to shoulder past him.

“You need to stay out here,” he repeats, grabbing my arm, and I tug from his hold, turn on him, and shove my finger in his face.

“You do not want to fucking touch me right now,” I growl, and he swallows, looking behind me, his body going even more alert seeing my boys at my back.

“You’re not—”

“Let him go, Don,” another officer cuts in, and he looks at him then at me, and steps aside.

Jogging down the road, I slow when I see a car against a tree, the airbags deployed. “Fuck, I knew you wouldn’t listen,” I hear behind me, and I pull my gun, Wes, Everett, and Mic all doing the same with theirs. “You better have carrying permits for those,” Cobi says, and I grit my teeth, shoving it back into my jeans.

“Where is she?”

“We’re looking. We just cleared this area two seconds ago. I have officers searching the woods, the car up the road, and the cabin farther up. Uncle Nico’s on his way. We’ll find her.” Fuck. I scan the dark, my gut twisting thinking of her out there somewhere, alone and scared. “It’s Hofstadter,” he says, and pain expands throughout my chest and my body jerks. “She’s also got a woman named Hadley with her.”

“Pardon?”

“Hadley, saw him put her in the trunk. I lost contact with her when she decided to keep following after him. That’s her car.” He lifts his chin to the wreck against the tree. “She’s gone. I’m expecting that when we find Harmony, we’ll find her.”

“Right.” I lift my chin and start toward the woods, done with talking.

“You’ll need a flashlight,” he tells me, shoving one toward me, and I take it.

“Tell your officers there are four other men in the woods looking and not to shoot us,” I order, and he lifts his chin.

“Let’s fan out,” Wes says quietly from my side, and my eyes go to him. “We’ll find her.”

Unable to speak, I lift my chin then watch Wes go to the left. Everett follows, and Mic takes off to the right. Staying straight, I keep my breathing natural, unholster my gun, and listen. That’s when I hear a shot ring out, and I take off.

Harmony

“Oh, God!” I cry out as pain explodes through my thigh. I fall forward to the ground, my hands catching me at the very last moment as my head comes up and swings around, looking for where the shot came from.

“Come on.” The woman tugs on my hand and I get up, feeling warm wetness slide down my leg and start to fill my boot. She tucks herself under my arm and wraps hers around the back of my waist, holding me up as I limp as quickly as I can.

“He’s close,” I whimper, tears filling my eyes—not from the pain in my leg, but from the fear that’s starting to overwhelm me. Hearing another shot, we both stumble and fall forward, my awkward weight bringing us both down quickly. I start to push up, but then he’s standing over us, his gun pointed right at me.

“Don’t!” the woman screams, as his finger starts to pull back on the trigger. My eyes close, every moment I’ve had with Harlen flashing behind my closed eyelids. Him asking me to celebrate my new job with him. Him standing in my kitchen holding Dizzy. Him making me laugh as we unpacked. Us standing under the night’s sky at a bonfire. Me tucked against him riding on his bike. Him claiming me as his. Us planning a future. And him putting a ring on my finger. A lone tear escapes my eye as the gun goes off.

Something wet hits me in the face, and I scream, hearing the woman shriek too. Then my eyes shoot open, and I watch Dr. Hofstadter’s eyes go blank as he stumbles to his knees before falling face forward onto the ground. Scrambling away from him, I see a large hole in the back of his head.

“I’m gonna be sick,” the woman whimpers, and I turn to look at her. I feel my body tense as something moves in the dark, and then my eyes widen when Harlen steps into view shining his flashlight on us.

“Honey,” I breathe, and his eyes come to me, scanning me from head to toe, his face going white when he sees my leg.

“You’re hit.”

“I’m okay.” My hands shake and I start to shiver. Coming to me, he drops to his knees at my side. “I’m okay,” I repeat, but he doesn’t hear me, or he ignores me, as he takes off his jacket and wraps it around my shoulders. Taking off his plaid shirt, he ties it high up on my thigh.

“Hadley,” he calls, and the woman pulls her wide fear-filled eyes off the back of Dr. Hofstadter’s head to look at him. “I need you to hold it together and go yell for help. As soon as you see someone, tell them we need an ambulance,” he instructs, and she nods. “Go, now.” She gets up and takes off, yelling as she goes.

“You found me,” I whisper, feeling tired, and Harlen’s eyes come to me.

“Stay with me, baby.”

“You found me,” I repeat, my eyes getting heavy as he picks me up, holding me against his chest.

“Stay with me, Angel.”

“I am with you.” My teeth chatter together.

“Stay with me. Don’t go to sleep.”

“I’m just a little tired,” I admit, my body feeling heavy.

“I love you, Angel,” he whispers.

“I love you too.” I whisper back, right before I let the darkness take me.

Hadley

With tears streaming down my cheeks I watch the big bulking man as he climbs into the back of the ambulance with the woman still in his arms. Even with the distance between us I can still see he looks stricken, worried out of his mind. Wrapping my own arms around my middle I look at the doors to the ambulance close then I see it pull away; the sirens blaring, the lights flashing. *God I hope she’s okay.* I close my eyes only to have them spring right back open when a vision of that man with a hole in his head fills my mind. Looking around I wonder what I should do, I hid myself away in the tree line out of the way when everyone was running to the woman and her man but now... Now I don’t know what to do. Walking slowly toward my car I look at the hood, it’s bad but it’s not horrible. I can probably even drive it, in a daze I open the driver’s door and take a seat turning the engine over.

“Hadley,” I turn my head at the sound of my name and look up into a bright light squinting my eyes. “Jesus, fuck me, fuck me, Jesus.” Two large hands capture my face and I blink trying to focus on the face in front of mine. “Get another fucking ambulance.” The man in front of me roars and I flinch at the sound. “Fuck, sorry baby, fuck, shit, sorry.” His hands still holding me shake and I blink again.

“Mayson, ambulance is en route.” I hear someone say right before I pass out.

Harlen

Three days later standing at the window in Harmony’s hospital room, a room filled with her friends and family, I stare out over the parking lot, sending up a silent prayer to my parents and anyone else who had been watching over her.

After I carried her out of the woods and got us to the road, I found there was an ambulance waiting for us. She had passed out; her body had gone into shock from everything that had happened, and from blood loss. When we arrived at the hospital in the ambulance, they sent her right into surgery, leaving me outside the double doors. I wanted to go with her, but I couldn't. It went against everything in me to trust they would take care of her.

What seemed like a lifetime later, a doctor came out to tell her family and me that she was going to be okay. The bullet just missed arteries and bone, which was a miracle. If an artery had been hit, she would have died almost instantly, without question. I already knew I was lucky before the doctor told me how things could have ended. But hearing how close she came to losing her life, and seeing firsthand how close to death she was, I knew I was lucky.

"Saved my girl." Nico's voice cuts into my thoughts, and I turn my head to look at him, watching him swallow hard. "Fuck, two seconds, and she would not be alive right now. His finger was on the trigger. You saved her." I do not need a reminder of what almost happened, what I almost lost. That moment is burned into my brain in a way I know I will never go a day of my life without seeing it, without remembering the fear I felt, the way time seemed to stop as he pointed his gun at her and I made a split-second decision to take his life before he could take hers. "Thank you." He pulls me in for a hug, pounding my back hard, and I do the same before letting him go.

Hearing the sound of Harmony's laughter, I look at the hospital bed and see her mom and sister on either side of her, a stack of wedding books and magazines on the table over Harmony's lap, and all three of them smiling at something. Fuck, I knew I loved her before, but now that I know what losing her would feel like, and I know I will never, ever take a moment of time with her for granted.

Lifting her head, her eyes meet mine and I fight back the wetness building in them as she mouths, *I love you*.

Chapter 13

Harmony

HEARING MY STOMACH GROWL for the third time in a row, I press Pause on the show I've been watching and slowly get off the bed. Once I'm standing, I grab my crutches and maneuver my way awkwardly out of the bedroom and down the hall. Going into the kitchen, I open the fridge and stare at the contents, all of which require cooking—something I'm not really in the mood to do. Okay something I'm never in the mood to do.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Jumping, I turn to look over my shoulder and find Harlen with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed on me, like he just caught me in an embrace with another man. "Looking for something to eat. What does it look like I'm doing?" I reply sassily, and then growl in frustration when he uncrosses his arms and comes toward me. "Do not pick me up!" I yell, right before he picks me up. "Seriously, you need to stop hauling me around." He kicks the fridge door closed then carries me to the couch in the living room, setting me down gently then lifting my legs and shoving a pillow under them.

"Now, what do you want to eat?" he asks, putting one fist to the back of the couch, the other on the arm, caging me in.

"You need to let me do stuff for myself." I push at his chest, but he doesn't move, not even an inch.

"I'm taking care of you."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't walk, or cook, or take a shower alone."

"You complaining about me helping you in the shower?" he prompts, and I grit my teeth, remembering just how nice it was this morning when he helped me in the shower... before helping *himself* in the shower.

"No."

"Good."

"Honey," I lower my voice in hopes to get through to him, "I'm okay. I'm healing. The doctors have said I'm doing great, but I need to start doing stuff for myself too. Without you hovering over me."

"I don't hover."

Oh Lord, here we go. He does hover. I can't do anything without him

standing at my back, watching my every move. “Okay, you don’t hover. I’m just saying I need to do things on my own again.”

“I don’t hover.”

Lord, give me patience.

“You saved me,” I say, and his chin jerks back so I lower my voice even more. “I love you. I know what happened was hard, but you saved me. I didn’t die. I’m living and breathing, and so are you. I want us to get back to normal.”

“Angel—”

“Please, Harlen,” I beg. “I want normal back. I need that.”

“I almost lost you.”

God, that hurts. No, it kills me, to not only see the pain in his eyes, but to hear it in his voice when he says it.

“I know, but you didn’t and you won’t.”

“You need to give me time, baby.”

“I know,” I agree, because that really is the only thing that is going to help, but at the same time, I want to move on. I don’t want to see him looking at me like I’m going to suddenly disappear right before his eyes, or to wake up at night finding him wide awake, his arms tight around me because he’s afraid I won’t be there if he goes to sleep. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He leans in, resting his forehead to mine. “More than anything on this earth.”

Tears start to fill my eyes, and I can’t hold them back as they fall down my cheeks. “How can I help you deal with this?” I ask through the lump in my throat.

“You breathing is helping me, but I need time to forget how close I came to losing you, to forget what happened. I know I’m a little overbearing right now, and I don’t know when that will stop... or *if* it will. I still see the look in your eyes when he raised the gun toward you, still feel your body going limp in my arms as I carried you to the ambulance. I don’t know when I will get over that, or if I ever will.”

Every single one of his words cuts me open, leaving me completely bare. I hate that he was so close to losing me, after already suffering the loss of his parents and knowing what a lifetime without them feels like.

“I’ll give you time, as much time as you need,” I finally say, watching his

eyes close. Moving my hands to his face, I tip my head and press my mouth against his. “It will be okay.”

“Okay, Angel.”

“I promise it will be okay,” I whisper against his lips, the same words he said to me, and I pray that he will believe them like I did.

“Okay, baby.” He kisses my forehead, and I hold onto him then smile when my stomach growls.

“Now, let me take care of you. What do you want to eat?” he asks, and I look up at him.

“Takeout?”

“Of course she wants takeout,” he mutters dryly, and I smack his arm, seeing his lips twitch. “What kind?”

“Pizza,” I respond immediately then shake my head. “No, Chinese. Wait, no, pizza.” I bite my lip, and he laughs, that sound filling me with the knowledge that we will be all right.

“How about both?” he suggests, and I smile.

“All right, dessert pizza and Lo Mein.”

“I can do that,” he agrees, then his eyes soften, making my stomach melt. “Do you need a pain pill?”

“No, I’m okay,” I whisper, and he touches his mouth to mine then to my forehead before he stands and heads for the kitchen. Lying back against the arm of the couch, I listen to him place our order, and then I smile when Dizzy jumps up onto the cushion to lie down on my stomach. As I run my fingers through his hair, my mind wanders.

Two weeks ago, I was released from the hospital, and ever since, then the media has been clamoring for a story. Harlen had to unplug the phone and change our cell numbers, because the calls just wouldn’t stop. Hopefully, they give up soon, but I doubt they will. A woman getting kidnapped is big news. Over fifty women coming forward to admit they had been sexual harassed by Hofstadter, and then forced to quit or be fired when they went to HR about what was happening, was not just big, but huge, especially in our town.

My dad told me that Dr. Hofstadter was so crazy, so egotistical, that he believed if he got rid of me, his troubles would go away. He didn’t know that his time was already up. There were too many rumors; he had hurt too many women, and his family had run out of ways to cover it up for him. They had been doing it for six years, since the moment he transferred to town.

Hofstadter didn't know he was already being looked into by an outside government organization, or that a few of the women he had harassed had gotten together and found a lawyer who was more than happy to take on the biggest hospital in four counties. Obviously, Hofstadter is now dead, but the story did not die with him, nor did the case against the hospital. The board changed members, and the CEO wisely stepped down. But even with that, there was a lot of backlash, and someone would eventually pay for what they allowed to happen and what they tried to cover up.

I, on the other hand, put in my resignation two days after I was released from the hospital. I'm not giving up my dreams of being a nurse and someday working in an emergency room. I'm just going to find someplace else to work, where I'm not constantly forced to remember how horribly Hofstadter's family let me, and fifty other women, down. They had the power to stop him from the beginning, but they didn't. Instead, they fed into his ego and made him believe he was untouchable. And for a while, he was. I wish I could say I'm sorry for him, but I'm not. He tried to kill me, and if Harlen hadn't been there, he would have done it. Then he probably would have killed Hadley so there weren't any witnesses.

"Food will be ready in about thirty minutes. You wanna come with me to pick it up?" Harlen asks, breaking into my thoughts.

I tip my head back to look at him upside down. "Can we ride your bike?" I ask knowing there is no way I can ride on his bike with him. Not yet anyways.

"Baby, we can't carry pizza and Chinese on my bike," he says, coming to take a seat on the couch and pulling my legs carefully over his lap.

"Really?" My brows draw together. "Then the first time we hung out, how were you going to get your pizza home?"

"I wasn't going home. I was going to your place."

"Yeah, but you didn't know that at the time."

"I did."

"You did?" I frown, and he smiles.

"Saw you, saw you get out of your car and go into the restaurant, pulled into the lot, parked, and followed you in. I placed my order right after you placed yours, and then I made my move."

"Made your move?"

"Yeah. Evan and Wes had told me that you were in the middle of unpacking, so when I saw you, I knew you probably needed help with that. I

figured that would be my way in, and it was.”

“You told me I looked beat.”

“Even exhausted, Angel, you’re still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life.”

“What?”

“Not only do you have brains, which is sexy as fuck, but your body is unbelievable, those tits and that ass, the fullness of your thighs.” He shakes his head then focuses on me, his eyes roaming my face. “Your face is the stuff of wet dreams. Believe me, before I had you, I had a lot of those about you.”

“Oh my God,” I laugh, and he grins, resting his hand on my cheek, his thumb skimming over my bottom lip.

“Even more beautiful when you smile, but the best is when you come.”

“Okay, you need to stop. You’re turning me on,” I tell him honestly, and he throws his head back, laughing loudly. “Glad you find me amusing.” I roll my eyes, and he laughs louder, and even though his reason for laughing is annoying, I know when I hear that sound that we will totally be okay.

Harlen

Sitting on the back deck of the four-story cabin Nico and Sophie rented in the Smoky Mountains I stare into the house through the glass doors watching Harmony play a board game in the living room with her siblings.

“It will get easier,” Nico says pulling my attention from his daughter, taking a seat across from me and handing me a beer. “It takes time, but it will get easier. Soon you won’t be constantly thinking about what happened, what could have happened.” “I hope you’re right.” It’s been over three months and it still feels like it was yesterday. There are nights I don’t sleep. I just lay in the dark holding her, listening to her breathe. Days when I can’t get shit done because all I can do is think about her, worry about her. Even knowing she’s safe, that shit still haunts me.

“Look at my girl,” He lifts his chin to the glass door. “She doesn’t have a care in the world, she knows she’s safe, she knows you made her that way. She knows you have the power to keep her that way.” He says shaking his head, his face softening. “You’ll lose sleep, you’ll lose hours a day thinking about it, but remember when you look at her that she’s good, and eventually you will be too.” He reaches out wrapping his hand around the side of my neck holding it tight, pulling me close. “I couldn’t have chosen better for my girl, you’re a good man Harlen, I didn’t know your parents, but I know they’d be proud of the man you are, proud of the kind of husband you’re going to be

to my girl and proud of the kind of father you'll be to your kids. I know that because down to my fucking soul, I'm fucking proud to call you my son."

Fuck my throat gets tight and my eyes start to burn as I hold his gaze. Knowing I have no words to give him to express how I feel, I wrap my hand around the back of his neck, and knock my forehead to his like I used to do to my dad. His eyes close briefly and he does the same back to me before letting me go, having no idea what he just gave me.

Epilogue

Harlen

One Year Later

“SHE REALLY IS PERFECT FOR YOU.”

Looking down at my aunt, I see her eyes are focused across the room on Harmony, who’s standing under her dad’s arm smiling at something one of her brothers is saying. Taking her in, my chest gets tight and my stomach fills with pride and possessiveness.

Three hours ago, I made her my wife at the front of a small church, with friends and close family.

Three hours ago, she walked down the aisle toward me, her white lace dress skimming her body and flowing out at her waist.

Three hours ago, I took her hand when her dad entrusted me with her.

Three hours ago, I realized I had been wrong all the times before, because her face right before she became my wife was the most beautiful I had ever seen her.

“So perfect for you.”

My aunt’s words pull me from my thoughts, and I focus on her. “She is,” I agree, as her arms slide around my waist and she tucks herself into my side.

“Your parents would be proud of you, Harlen Alistair MacCabe. So darn proud of the man you’ve become.” Her words wash through me, and I wrap my arm tighter around her shoulders. “You’ve done good for yourself, kid.”

“You had a hand in me becoming the man I am,” I tell her, and her body jolts in surprise. Christ, have I never told her that?

“She’s making you soft.” I hear the tears in her voice, and then see them when she tips her head back to look up at me.

“Probably,” I agree without a shred of regret, and she laughs, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

Looking around the room, I take in all the familiar faces, and then my eyes land on the large photo of my parents. Harmony wanted them with us today. I didn’t know she had it planned, but when we walked into the reception hall in hand, I saw that photo and knew that, even without the picture, they were

here. In some way or another, they have always been with me. I still miss them every day, but I know they had a hand in me finding the woman I married and the life I live.

Harlen

Six Years Later

Hearing Ava cry through the baby monitor on the nightstand, and feeling Harmony starting to get up, I place my hand against her round stomach to still her. “Stay, I got her.”

I kiss her bare shoulder then roll out of bed and head out of our room, down the hall to our five-year-old daughter Ava’s room. Seeing her shadowy figure sitting up in bed, I walk across the dark room and flip on her lamp. The base is the head of a unicorn, the shade a soft cotton candy pink that is the same color as pretty much everything else in her bedroom.

“You okay?” I ask my baby girl, picking her up when she holds her arms out to me, and she shakes her head.

“There’s a monster.” She snuffles, and I run my hand down the back of her long, soft hair as she tucks her face into my neck and wraps her tiny arms around my shoulders.

“There’s no monsters in here, baby,” I assure her quietly, feeling her shake.

“There is. I saw it.” She pulls her face out of my neck to look at me, and then points. “It’s in the closet.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” She nods, and I give her a squeeze then kiss her forehead.

“Okay, let me get my sword.” I go across the room with her still in my arms and pick up the plastic silver sword leaning against the wall by the door. Taking hold of the hilt, I whisper, “You open the door to the closet, and I’ll kill him.”

Nodding, she leans over and opens the door to the closet then quickly tucks her face into my neck. Like I do at least a few times a week, I swing out the sword, making grunting noises, spinning around and dancing, and then finish with a downward plunge into the imaginary monster’s chest.

“There. He’s gone,” I say, and Ava lifts her head and looks around the room then peeks into the closet. “See? All taken care of.”

“Thank you, Daddy.” God, no matter how many times a day I hear her call

me that, it never gets old.

“You’re welcome, baby. You ready to get back into bed?”

“Yes.” She nods. Dropping the sword back to its spot by the door, I carry her to her bed and lay her down, pulling the blankets up around her shoulder and kissing the top of her head. “Is tomorrow doughnut day?” she asks, sounding already half asleep.

I grin. “Yeah, baby. Tomorrow’s doughnut day.”

“Yippie,” she whispers, as her eyes slide closed.

“See you in the morning.” I kiss her hair once more, turn out her lamp, and then head across her dark room. Climbing back into bed with Harmony, I fit myself against her back and rest my hand over our soon-to-arrive second daughter.

“Harlen Alistair MacCabe, the Scottish lord and slayer of monsters,” she says, and even though I can’t see her face through the dark, I know she’s smiling.

“Do anything for my girls.”

“We know.” She scoots back, cuddling closer.

“Sleep, Angel.”

“Still so bossy,” she mumbles, sounding like she’s still smiling.

Ignoring her comment, I kiss the top of her head then listen to her breathing even out as she falls back asleep.

Harmony

Four Years Later

“No, it’s mine!” Ava cries, holding a pink-frosted sprinkled doughnut over her head, just out of her little sister’s reach.

“No, I want it!” our daughter, Lillian, yells, standing on her tiptoes trying to reach the doughnut but failing, since she’s about a foot and a half too short.

“How about neither of you get it?” Harlen growls, and I look down at our six-week-old son Alistair to hide my smile from our girls.

“Dad, that’s not fair! I saw it first,” Ava says, and I’m sure if I looked up at her, she would be jetting out her bottom lip in a pout, a look she has perfected over the years. A look that normally gets her whatever she wants from her daddy. I also know she’s lying. When Harlen came home and dropped the box

of donuts on the table, both girls opened the box at the same time, and both of them reached for that doughnut at the same time. Ava just got to it first.

“Give me the doughnut, Ava,” he orders, and I look up just in time to watch him hold out his hand and her place it in his upturned palm.

“Daddy,” Lillian whispers in horror, as he shoves the whole thing in his mouth and swallows it without really even chewing.

“Now it’s gone. Pick another one, stop arguing, and go watch TV,” he orders, and I hold back laughter, because he’s seriously funny when he’s trying to be tough. Something he’s not very good at being with his babies.

“Need some milk, honey?” I ask, and his eyes come to me and narrow. “What? Just asking.” I bite my lip, and his eyes drop to my mouth then down to our son that is attached to my breast, where he’s enjoying his Saturday breakfast. When his eyes meet mine again, I see frustration there. Then again, he hasn’t gotten laid for over six weeks. I just got word from the doctor that the seal could finally be broken a couple of days ago, but with the girls and a new little one, we haven’t had a chance, so he’s not the only one who’s frustrated.

“Did you eat?” he questions, and I shake my head. “Angel, you need to eat.” He comes to me, taking Alistair when I lift him off my breast, then bends to kiss me. Hearing the doorbell ring, he leans back to look at me, ordering, “Eat something. I’ll get the door.” Kissing my forehead, he carries Alistair toward the front door, patting his back.

I listen to the door open, and then hear the sound of my dad and mom greeting Harlen. My face softens as my dad says something that makes Harlen laugh while the girls run through the house—a house we bought after Lillian was born—both of them yelling for their grandma and grandpa. Hearing all that, I smile to myself, get up, and head to the kitchen to make myself something to eat.

“Honey,” I whimper against Harlen’s ear eight hours later, and his fingers that had been playing lazily between my legs speed up.

“Do not wake the kids,” he orders gruffly, and I bite my lip.

“I need you.”

“You’ll get me.” His thumb rolls against my clit, and my back arches off the bed, sending his fingers deeper. “God, so fucking tight, and so goddamn wet. I’ve missed this,” he says, still toying with me.

I squeeze my eyes closed then move quickly, rolling him to his back,

straddling his waist, and impaling myself on his cock. “I’ve missed this,” I tell him, riding him hard as one of his hands wraps around my hip, the other cupping my breast.

“Fuck,” he groans, and I look down at him, his eyes meeting mine.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Angel.” He lifts his hips into mine then sits up, capturing my breast with his mouth and pulling my nipple deep, sending a shockwave of pleasure through me. “Give it to me.”

“Yes,” I pant as I start to come, going over the edge and pulling him along with me when I feel him pulse deep inside me. Falling against his chest, breathing heavy, I shiver as his hands slide up and down my back.

“That was way too quick. Give me twenty minutes and we’re gonna try that again,” he says, and I laugh, tucking my face into his neck then closing my eyes when I hear Alistair wake through the baby monitor.

“I’ll go get him,” he says, kissing my lips then my forehead before pulling out of me and rolling out of bed. He puts on a pair of pajama bottoms and leaves the room. Watching him go, I know without a doubt that some of the most beautiful things in life are things you don’t plan for, and my amazing life is proof of that.

Until Cobi Coming Late 2018

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I started this writing journey after I fell in love with reading, like thousands of authors before me. I wanted to give people a place to escape where the stories were funny, sweet, and hot and left you feeling good. I have loved sharing my stories with you all, loved that I have helped people escape the real world, even for a moment.

I started writing for me and will continue writing for you. XOXO Aurora

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Aurora Rose Reynolds is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author whose wildly popular series include *Until*, *Until Him*, *Until Her*, and *Underground Kings*.

Her writing career started in an attempt to get the outrageously alpha men who resided in her head to leave her alone and has blossomed into an opportunity to share her stories with readers all over the world.

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