



# Blurred Love

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** Ever since a traumatic brain injury changed his life, Colter James has kept to himself.

He doesn't do small talk. Doesn't do crowds.

And certainly doesn't do women.

When my sleazy ex starts causing trouble,

Colter shows up like a storm—dark, dangerous, and hell bent on protecting me. Even if it means breaking all of his rules.

Now he's stepping into my world—

one quiet gesture, one lingering glance at a time.

I can't deny I want more.

More of his guarded kindness.

More of the man he swears he can't be.

He says he's not worth the risk.

But what if losing him is the biggest risk of all?

**Total Pages (Source):** 41

# Page 1

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## CHAPTER1

### POPPY

He's watching me... again.

It would be one thing if he was doing it with interest or even just an acknowledgement, but it's not like that. It's like he has a permanent scowl on his face, and it's directed at me the whole time.

After the morning I've had, I'm over it, and I'm barely able to contain myself.

I am representing Glaze Bakery. I can't tell off customers. I chant the little reminder to myself, but the little devil on my shoulder reminds me that this guy is not a customer. He's always here when we set up the food truck, but he's never bought anything.

He always just sits there, peeking at me over his computer, scowling.

"You okay?" Teresa nudges me in the ribs.

I grunt in response. How else should I respond? I had to deal with my ex at the Co-op location this morning, and now I have to deal with the scowling asshole at the Heroes Rehab Center. I can't seem to catch a break.

Teresa puts a hand on my shoulder. "Look, forget about Adam. He's an asshole, and everyone knows it."

I put a hand on my hip. “I’m not mad at Adam. I’m mad at myself. I broke up with him because he treated me like shit, and I hate that even now, I’m letting him keep doing it. I should have said something. I should have....”

Teresa holds her hand up. “Look, don’t beat yourself up about it. That’s the last thing you should be doing.”

I suck in a deep breath. “I know, but the food truck is new for Glaze, and I don’t want to cause any drama around it. Emery is counting on me and?—”

Teresa stomps her foot. “Emery would not want you to let any man disrespect you.”

I suck in a breath and let it out slowly. “You’re right. I know you’re right.” I nod my head toward the back of the picnic tables. “See that guy?”

She looks around the tables, and the sassy Teresa that I’ve come to love is back in full force. “There’s like fifteen men sitting out there, and yeah, I’ve looked at them all. This is my favorite location by far.”

She’s wiggling her eyebrows, and even in the bad mood I’m in, I can’t stop the laugh from coming out. “You’re crazy.”

She nods her head in agreement. “Yeah, I am. Now tell me which guy. You hookin’ up? Because you know that’s what you need to do, right? You need to get laid.”

As soon as she says the words, there’s a giggle at the window. I push Teresa to the side. “I’m so sorry that you had to hear that. What can I get you?”

The curvy brown-haired woman looks up at me with amused brown eyes. “I’ll take a chocolate croissant and an iced coffee, please.”

Almost awkwardly, I start the coffee while Teresa disappears. Of course, she's going to go hide right now. When I have the order ready, I hand it through the window. "That will be seven-fifty."

She taps her card to pay and doesn't immediately walk away. "I'm Brooklyn," she says, introducing herself.

My face flames. Everyone in Whiskey Run knows Walker. He owns half the damn town, including the Heroes Rehab Center. Brooklyn is his wife. I knew who she was as soon as I saw her, and if there's anyone that I'd want to make a good impression on, it's her. "I know. I'm Poppy. It's nice to meet you."

She opens her mouth, and I can't stop myself from rambling. "Anyway, I want to apologize. I promise that we'll keep things professional here, and I don't want you or your husband to worry. All professional from here on out."

She sets her coffee down and pinches off a bite of the croissant. After chewing and swallowing, she nods. "I'm not worried. Everyone loves when Glaze stops by." She waves her hand behind her at the group of men and women behind her. "And Walker is happy you're here because then I don't have to go into town to get my daily dose of caffeine. I told Emery if you can add more stops here to your calendar we would love it, and I'll make sure the center is aware."

I let out a breath of relief. "Okay, thank you. I'll double-check with her and let you know."

She grabs up her coffee, and I'm sure she's about to walk away, but she surprises me. "And your friend is right, you know. You should never let a man make you feel less than."

I grimace. "You heard that?"

She nods. “Yeah and the part where she said you needed to get laid.”

By this point, I’m wishing a big hole would open up and swallow me. “Uhhhh,” I stutter, not sure what I can say to make this sound good. I just gave a speech to this woman about how we’re professional, and now I’m talking to her about getting laid.

## Page 2

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“Yeah, I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

She waves me off. “Don’t apologize. Your friend reminds me of my sister, Cassie. And just so you know, my sister is usually right.” She smiles and gives me a wave. “Let me know if your schedule opens up any.”

I wave with a big dumb smile on my face because I’m not sure what to say. I’m pretty sure Brooklyn just told me I needed to go get laid.

“So who is it?”

As soon as Brooklyn walks away, Teresa is back in the truck by my side. “Really, you just left? Drop a bombshell about me”—I lower my voice to a whisper—“‘getting laid,’ and then walk off so I can deal with the aftermath.”

Teresa snorts. “It’s fine. She was laughing when she walked away, it’s all good. Now which guy? Is he still here?”

She gestures wildly with her head toward the picnic tables. I’m surprised to see some people have left, but the one man still remains, staring at me.

“Forget it,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “Oh no, you can’t do that. You can’t bring it up that you’re interested in a guy and then drop it.”

I pick up a dish towel and throw it to her. “Start cleaning up. I’m going to let people

know we're closing up in thirty minutes if they want anything before we go."

Teresa rolls her eyes at me, but I just laugh and walk out of the truck. I stop at the first table. "Hey guys, I just wanted to let you know we're closing up in thirty minutes in case you want to get anything to go."

They nod their thanks, and I move to the next table of women and repeat my speech.

One woman bolts up. "Ooooh, thank you. I wanted to get some cupcakes to take home for my family."

I tell her the selection we have left, and as she walks up to the truck, I go to the next table. I'm getting closer to the man in the back, and I can feel my blood pressure rising. He's openly glaring at me, and in my head, I'm imagining everything he's thinking.

"A fat girl working at a dessert truck."

"Do you make any money or eat all the profits?"

"You really shouldn't be surrounded by all that food because you don't have the willpower not to eat it."

Everything Adam said to me when he found out I was going to start working at the Glaze Bakery Food Truck crosses my mind. I was so excited to get the job, and he ruined it for me. I almost turned down the job offer until I came to my senses. I grew up making pastries with my grandma, and it's something I love to do. Plus, instead of being cooped up inside all day, I get to travel around and meet new people. And let's face it, almost all our customers are happy to see us. So I got rid of the boyfriend instead of the job.

But seeing the strange man glowering at me reminds me of everything that my ex said. I clench my hands into fists and mentally prepare myself for when I get to his table because I'm over men treating me like shit and getting away with it. Like Brooklyn said, I'm done letting men treat me as if I'm less than.

## CHAPTER2

### COLTER

Today is the day.

I'm going to talk to her.

I practiced in front of the mirror all last night and this morning, and I was able to get through it without stuttering.

I've sat here for the last two hours with my laptop open and haven't done a bit of work. Hell, I haven't even looked at my screen because I've been too busy watching Poppy. I only know her name because I heard the other woman call her that a few times.

The truck has only been coming to the Rehab Center for a few weeks. I never pay attention to the food trucks or make it a point to visit them, but I was walking by that day and saw Poppy, and it was over with. I sat down at the same table I'm sitting at now and stared at her the whole time the truck was parked here. She is beautiful. I'm assuming her hair is long, but she wears it in a bun at the top of her head. She has big blue eyes and an infectious smile. Hell, she even makes me want to smile, and that's something I haven't done in a long time.

I watch her make her way through the tables, stopping and chatting with each one, and my heart starts to race because I know she's going to stop at my table too.



Everything inside of me is screaming that I should get up and walk away while I still can, but I stay rooted to my spot, unable to move.

My throat feels as if it's closing up.

I'm sweating even though it's only seventy degrees.

And I swear it feels as if my heart is going to pound right out of my chest.

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As soon as Poppy starts walking toward me, the smile that was on her face disappears.

She stops in front of me and puts a hand on her hip. “I would ask you if you want anything before we close up, but you haven’t even bought anything the whole two and half hours you’ve been sitting here.”

I swallow hard. Shit, is she mad I didn’t buy anything? I was too busy watching her, and hell, let’s face it, I would never get through ordering something from her without stuttering all through it.

The sun comes through the clouds, and it’s like an instant headache. I pull the sunglasses off my head and put them on my face, hoping it helps. All I can do is stare up at the woman that I’ve dreamt about since I first saw her last week.

She waves her hand around and then crosses her arms over her chest. “Listen, you’ve been scowling at me for the last two, almost three hours. Whatever you want to say, say it. Let’s just get this over with.”

I open my mouth to say something, but as soon as a stuttered word comes out, I slam my mouth shut.

She shakes her head, and I’m not sure what I did, but it had to be something because she is pissed off. She sits down in the chair across from me, and I suck in a breath and lean back. I’m not sure where my reaction comes from, but I do know that I don’t have any faith that I won’t make a fool of myself when it comes to her. I can see me doing something crazy like trying to hold her hand, and that will really freak her out.

She notices the way I backed up, and anger fills her face. “What? Being fat is not contagious.”

I shake my head, trying to make sense of what she’s talking about. “Wha—” I stutter and stop.

She points at me. “I’ve seen you sitting here with your six-pack abs and big arms. I’m sure you spend all your time in the gym, but that doesn’t give you any right to look down on me.”

I shake my head vigorously, but that seems to piss her off even more. “I know men like you. Men that think they’re too good to even share the same air as me.” She pokes her finger into her chest. “And I’ll tell you what: There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m happy with who I am, and I don’t need you to just sit there and judge me because I’m overweight and work a dessert food truck.”

“I’m not?—”

She doesn’t let me finish. Instead she leans forward and blows out a breath. Her voice is filled with sadness as she shakes her head. Her blue eyes are not as bright, and it makes me sick to know that I’m the reason for it. She folds her hands together on the table. “Look, I’m not trying to cause trouble or anything, but think about this on my end. You’ve glowered at me for three hours, and this whole time, instead of being able to happily do my job, I’ve been trying to figure out why you hate me as much as you obviously do.”

My hands clench. “I do...don’t.”

She laughs bitterly. “Just forget it. Just stop, okay? I’m done.”

She stands up, and with no emotion, she points at the Glaze truck. “We’re closing up

soon if you want to get anything.”

And then she’s gone, turning on her heel and walking away from me.

I want to follow her. I want to plead with her to listen to me and let me explain that I don’t hate her. In my head, I’m thinking of all the things I wish I could say to her.

I’m sorry, to begin with.

And then I’d tell her that I think she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.

I’d tell her that she makes me want to smile and that looking at her almost makes me forget my past and who I am.

But I can’t say any of that. Not without looking like a fool.

I close my laptop and stuff it into the bag at my feet. Without looking up, I grab my stuff and start walking away from the picnic area.

I hear someone calling my name, but I keep moving.

Abby, my friend Davis’ wife, catches up to me and is huffing and puffing.

“Colter, stop!”

I stand, feet planted, thankful I still have my sunglasses on because it’s like a shield.

“What happened back there?”

I tilt my head to the side. I know Abby, and I trust her. She’s married to one of my

very best friends. Davis and I, along with Kanan, Jason, and Elias served together, and we're brothers bonded together by loss, injury, and survival. I take a deep breath and speak slowly. "It was a misunderstanding."

Abby grips my arm. "Are you okay?"

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I nod.

She wants me to explain, but I'm not sure I know how to.

She squeezes my arm again and nods her head. "Okay."

I put my bag strap farther up my shoulder. "I'll see you later, Abby."

She nods, frowning as I walk past her.

It's not until I walk down the path to my cabin and get inside with the door closed behind me that I let myself react. I want to throw something or punch a wall, but after years of therapy, I know that's not what I need to do. So I walk into the bedroom and pull off my jeans and long-sleeve shirt. I put on my shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes and practically sprint out the door. It's not until I'm into mile two that I start to feel a little better. I hate that Poppy feels I was thinking all those things about her, but I know I need to make it right. Maybe I can talk to Brooklyn or Abby and have one of them check on her to make sure she's okay.

No matter what happens, I know I'll be avoiding the food truck from now on, and I hate that too because the thought of not seeing Poppy again makes me a little crazy.

I was hopeful when I first saw Poppy, and that feeling carried me through the next week. Now all I feel is loss. I'll never be the same Colter that I once was. I'll never have a healthy relationship, a wife, or a family, and it's about time I come to terms with it.

## CHAPTER3

### POPPY

I watch the man walk away, and I wait for the relief to come, but it doesn't. I sit back down at the picnic table feeling worse now than I did before I confronted him. He didn't say anything. Heck, I didn't give him much of a chance to say anything.

I put my head in my hands. I usually avoid any and all drama, so I want to kick myself for what I did today. Why did I unleash on some stranger? All he did was scowl at me. I directed everything I felt for Adam on some poor guy.

I groan and lift my head to find a woman standing in front of me. She's the one that went to buy items to take home earlier. I sit up a little straighter as she sits down across from me.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

I rear back, surprised. "What?"

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Colter is one of the nicest men I know, and whatever you said to him, you destroyed any progress he's made in the last two years."

Shocked, I shake my head. "What do you mean? He was staring at me, scowling for hours and?—"

She blows out a breath and waves her hand around. "He usually is holed up inside, so I was happy to find him out in the sunshine."

A knot in my stomach starts to form, but the woman is glaring at me, not cutting me

any slack. “Colter is one of my husband’s best friends. If you only knew the hell he’s been through these past two years. You could have just let him down easy instead of being mean about it.”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t... I mean, he didn’t ask me out or anything. He was glaring at me for hours, and I went off on him.”

She looks down the path that Colter disappeared down and then back at me. “For just looking at you?”

I roll my eyes and blow out a breath. “He wasn’t just looking at me... he was judging me.”

Her eyes round. “Judging you? Trust me when I say that Colter is the last man to judge anyone.”

Damnit, did I really screw up this badly? “I’m sorry, okay? I had a bad morning, and maybe I took it out on the wrong person.”

She laughs bitterly. “You think?” She stands up. “I just hope that whatever you said to him doesn’t set him back.”

She starts to walk off, and I bolt to my feet. “Wait...”

She turns to look at me. “Abby. My name is Abby.”

I gesture to the seat she just got up from. “I’m Poppy. Will you please sit down?” She’s about to refuse, but I plead with her. “Please?”

She doesn’t look happy about it, but she sits down and stares at me. Most people like me, but today seems to be the day that I’m rubbing everyone the wrong way. “Can



you tell me about Colter?”

She rolls her eyes. “His story is not mine to tell.”

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I nod. “Okay, well, can I tell you about me?”

She doesn’t answer me, but at least she doesn’t get up and walk away, so I start to ramble. “I started working at Glaze around a month ago, and this is the second week since we’ve started with the truck.”

She crosses her legs, and I settle in. “Look, I regret what I said to your friend. I had a run-in with an ex this morning, and let’s just say it wasn’t pretty. When Colter stared at me for two hours, scowling, I thought he was judging me, and I tried to talk to him, but he just stared at me, and I lost my temper.”

Abby blows out a breath. “Colter has a traumatic brain injury.”

I swear she may as well have punched me in the face. Shocked, I shake my head side to side. “No... I didn’t know...”

Abby tilts her head to look at me. “Like I said, Colter is one of the good guys, and I don’t know what you said to him, but whatever it was, he didn’t deserve it.”

I grip my hands together in my lap. I can feel myself spiraling. I’m replaying everything I said in my head, and I feel sick to my stomach. I look at the path Colter walked down. “I need to talk to him.”

Abby shakes her head. “That’s not a good idea.”

I lean forward. “Abby, please. I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but I’m not a mean person. I let my morning affect how I treated Colter, and I need to apologize to

him.”

She’s shaking her head the whole time. “See, I’m pretty sure Colter won’t want that. If anything, he’s going to want to know you’re okay because he’ll be worried about you and?—”

I point at myself. “Worried about me? He doesn’t even know me.”

She searches my face. “He doesn’t? Are you sure? Because I don’t know any other reason a man that is sensitive to light so badly it causes migraines would come out here to just hang out.”

I remember Colter putting on his sunglasses when the sun broke through the clouds, and I start to reexamine everything that happened over the last few hours. Maybe he wasn’t scowling at me. I mean, sure, he was watching me the whole time, but maybe he wasn’t scowling. Maybe he was squinting because even though there were clouds, he was protecting his eyes. Maybe it was desire not disgust that I saw flare in his eyes when he looked me up and down.

“Oh God!” I exclaim and put my head in my hands. “I shouldn’t have said what I said. I shouldn’t have said any of it.” I lift my head and plead with her in desperation. “Abby, please, you don’t owe me anything, but you have to help me make this right. Oh my gosh, he has to think I’m a horrible person.”

She shrugs. “Trust me, he doesn’t. He just thinks you’re like every other person that judges him for his TBI.”

I let my head fall back with a huff. “I wasn’t judging him, at least not like that. I need to fix this, Abby, please.”

She searches my face, and I hope she sees the sincerity and the overwhelming regret

I'm feeling right now. "Please."

She finally nods her head and pulls her phone out. "I'll give you his number, but I need you to promise me one thing."

I dig my phone out of my apron pocket. "Anything."

She nods. "You can text him, but don't call him. I don't want you catching him off guard and making him even more uncomfortable. If he wants to talk to you, he'll call you."

At this point, I'll promise her anything. "I promise. I'll text him, and that's it. I won't call him unless he says I can."

She still doesn't seem completely sure about it, but after looking up his number on her phone, she recites it to me. I enter it into my phone and then repeat it to her to make sure I got it right.

I look at the window of the Glaze truck, and Teresa is hanging out of it, throwing her hands up in the air. I want to talk to Abby more, but I know I need to get back to work. I stand up. "Thank you, Abby. I really am sorry, but I want to thank you for talking to me about this. I'm going to fix it, and I'm going to apologize to him."

She nods her head, but as I turn to walk away, she grabs my arm to stop me. Surprised, I look up at her. She shakes her head. "Poppy, whatever you do, just don't hurt him... okay?"

I blink in surprise. "Hurt him? I couldn't do that."

She smiles softly at me. "I have a feeling that you could probably hurt him more than anyone."

I feel the need to remind her. “Abby, I don’t know him. I didn’t even know his name until you told me what it was.”

She nods. “Yeah, I know, but something got him out of his cabin, and I have a feeling it was you.”

I just stare at her in surprise and wonder if there is any truth to what she’s thinking. “I promise, Abby, I won’t hurt him.”

She nods and sighs in relief before walking away.

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As soon as I get to the truck, I start handing napkins and utensils through the open window to Teresa.

“What was that about?”

I look at Abby’s retreating back. “I’m not really sure.”

Teresa leans out the window. “Poppy, what’s going on?”

I shake my head, not wanting to go into detail. I love Teresa, but I know that whatever I tell her will be told to anyone and everyone that will listen when she works her shift at the shop this week. “Nothing is going on. I was just catching up with Abby.”

Her eyes light up. “You know Abby? Do you know her brother, Zach? He is hot with a capital h.” She holds her five fingers up. “I just need five minutes alone with that man and...”

She rambles on, but I have trouble paying attention because my thoughts go back to Colter and everything I said to him. I feel a deep regret for all of it, and as soon as I get the truck back to the bakery and go home, I’m going to text Colter and just hope he forgives me.

## CHAPTER4

## COLTER

My phone dings, and instead of looking at it, I rub at my eyes. As soon as I got back from my run, I took a cold shower and then had to take some meds for my headache. I hate taking pain relievers, but sometimes it's the only thing that helps. I should have worn my glasses even in the shade today. I know better, but I guess I was too busy watching Poppy.

Two minutes later, my phone reminds me that I missed a text, so I roll to my back, taking the phone with me. Fully expecting a text from Davis, Kanan, Elias, or Jason, I'm surprised I have a message from an unknown number.

I click on it and scan the text and then take my time and read it again.

“Hi, Colter. My name is Poppy. I'm the woman from the food truck today. I hope it's okay that I'm texting you. I got your number from Abby. Anyway, I would like to talk to you and apologize to you for my behavior. Will you call me?”

I sit up in bed and stare at the phone. My mind starts to race, and I have to force myself to relax and slow down. I'm not able to compute or make sense of things like I used to, and when my mind races, it makes it damn near impossible to make sense of anything.

I take a few deep breaths, read the text again, and then start typing a response. I have to read it a few times to make sure it sounds right, but eventually I push send.

“Hi Poppy. You don't owe me an apology. I'm sorry if I bothered you today. It won't happen again.”

I put my phone down and then pace through the living room and back to the bedroom. Back and forth I go, waiting to hear the ding of an incoming text. As soon as I hear it, I'm jogging to the bedroom to check my phone that I laid on the nightstand.

“I do owe you an apology. I shouldn’t have said the things I said and I truly am sorry.”

I sit down on the edge of the bed and try to figure out what I need to say to her. I don’t want her to feel bad. Obviously, me being there today, watching her spooked her, and I don’t want to scare her in any way. But I also don’t want her to think that I thought any of those things she said today either. I type out a text and send it before rereading it.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, but you’re forgiven. I’m sorry for watching you work for the almost three hours you were stationed at the Rehab Center today.”

I scan the text I just sent, and my stomach drops. I sound like a stalker. I admitted to watching her work for three hours. I mean, I won’t be surprised if the police show up and arrest me for stalking. I toss the phone onto the bed and lay back with a groan. It only takes a few seconds for my phone to ding to let me know that I have another message.

Refusing to read it, I cover my eyes with my arm and wish the whole situation away. I hate the person I’ve become. I feel like I’m always saying the wrong things. I question everything I do, say, and think, and even though the therapist says it’s normal, none of this is normal to me.

I’ve always been assertive and confident, and I thought I was getting back to being that guy, but the first woman that I have any feelings for, I fall apart at the seams.

The phone dings again and then again.

Unable to resist, I stretch to reach for it and read the incoming messages.

The first text says. “You were watching me work?”



I groan again, knowing how awful that sounds.

The next text says, “I thought you were offended by me. Or upset or something. I didn’t know you were watching me... I thought you were scowling at me like I was bothering you somehow.”

I tilt my head to look at the phone. Bothering me? How the hell could she have been bothering me? Before I can ask, she sends another text. “Can we please talk?”

I drop the phone because there's no way I’m going to talk to her. I can’t. I’ll stutter through the whole thing and embarrass myself more than I already have.

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She texts a question mark, but no matter how much I'd love to hear her voice, I can't do it. Instead of trying to explain to her, I just ignore her request and her follow-up with the question mark.

I rub my hand along the scruff of my chin and not for the first time wish that things—that I—could be different.

When my phone dings again, I look at it hesitantly and see that there is an attached voice message that Poppy sent me.

I take a deep breath and listen to her soft Southern voice come through the phone.

She speaks slow. "Hi, Colter. I hoped we could talk, but I understand if you don't want to. After everything I said to you today, I don't blame you for not wanting to talk to me." She takes a breath. "Anyway, I really am sorry. I uh, had a bad morning, and unfortunately, I took it out on you. What I did was wrong, and I feel really bad about it. If you want to talk—so I can apologize in person—please call me. Or if you want to stop by the next time I have the truck at the center, I'd be happy to buy you a piece of pie or a cupcake or whatever you would like to eat." She pauses and then blows out a soft breath. "Anyway, I am sorry. I hope you call or I get to see you again, but if I don't, I don't blame you. Sorry... again. I'll talk to you or not, whatever you decide. Bye."

As soon as the recording stops, I play it again and listen to her talk.

Everything inside me wants to talk to her. I wish I could call and have a normal conversation, but I don't trust myself to do it. And there's no way I'm going to go

and talk to her in person, not after today's epic fail.

I start typing. "I'm sorry you had a bad morning, but I promise you don't owe me an apology or a piece of pie. All is forgiven. I hope your day is better tomorrow."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I hit send, turn the volume off on my phone, and then leave it on the bed as I walk through the house and to my office. I sit down behind the four computer screens and decide to focus on my work. Each of them are set to a black background, meant to help fend off migraines. I turn the brightness up a little bit. At least with my job, I know what I'm doing. It's easy for me, and it's the one thing I have left that I'm confident with.

It helps that what I do is important. I may not be able to go on missions anymore or work in the field, and I am behind a computer, but what I do still saves lives.

I try to focus on the work at hand, but only a few minutes pass by and I'm logging into my phone messages from my computer. I listen to Poppy's voice message again and again.

Each time I get to the end of the message, I hit play again. Over and over, I listen to her sweet voice until I lean my head back, close my eyes, and picture her in my mind.

When her voice stops and is replaced by my phone ringing through the speakers of my computer, I open my eyes and look at the pop-up on my screen. Walker.

I sit up in my chair and open all my screens as I answer the call. "Walker."

He gets straight into giving me my assignment, and I hit the record button to make sure I don't miss anything. As soon as I hang up the phone, I get straight to work because I know that lives can be lost in minutes if I drop the ball.

It's not until hours later when the assignment is done that I finally let my mind wander and think about Poppy, and I can't help but wonder what she's doing right now.

## CHAPTER 5

### POPPY

It's been a week since I sent Colter a voice message, pouring out my heart and apologizing. And I haven't heard one word from him since.

I'm packing up the food truck, ready for another busy day, and all I can think about is if I'm going to see Colter today. I haven't been able to get him off my mind, and it feels like I have butterflies in my stomach as I wonder if he's going to show or not.

"What's up with you?"

I keep working, unable to look April in the eye. "What do you mean? I'm packing the truck."

As soon as I finish stacking the plates, plasticware, cups, and napkins, I look up. April has her arms crossed over her chest as she stares back at me. She knows something is up, and she's not going to give in until I tell her what's happening. April has worked at the bakery for a long time, and even though she only helps out part-time now, she still knows all the ins and outs of it all. "What?" I ask her, trying to put off the inevitable.

She laughs. "What's going on?" When I don't answer her right away, she shakes her head. "You may as well tell me because you know I'm going to find out anyway."

I lean against the edge of the counter and cross my arms. "Okay, so last week, I had

another run-in with Adam.”

She shakes her head. “Dammit. Do you want me to get Matt to talk to him?”

I roll my eyes. April’s husband is the center for the Jasper Eagles football team, and I’m sure he doesn’t want to spend his time dealing with my ex-boyfriend. “No, I don’t want that. I need to stand up to him on my own.”

She nods her head, but I should have known that April would see right through me. “What else? There’s more to it than that.”

“Well, after I let Adam ruin my morning, I turned around and ruined someone else’s afternoon. I said things I regret, and I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Her forehead creases. “Did you apologize?”

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I shrug my shoulders because even though I did apologize, I still don't feel like it was enough. "Yeah, I did."

She nods her head. "Buuuut?"

I shrug again. "I don't know. He said he forgave me, but it doesn't excuse the fact that I was rude and offensive."

A big smile forms on her face. "He?"

I roll my eyes. "It's not like that."

She points to my face. "If it's not like that, then why is your face so red?"

I cover my cheeks with my hands and feel the heat radiating off my skin, but I still deny it. "It's not."

She laughs. "Okay, well, you did something wrong, you apologized, and he forgave you. Have you seen him since?"

I shake my head.

"Well, when will you see him again?"

I put my hand to my stomach and breathe in. "I don't know."

She nods. "Well, I guess you let fate handle it."

“Fate,” I repeat.

She smiles. “Yep. If it’s meant to be, it will happen.”

I’m about to correct her and explain that it’s not like that. It’s not like anything is going on between Colter and me, but before I can, Teresa walks up to the truck carrying trays of pastries. “Morning,” she grumbles.

April and I look at each other and laugh. We all know not to talk to Teresa until she’s had her morning coffee. I take the trays from her and gesture to the coffee in the sterno that I brought out earlier. “Drink up.”

She moans as she drinks the coffee, and both April and I laugh. The rest of the packing is done in silence, and it’s not long before Teresa and I are on the road to set up at the Heroes Rehab Center.

The whole time we’re setting up, I’m looking for Colter. Midmorning, Brooklyn shows up, and we chat for a while. I almost ask her about Colter. I’m sure she knows who he is since he works for her husband, but in the end, I decide not to. I don’t want it to get back to Colter that I’m talking about him.

By midafternoon, we’re slowing down, and when there’s only another two hours left, I finally realize that he’s not coming. If he wanted to see me, he would be here by now.

When Abby shows up, I try not to let her know how disappointed I am. “Hey,” I say timidly. Even though our conversation ended okay the last time, I’m still unsure how she is going to react today.

She picks at her chocolate croissant and moans when she takes a bite. “This is so good.”

I sit down across from her at the picnic table.

She leans forward after she swallows. “So?”

I don’t have to ask, because I can guess what she wants to know. “I texted him and sent him a voice message. I apologized. A few times actually.”

She nods. “And?”

I shrug, trying to act like it doesn’t bother me when in fact it’s all I’ve been able to think about. “He texted me back that he forgave me.”

She nods, expecting more, and I shake my head. “That’s it.”

“Darn it,” she exclaims. “I thought for sure...”

She doesn’t finish, so I have to ask. “You thought what?”

She shrugs. “Never mind. I’m sorry, Poppy.”



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I stand up. I don't know why I'm so bothered by all this. I guess I was hoping to at least talk face to face with him, but that's obviously not going to happen. "I asked him to come see me today, but I haven't seen him. I'm sure he wants to forget he ever met me."

She reaches for me to stop me from walking away. "Poppy, don't beat yourself up. You apologized. That's all you can do."

I force a smile onto my face. I know she's right, but it still doesn't feel good. "I know. I better get back to work."

She nods. "See you."

I walk back to the truck and nudge Teresa. "Go take a break."

Her eyes light up. "Really?"

"Yeah, we're through the rush. Go ahead."

She grabs her phone and her earbuds out of her purse. "I'm at a good spot in my audiobook, so I'm going to go for a walk. I'll be back."

I laugh. "Take your time."

I straighten up the inside of the truck, restocking a few things. I keep checking the window, expecting customers, but it's died down a bit now. I walk outside of the truck to restock out there when I see Colter sitting at the table with Abby. Instantly,

my heart starts to race, and I come to a halt, staring at the man with a beard and shaggy brown hair. He looks up at me but quickly looks away.

I try to go about my business, but I know what I need to do.

I walk back into the truck and put a chocolate croissant and a slice of chocolate cake onto a plate and then walk back out of the truck. Abby is gone, but Colter remains in his seat, and even though he has his sunglasses on, I just know he's looking at me.

It's like I can feel his gaze.

I suck in a breath, and even though he's only a few feet away, it feels like it takes me forever to get to where he is.

I set the plate down in front of him. "Can I sit down?"

He's tense, his back ramrod straight, but he nods his head.

I sit down across from him. "I'm sorry?—"

He holds up a hand to stop me and then lets it rest on the table between us. "You d...don't have t...to..."

His voice trails off, and I can see that he's about to bolt. I don't know why I do it, but it's like I can't stop myself. I reach for him, putting my hand on top of his. I look down and can't help but notice the difference in our hands. His are darker, rougher, worn. Mine are pale in comparison and softer. I lift my hand slightly and apologize.

It's still hovering, and he shakes his head, turns his hand over, and grips my hand in his. He clears his throat, and I wish I could see his eyes when he confesses. "I have a TBI."

I nod slowly. “Abby told me.”

He speaks slowly. “Why did you hold my hand?”

I look at our hands and the way he has mine gripped with his, I could easily argue that he’s holding mine, but I know what he’s asking. “After my talk with Abby, I did some research, and I read that touch helps.”

“Touch?” he croaks.

I nod, listing off some of the things I can remember. “Yeah, it’s supposed to help relieve stress, helps regulate emotions, promotes security and safety…”

He squeezes my hand, and I smile. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“I like to hear you talk.”

He sounds more assured when he says it, and I lean toward him. “I need to explain.”

He’s shaking his head because it’s obvious he doesn’t want to hear me apologize again, but I need to make him understand. All I can do is replay the things I said to him, and I need to make it right. “I know you forgave me, but I need to explain. I don’t usually just jump down the throats of people I don’t know.”

“It’s fine,” he says.

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I put my other hand on his arm. “Last week, when we met, I had a really rough morning. A man, uh, gave me some trouble at a location that morning, and I let it carry over with me the rest of the day. I saw you watching me, and I thought you were giving me dirty looks. I just snapped and all the things uh, that man said to me, I said to you.”

His forehead creases, and I know he’s trying to recall everything I said to him. He lifts his glasses from his face and puts them on the top of his head. “Are you saying that some man said those things about you, called you names?”

His speech is fragmented, but his voice is thick with emotion. It’s obvious he’s angry, and I don’t want to upset him. “It’s fine.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not fine.”

I wave him off. I wasn’t trying to upset him or have him come to my rescue. I just wanted him to understand.

## CHAPTER6

### COLTER

She has her guard up, and it’s killing me. All I need is a name, and the man that bothered her will never do it again. But she doesn’t trust me. Somehow I have to earn her trust.

I’m gripping her hand like it’s a lifeline, and I have to remind myself to soften my

hold. I have to remind myself to speak slowly, and I have to really think about the words. “Thank you for researching TBI and how you could help me. No one has ever done something like that for me before.”

She tilts her head to the side, and her hand on my arm lifts as she points at the croissant and pie she brought me. “Are you going to eat that?”

“Later,” I tell her.

She nods her head and puts her hand back on my arm. This should be awkward and uncomfortable, but it’s not for me. I haven’t had anyone touch me like this in a long time, and I’m reveling in the feel of it all.

I clear my throat. “How long have you worked for Glaze Bakery?”

Her face turns red. “Just over a month. I don’t know what I want to do with my life. I tried college, but I hated it.”

“You’re young, you have time,” I tell her, wondering how old she is. I could have easily hacked into her information and found out everything I wanted to know about her, but I didn’t want to do it that way.

She laughs. “I’m twenty-five, a college dropout, and I live in a one-bedroom condo that my father bought for me.”

She’s ten years younger than me. It’s not that big of a deal, relativity speaking, but why am I even thinking about it? It’s not going to happen between me and her. Reluctantly, I pull my hand from hers. Instantly, I miss her touch, but I know that it’s the right thing to do.

“So what do you want to do with your life?”

She looks at her now empty hands on the table and then pulls her arms back against herself. “I grew up with my grandma teaching me to bake, and that’s when I’m most happy.”

I point toward the truck. “Well, you’re off to a good start.”

She shrugs. “I got to bake when I first started, but now that I drive the truck, I’m more like a delivery person.”

Well, hell, she’s the most gorgeous delivery woman I’ve ever seen, but I understand her frustration. “Don’t give up. Talk to Emery. I’m sure she’d let you work some days in the shop and some on the truck.”

She creases her forehead. “You know my boss?”

“She’s married to Nash, and Nash works with Walker,” I explain, not wanting to get into the whole explanation of the Ghost Team or anything. The sun comes through a cloud, and instantly, I’m pulling my glasses off my head and putting them on my face.

“Are you sensitive to light?”

Instead of answering her, I ask my own question. “More research?”

She blushes, and I don’t know how to tell her how much it means to me that she would research my condition and want to help me.

She evades the question. “So what about you? Are you a patient here? How long are you in Whiskey Run?”

I look at the huge building behind us. “I work here. I mean, I guess I’m a patient too.

Walker requires all of us to go to therapy.”

“What do you do?”

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I shrug. "I work with computers."

She knows there's more to it, but she doesn't ask. "Do you love your job?"

I shrug. "I loved working in the field. I miss it. But yeah, this is my life now. I still get to do what I love. I'm just doing it in a different way."

She nods and waves at her friend who's walking back into the truck. It's obvious she's curious what's going on. Hell, I wish I knew.

Poppy leans back, and I know she's about to walk away. I put a hand out to stop her. I feel rushed, but I know if I don't take my time and say things plainly, I'm just going to embarrass myself. "Who hurt you?"

She's surprised I'm back at that. "It's nothing I can't handle."

"But you don't have?—"

She cuts me off and leans over, squeezing my hand again. "I have to get back to work. What's your favorite dessert?"

"Uh, I don't know. Anything strawberry."

She puts her hands on her hips. "Good to know. Thanks, Colter. And thanks for forgiving me."

Before I can say anything, she's walking away.



I had told myself I wasn't going to look her up, but now I have to. I need to know everything there is to know about her. I refuse to go full-on hacker mode, but I am going to start with her social media and see what I can find out about her that way.

I grab the plate of treats and walk back toward my cabin. As soon as I get inside, I make my way to my office and start searching. I should have asked her last name to make this easier, but it only takes me a few clicks to find out that her name is Poppy Turner. When I open her Facebook page and scroll through her feed, my stomach starts to turn.

She has a boyfriend.

I don't know why it bothers me so much. Yes, I think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and yes, I would love to take her on a date or something, but I also know that it will never happen. She is so far out of my league, there's not a chance in hell she'd go out with me.

So why am I so upset?

I keep looking through the feed and then click over to her Instagram. I'm looking at pictures and reading comments, and it's when I see one that says "Nobody wants to see that" that I start to get somewhere.

I click on the profile and sit back. It's the same man she was in all the pictures with. I start comparing dates, looking at things closer and notice that her feed in Facebook had been changed from "in a relationship" to "single." Is this the guy that's been bothering her?

I do some research on the guy. He's a realtor for Whiskey Run Realty. I only have to look at a few of his posts to know he's a conceited asshole.

I go back to Poppy's profile and spend way longer looking through her pictures than I should. She's an only child as far as I can tell. Her mom is not in the picture. Her dad is in a rock band and travels the country.

There's picture after picture of her with desserts she's baked. And when I come to her videos, I go down the rabbit hole of watching her in a small kitchen, smiling, baking, and then showing the final product. Happiness is shining on her face, and I think she's right. Baking is what she should do. I may not have ever tasted anything she made, but I have no doubt that if it makes her that happy, then she's going to be good at it.

I look through her pictures again and decide to focus on the ex-boyfriend. If he's bothering her, it's going to stop. I can at least do that for her.

## CHAPTER 7

### POPPY

I open the window of the trailer, and the first person I see is Colter.

Surprised doesn't begin to describe how I feel.

I felt a connection talking to him the other day, and I thought for sure that he felt it too.

I thought he would call me or at least text, but it's been two days and nothing.

So what is he doing here?

I'm set up downtown, next to the courthouse. Did he come into town for a meeting or something? Just stopping by?

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“Your stalker is here,” Teresa murmurs, elbowing me in the side.

I roll my eyes at her but don’t comment. Probably because the first thing I want to say is I wish he was here for me.

I want to ask him, but as soon as we open, a line is forming, and Teresa and I work tirelessly through the whole shift. I keep looking where Colter is sitting, and he has his sunglasses on, but I can feel his eyes on me. I know he’s watching me.

He has his laptop open, but I haven’t seen him type one thing on it.

When business finally dies down and we’re starting to pack up, I look out where he was sitting, and he’s gone. I look up and down the sidewalk and watch as he gets into his truck.

I try not to let on that I’m disappointed, but I am. I really hoped he was going to ask me out, but it’s starting to look like even though he’s nice, he’s not interested in me at all.

Teresa and I eat lunch while we finish packing up, and I try not to dwell on the fact that there’s something going on with Colter, and I don’t know what it is.

We drive over to the Co-op and set up our truck. I’m dreading it because this is where I had the run-in with Adam last week, and I’m not looking forward to seeing him again.

If he causes another scene, I’m going to have to do something about it. I can’t let him

keep interrupting my life like he is.

I open the window, and my eyes dart around the area. Relieved doesn't even begin to describe how I feel. Adam is nowhere to be seen.

Just like most places, this one is packed too, and the line is already forming. We're moving through the line when Teresa nudges me again. "I'm sorry, but that's just creepy."

I look up, prepared to see Adam, but I'm surprised to see Colter sitting at a table in front of the truck. He doesn't have his computer with him this time. He has his sunglasses on, but I have no doubt his eyes are on me.

I look at him longer than I probably should because I see his forehead crease as if he's wondering what I'm doing. I make a promise to myself, here and now, that he's not getting out of here this time without me asking him what he's doing. It's one thing to show up at one place I'm set up at but a completely different thing for him to show up at a second place on the same day.

I help Teresa take orders, and while she fills them, I'm so focused on Colter that I'm taken by surprise when I see Adam standing in front of me.

Everything blurs out behind him, and my whole body tenses. He's the absolute last person I want to see right now, but I know he's not going to go quietly.

"Adam."

He smirks at me. "You're still doing this."

My hand tightens around the pen I'm holding. "Yeah, I'm still doing this. It is my job."

He slaps a hand on the counter. “And I told you that if you wanted to be with me that I’m not going to have a girlfriend work in a food truck. I do have a reputation to uphold.”

I put a hand on my hip. “And I told you I’m not your girlfriend anymore.”

He leans toward me. “What are you doing, Poppy? Look at you. A woman like you doesn’t break up with a man like me.”

I’m about to defend myself when Colter walks up and puts an arm around Adam, pushing him away. Shocked, I lean out the window, and I see Colter forcibly pushing Adam around the corner and out of sight.

Shoot. “Take over, Teresa. I’ll be back.”

”Was that your stalker with Adam?”

I don’t stop to answer her. I climb out of the truck and get around the side of the building just in time see Colter pointing at his own face. “Come on. You wanna punch me? Do it.”

”What? No!” I holler at the same time Adam lands a punch to the side of Colter’s face.

Colter doesn’t seem fazed in the least. He smiles. He literally smiles at Adam, and all I can do is stand here while Colter punches Adam a few times until he lands on his back on the pavement.

Colter stands over him. There’s no stutter to be heard when he starts to talk. “Forget you know Poppy. I don’t want you showing up where she is, talking to her, hell, I don’t even want you thinking about her.”

He squats down and grabs Adam's hair, pulling him up so he has to look at him. "Cause look at me, mother fucker. I will be your worst fuckin' nightmare. I can kill and bury you, and no one will ever find your ass." His voice gets thick. "Do you understand me?"

When Adam doesn't say anything, Colter leans down into his face. "Answer me. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" Adam grunts.

Colter gets up, and he's not even breathing hard. He starts to walk away, but then Adam, like the dumbass he is, says, "You can have the fat bitch. I was done with her anyway."

Colter walks over to him, lifts his leg and stomps his boot down into Adam's ribs. I swear I can hear the crunch from where I'm standing.

I rush over to them. "Colter."

He has his boot up, ready to stomp again, but I move closer. "Colter, stop. He's not worth it."

He lowers his boot to the ground and squats next to Adam. "She just saved your ass. You won't be so lucky next time."

Colter stands up, puts a hand at my waist, and leads me away from the man bleeding on the ground. Still behind the building, I stop and turn to look at him. "You're bleeding. Oh Colter, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

He shakes his head, wiping the blood from his lip. "This is not your fault. I wanted him to have the first punch. I'm okay."

All I can see is the blood pouring from his lip. "You're not okay, you're bleeding."

He laughs. "I'm fine. Go back to work. I'm going to wait until the sheriff gets here."

I put a hand to my chest. “I’m not going back to work while you go to jail. I’ll stay and tell them you were defending me.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not going to jail, Poppy. I’m the one that called the police.”

”But... but how did you know?” I put a hand to my head. “I’m so confused.”

Before he can explain, a cop car pulls in, and he nods at me, full of confidence. “Go on, I got this.”

I squeeze his arm. “This is my mess, Colter, I can’t just?—“

He puts his hand on my chin and lifts it so I have to look at him. His brown eyes are pleading with me. “Please, go. I don’t want you involved.”

”Involved? I’m the reason you’re involved.”

He tilts his head to the side. “Trust me?”

I nod, and he gestures toward where the food truck is parked. “Go on. I’ll take care of this.”

Reluctantly, I walk away.

I try to focus on my job, but I keep waiting for Colter to come and tell me it’s over. When I see the cop car pull out and no Colter in sight, I know exactly where he is. He’s leaving, and he’s not even going to tell me bye.

Thankfully, business has slowed, and I leave Teresa again. As soon as I get around the side of the building, I see Colter climbing into his truck. I call his name and take off running to reach him before he pulls out.



I knock on his window and gesture to the door. He opens it and steps out. “Poppy, you okay?”

I point to his parked truck. “You were just going to leave?”

He nods. “Yeah, I figured I’d already disrupted your work enough today.”

I point to where Colter and Adam fought. “You going to tell me what that was all about?”

He just stares back at me.

I lift my shoulders. “Colter?”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re not going to like it.”

I jut my chin at him. “Try me.”

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He blows out a breath and then shoves his hand through his hair. “Fine. When you said someone said those things to you, I found out who it was. Then I got your schedule and waited for him to show up.”

Stunned, all I can do is stare back at him.

He puts his hands on his hips. “I’m not going to apologize for it.”

I can’t believe he did all this for me. I could just thank him and let him walk away, but there’s no way I can just let this go. “I don’t want you to apologize, but I do have one question.”

He tenses, and he’s probably expecting me to ask him how he knew who Adam was or how he knew where the truck would be today. Heck, I should probably ask those things, but instead I ask him the one thing I’ve wondered about since our last meeting. “Are you going to ask me out?”

His mouth drops. “You, uh, want me to ask you out?”

I don’t trust my voice, so I just nod my head.

He lets his hands fall from his hips, and his body tenses. “Poppy, would you go to dinner with me?”

”Tonight?” I ask him.

He nods.

"Yes." I bite my lip, wondering how much he knows about me. "Do you know where I live?"

His eyes widen, but he nods his head. "Yeah, I do."

It should probably freak me out, but instead there is a thrill that goes through me. Just the idea that Colter is sweetly stalking me makes me a little feral. "Okay, wanna pick me up at six?"

He nods.

I take a step away and walk backwards. "See you tonight, Colter."

He stands watching me, speechless.

I have a hundred questions I want to ask him, but they're going to have to wait until tonight. And then, I'm going to make sure I know everything I want to know about the man that just defended my honor like it was his right and privilege.

## CHAPTER8

### COLTER

I'm sitting outside of Poppy's apartment thinking of a thousand reasons why I should call this whole thing off.

Nothing is going to come of this date.

Right now, she thinks I'm a normal man that can do normal things. Eventually, she's going to see the real me, and she's not going to want anything to do with me.

I should save us both a lot of time and cancel on her now.

I'm staring out the front of my windshield, trying to decide what I should say to her when the passenger side door of my truck opens, and Poppy is standing there, smiling at me.

She laughs. "I'm so sorry. Have you been waiting long?"

My God, she's beautiful. She has an off-the-shoulder blue top on that makes her eyes even bluer than normal. She has on jeans and boots that come up her calf. I'm practically salivating, looking at her.

"Colter... you okay?"

She's holding the door open and still standing on the sidewalk waiting for me to say something.

I clear my throat. "Wait right there."

I get out and want to run around to her side, but sometimes my gait is off balance, so I go slowly. I feel foolish since she already has the door open, but when I reach her, I hold on to it as I try to explain. "I'm sorry, I would have come up to get you."

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She bites her lip worriedly. “I don’t know. Would you? You’ve been sitting out here for twenty minutes. I thought for sure you’d changed your mind or something.”

I grip the car door, hating the way I am. Gritting my teeth, I know the best thing for me to do is to just come clean and be honest. “I was thinking of canceling.”

Her cheeks turn red, and her mouth drops. “Oh.”

She backs away from my truck, and I know I’ve embarrassed her. I reach for her, and touching her is like touching a live wire, but instead of releasing her like I should, I wrap my hand around her arm and hold on. “Let me explain.”

My words are choppy, and I hate that I sound this way, but I have to tell her. “I thought about canceling because... once you get to know the real me, you will probably find this is a waste of your time.”

She points to her chest. “A waste of my time?”

I nod and wonder why it already feels like my heart is breaking. “Yes.”

She nods her head, walks to my truck, and leans her back against it. “Okay, so let me ask you: Are you a good guy?”

I shrug. “I try to be.”

She nods. “Do you enjoy talking to me, spending time with me?”

I don't even hesitate. "Yes, of course I do."

She crosses her arms over her chest and lifts her chin. "Do you find me attractive?"

I do hesitate on this one because instantly I'm thinking about the massive hard-on that seems to take over as soon as I'm around her. "Yes."

She looks at me doubtfully. "You don't seem too sure about that."

Shit, now she thinks I'm not attracted to her. "Poppy, yes, I'm attracted to you, and it's almost embarrassing how my body reacts to being around you."

Her eyes widen, and she lets her gaze travel down my body. My cock twitches, and her eyebrows lift in surprise. Shit, kill me now.

This time it's her turn to stutter. "Uh, right, uh, well, then how are you wasting my time?"

I clench my eyes shut and then open them again. "Poppy, I have a TBI."

She doesn't even blink. "I know that already."

I'm quickly losing patience. I am not the guy that likes to talk about my inadequacies, but it's better to do it now instead of later. "I have migraines, sometimes I get confused easily, I get dizzy, lightheaded, blurred vision. I'm not a quick thinker and have to take my time on things now."

She measures me with a look before uncrossing her arms and stepping toward me. She's so close, I swear I can feel her chest graze against mine when she breathes in. "Colter, I'm sorry that you have to go through all of that, I really am. But I'm not sure what that has to do with us dating."

Frustrated, I accuse her, “You’re not listening.”

She reaches for me, putting her hand on my arm and letting it slide up to rest on my shoulder. She does the same with her other hand and presses herself against me. There’s no way she doesn’t feel my cock pressing into her stomach. She smiles up at me. “I am listening to you.”

I shake my head. “Poppy...”

She wraps her arms around my neck and raises to her tiptoes. “Can I ask you one thing? And after, if you want to cancel our date, I will walk away and never bother you again.”

I nod once.

She takes a deep breath and blows it out. “Kiss me.”

I couldn’t stop the stutter if I tried. “Y..y...you want me to kiss you?”

She nods. “I do.”

I’m staring at her full lips that are practically begging for my mouth, and I know I can’t resist her. There’s no way I’m saying no and turning her down. Hell, I’ve wanted to kiss her since I first laid eyes on her, and there’s no way I’m not going to kiss her lips if she’s willing.

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I bring my hands up to cup her face. I look into her eyes, searching for any sign that she doesn't want this, but she surprises me by stretching her body against mine. "Kiss me, Colter."

I slam my mouth against hers. I should give her a quick peck, just a simple kiss to give her what she wants, but as soon as our lips touch, there's no holding back.

I lean into her, tilt her head to the side to deepen the kiss, and slide my tongue along hers. The sound of her whimper has me kissing her deeper, devouring her until there's no breath left inside me.

I don't want to stop, but I don't have a choice. I pull away, but I don't want to go far, so I let my forehead rest against hers. I'm trying to process everything that just happened, and I'm still trying to make sense of it when she disentangles herself from my arms and takes a step back.

The way she's looking at me makes me want to throw her over my shoulder and carry her inside her apartment to finish what we just started.

But before I can reach for her, she steps to the side and gets into the passenger side of my truck. She's looking at me expectantly, and I move closer to her. I run my hand through the scruff of my chin. "I have reservations. We're going to be late."

She smiles up at me. "So I guess you want to go on this date then."

I can't stop the smile from forming on my face. "Yes, I want to go on a date with you." I leave out the part about everything else I want to do with her.



I lean into my truck, grab the seat belt, and pull it around her to buckle her in. She sucks in a breath. We're almost nose to nose, and I'd give anything to kiss her again.

From the way she's looking at me, she wants it too.

I brush my thumb across her cheek. "Just so we're clear, I want to kiss you again, but if I do, we won't make our reservation, and I want to take you to dinner."

She smiles at me, and her voice is a whisper. "You can kiss me when we get there if you want to."

I groan, thinking that I can just kiss her when I want to. I force myself to pull back, and after making sure she's inside, I shut her door and then walk around to the driver's side.

She's turned her body toward me as I drive us to the restaurant. Her gaze on me makes me hot. She puts her hand on the console between us. "So where are you taking me in Whiskey Run that you had to make a reservation?"

I glance over at her. "The Peddler."

At that exact moment, her stomach growls, and when she laughs, I laugh with her.

"I guess that makes you happy."

She puts one hand on her belly. "Yes, I've never eaten there. I'm excited." She leans toward me. "Can I ask you a question, Colter? It's a personal one, and if you don't want to answer, you don't have to."

I grip the steering wheel a little tighter. "Yeah, you can ask me."

She nods. “Okay. Well, I noticed sometimes you have trouble forming words, and?—“

I cut her off. “Stutter. Sometimes, I stutter.”

She flinches at the tone of my voice, and I have to remind myself that she’s not trying to be mean by asking me this question. She’s curious, and I can’t say I blame her.

She reaches over and puts a hand on my arm. “What I’m saying is that I’ve noticed that sometimes you do it and sometimes you don’t.”

I nod. “Yeah, I do.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just wondering why? Is it because of me? Do I make you nervous?”

I suck in a breath and let it out slowly. “It’s not that, really. It’s me. I’m the problem.”

She rolls her eyes. “I don’t believe that.”

When we roll up on a stop sign, I sneak a peek at her. She’s looking at me expectantly but without judgment on her face. “My therapist says that my stutter is more about what’s going on in my head than anything. And I know she’s right. I’ve noticed if I’m nervous or something, I get caught up in my head and seem to focus on my speech, and that seems to make it worse. The less I think about it, the less I stutter.”

She nods. “So when you were beating up Adam and yelling at him, you weren’t worried at all about your stutter.”

I laugh. “No, I was just trying to make sure I didn’t kill him.”

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She gasps. “Kill him?”

I tighten my hold on the steering wheel. “No man should talk to you like that, Poppy.”

She nods, and her cheeks turn red. “I know. Thank you, Colter. I don’t think I —“

I stop her by taking one hand off the steering wheel and wrapping it around hers. “You don’t owe me a thank you.”

“No one’s ever done anything like that for me before.”

I caress my thumb over her soft skin. We’re both lost in thought, and I think we’ve changed the subject until we pull into the parking spot at The Peddler and instead of her getting out, she turns fully toward me. I’m not sure what she is going to say, but I’m nervous about it. “Hey, you can’t fix me, Poppy. There’s no fixing me. This is who I am.”

She opens her mouth and looks at me with surprise. “You think I want to change you? There’s not one thing I’d change about you, Colter. Not one thing. The reason I even brought this all up is because I want you to know that I like you. I like everything about you, and I just wanted you to know that.”

I lean toward her. “I like everything about you too.”

We’re just staring at each other, and I’m about to lean in to kiss her when she puts a hand to my chest. “Feed me, Colter.”

I let out a breath and chuckle. “Okay, stay right there.”

I get out of the truck and walk around to open her door. As we walk into the restaurant, hand in hand, I can’t help but be thankful that I didn’t cancel this date because already I’m having a better time than I have in years.

## CHAPTER9

### POPPY

He’s held my hand through the whole dinner. It was interesting when I tried to cut my steak, but luckily, it was so tender I was able to cut it one-handed with a fork.

We laughed. We talked. And when our waitress sets a dessert between us, an overwhelming sadness comes over me.

He points at me. “What’s that look?”

I shrug, a little embarrassed that I’m feeling this attached after one date. I know I need to take things slowly, but I’ve never felt this way about someone, and it’s a little much for me to deal with.

He puts a piece of the chocolate cake on his spoon and brings it to my lips. He watches me as I take the bite, and his eyes never leave my mouth the whole time.

He groans and sits back, adjusting himself in his seat. “You’re so fuckin’ beautiful, Poppy.”

I roll my eyes and wave my hand in front of me. “Stop.”

He doesn’t smile, doesn’t do anything but look at me with a sincere expression. “I’m

just telling you the truth. Every man in here wishes he was in my spot right now. Thank you for coming to dinner with me.”

I lift my chin and decide it’s time I show him some vulnerability of my own. “When you asked me what that look was, I was thinking of something.”

He patiently waits for my answer.

”I was thinking about how dinner was almost done, and I’m not ready for tonight to be over.” I suck in a deep breath. “I’m having a really good time with you.”

He smiles and leans across the table before pressing his lips to mine. I can hear the soft murmurs around us, and I know that tomorrow, most of Whiskey Run will have heard we went on a date tonight, but for the first time in a long time, I don’t care what people are saying about me.

When he ends the kiss and sits down in his seat, his eyes are almost black instead of brown. We eat the rest of the cake, and when we’re finished, he walks me back to his truck.

Silence fills the truck, and when he pulls back into the parking lot of my apartment building, I look out the window instead of at him. I can’t hide my disappointment. Will he ask me out again? I hope so.

Instead of getting out of the truck, he turns to me and grabs the hand closest to him and holds it between both of his. “I want you, Poppy.”

I’m about to invite him in, but he continues. “There’s no denying the chemistry between us, and even though all I want is to take you inside and show you exactly how much I want you, I think we should wait.”

”Wait?” I ask, surprised.

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He points toward my apartment. “Wait before you invite me inside.”

Trying to be funny, I smile. “I’m sorry, what kind of woman do you think I am? I do not put out on the first date.”

He rears back embarrassed. “I wasn’t... I didn’t mean?—”

I smack him playfully on the chest. “I’m just playing. Truth is, I was thinking of inviting you in because I want you too, Colter.”

”Fuck.” He groans.

I want to laugh, but I don’t. Instead, I ask him what’s been on my mind. “So I guess you’d like to go out again?”

He nods. “Yes.”

I reach for him at the same time he reaches for me. Our kiss gets hot and heavy, and I’m whimpering at the masterful way he kisses me. My whole body ignites just from his kiss, and I can just imagine how good it would be if we did more. A guttural groan leaves me before I can stop it, and he jerks away worriedly. “Are you okay?”

I’m too much in awe to play it cool. I smack him on the chest. “You’re too good at this.”

We’re both panting, and his hands are cupping my face while he searches my eyes. “I could say the same to you, honey.”

I shake my head. “Uh-uh. No way. Those lips are lethal, Colter.”

He releases me, and that’s the last thing I wanted him to do. He grips the console. “Raise up, honey.”

I’m practically lying on the console between us, and when I move back, he lifts it, opening the space between us. “Come over here.”

His voice is deep and thick with emotion. I look around the parking lot. Anyone can see us, but I don’t care because there’s no way I’m saying no to him.

I lean toward him to get closer, but he has something else in mind. He pulls me to his side of the truck and maneuvers me until I’m straddling him.

I gasp as I lean against him.

His hands go to my hips, and he pulls me snug against his body. Even with jeans on, I can feel the bulge between his thighs pressed against my core.

“This okay?” he asks.

“Yes.”

As soon as I say the word, his mouth is on me. He ravages my lips, and our tongues meet in a dueling battle that makes me want to completely submit to him.

He moans and leans his head back on the seat. His fingers are digging into my hips, and it’s then I realize that I’ve been grinding into him.

Embarrassed, I try to pull away, but he holds me to him. “Don’t,” he demands.



I press my forehead to his neck, trying to hide my embarrassment. “I’m sorry.”

His hands go from my waist to my back, and then he’s cupping my ass, pulling me closer against him. “Argh!” he mutters, and I feel his whole body tremble.

“We can just go inside,” I plead with him.

My whole body is on fire, and I should be ashamed at how much I want him.

He’s quiet now, and I bring my hands up to touch him, but he’s quicker than me and grabs both my hands in his. “I’m barely hanging on here, Poppy, and if you touch me, I’m going to embarrass myself.”

I groan. “I want you too. Can we just go inside?”

I lift my head to look at him, and it’s obvious he’s tempted. He wants to say yes, but something is holding him back. He looks almost tortured. “I won’t rush you.”

I’m about to argue with him, but he stops me. “I want you to think about this, Poppy. If the next time we go out, you still want me?—”

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I cut him off. "Of course I'm still going to want you."

He wants to believe me, but I can see the doubt reflected on his face. He brings one hand up and cups my chin. "I'm not looking for a one-night stand, Poppy. I want more."

When I don't say anything, he rushes to add, "I don't want to rush you, but I need you to know where I'm coming from before we go any further."

I lean into him and tell him honestly, "You seem a little too good to be true, Colter. Most men say what they think you want to hear so they get what they want."

He strokes my chin and then lets his hand trail down to the side of my neck. He holds me firmly, and I can feel in his touch that he's really feeling this. "I have a lot of baggage, and no one would blame you if you decided I'm not the type of guy you wanted."

I smile and shake my head. Does he not have any idea how wonderful he is? "You mean the type that is smart, caring, protective, handsome, and knows how to kiss?"

The corners of his lips lift. "Just think about it, Poppy. I want you to be sure."

"When?" I ask.

He shakes his head, confused. "When what?"

"When are we going out again?"

His hands move to my back, and as he pulls me against him, his hands caress firmly up and down my back. "Are you free tomorrow?"

Maybe I should be playing hard to get, but I don't want to. Even if I did have something planned for tomorrow night, I would make myself free for him. "I'm free."

He lifts his hips, and it's my turn to groan. How is this man wreaking so much havoc on my body when I'm fully clothed?

He chuckles because he knows exactly what he's doing. "I'll pick you up at six."

He opens his truck door, and reluctantly, I climb off him. When my feet hit the pavement, he follows me out. I giggle, watching him adjust himself. There's no hiding his erection, and he points at me. "You're awfully proud of yourself, aren't you?"

I lean up to kiss him. I make it quick and pull back before whispering, "I would be if I'd actually made you come."

I start to twirl away from him, but he grabs my hand to stop me. "Tomorrow," he promises. "Unless you change your mind."

I pat his chest. "I'm not changing my mind."

He grabs my hand that is on his chest and threads our fingers together. He walks me to my apartment door, and I have to restrain myself from begging him to come inside.

He kisses me until I'm breathless and then practically pushes me inside. "Tomorrow," he promises before pulling my door shut.

I turn and lean my back against the door and feel as if I'm going to melt into a puddle

on the floor. There's no way I'll be changing my mind about this. I'll be counting down the hours until our next date.

## CHAPTER10

### COLTER

The ride home is a long one.

My cock is rigid, and keeping it zipped up in my jeans is a torture that I wasn't ready for. I've never reacted this way to a woman before, and I'm not sure what to do about it.

I would have given anything to take her inside her apartment and have my way with her, but I needed her to know and fully understand that this is not some kind of one-night stand. For the first time in a long time, I'm thinking about the future, and I know I want Poppy to be a part of it.

I park my truck in the lot and then take the path to the residential housing. I pass the huge pond, and when I finally get to my cabin, I slam the door behind me and start stripping off my boots and then my clothes. I almost fall getting out of my pants, and I leave a trail of clothes from the front door to the bathroom.

I turn the shower to cold and walk in, letting the spray hit me right in the face.

I let the water slide over my body, and only when my cock begins to soften do I think about getting out.

Trembling now, I get out and dry off before picking my pants up off the floor, digging out my phone, and then sitting on the bed.

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Don't do it, I tell myself.

But of course, I don't listen. I open the picture app and look at the picture I took of Poppy tonight. She's sitting across from me, smiling in that sweet way she has, and instantly, I'm hard again.

I groan as I lie back on the bed and bring the phone up. Her hair is in curls around her head. Her blue eyes are big and expressive. I wonder if she knows I can almost always guess what she's thinking just by looking into her eyes?

Her lips are smiling, and the pink stain on her lips from earlier is fading, but they still look full and kissable.

I can just imagine what they will feel like wrapped around my dick.

With a groan, I know what I have to do. I need a release, and I need it now.

I wrap my palm around my girth and stroke from root to tip. Cum leaks from my tip, and I coat my hand with it before stroking up and down.

I close my eyes, and images from our date tonight play out in my head as I grip myself tighter.

Poppy in her food truck looking out the window for me.

How she tilts her head when she's looking up at me.

The way she licks her lips when she's staring at me.

How she shifts her hips when she's straddling my lap.

The feel of her pressed against me...

I can't stop.

I'm so close.

I open my eyes and look at my phone screen. Poppy is smiling back at me, all innocent and happy, and I grunt as I pump my release into my hand.

"Poppy," I groan, needing her name on my lips as much as I need to be inside her.

I lay my head back on the bed, my hand still around my dick. I need to clean up, but I don't want to.

I want to lie right here and think about Poppy and everything I want to do to her.

My phone rings, and the image of Poppy is gone. In its place is the caller ID for Walker. Fuck!

I reach for a tissue on the nightstand and do my best to clean up as I answer the phone. "Walker."

He doesn't waste time with niceties. "I need you."

For just a second, I feel a plague of darkness. In previous days, when Walker would say that to me, I would have to be prepared to go on a mission. I wouldn't know the details or how long I'd be gone. Hell, I barely knew where I was going until I was

there. But these days, it's different. By the time Walker calls me in, the team is already on a mission, and I'm needed to do something online. And I usually have to do it fast.

I pull up my underwear and stomp through the house to get to my computers. "I'm here. What's up?"

He tells me what's going on and what my mission is.

I know for the rest of the night, I'm going to busy tracking the movement of dignitaries in some small foreign country. I'll be tracking their every movement and figuring out what their plans are next. I know my job is important and what I do can make the difference between life and death.

But a part of me wants to call up Poppy and talk to her.

It's hours later when I realize I have a text message.

When I see it's from Poppy, I open the message and read.

"I can't sleep. I'm thinking about tonight."

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And then the next text from her reads. “How embarrassing. Maybe I shouldn’t have admitted that. Disregard the first message. I had fun tonight. See you tomorrow.”

I look at the computer screens in front of me. I turn on notifications so if there is any movement, I will be notified with a special ringtone, and then I go back to my phone and start to type.

“I got called into work, that’s why I didn’t return your text right away. But same. I can’t stop thinking of you or our date tonight.”

I hit send, and it’s then that I realize she sent that text a couple of hours ago and she’s probably asleep.

I glance at the computer screen and then at my phone. My heart starts to race when the little dots appear, telling me that she’s typing something back to me.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Colter. And just so you know, I won’t be changing my mind. Good night. Sweet dreams.”

I suck in a breath and read her text again. Instantly, my cock is hard again, and I have to fight with myself not to drive across town and take Poppy like I want to. “Sweet dreams, baby.”

I force myself to put down my phone. I ignore my massive hard-on and get back to work because the sooner I get this done, the sooner I get to focus on Poppy and figure out how I’m going to convince her that even though I’m a broken man, we can be really good together.



## CHAPTER 11

### POPPY

It's been twenty-four hours since my date with Colter, and we should be out right now, but instead I'm sitting in my car with a Tupperware container full of food and a bag from the pharmacy, and I'm filled with doubt.

I re-read the text that Colter sent me a few hours ago.

"I hate to do this, but I'm going to have to cancel. I have a migraine."

I had texted him back, asking him if he needed anything, but when I didn't get a response, I got worried. I tracked down Abby's phone number and called her asking her for her help. She didn't want to give me Colter's home address at first, but I finally convinced her that I was just worried and wanted to check on him.

I've parked in the parking lot of the rehab center, and I'm facing the path that goes behind it. I've been here multiple times, but this is the first time I've noticed this path. I get out of my car, grab everything I need, and start walking. The whole way to his cabin, I'm second-guessing myself. I should have put on something else besides a T-shirt and shorts. I had just gotten out of the shower when he texted, and I just went with it. As I pass the first few cabins, I start to get nervous. What if he was just trying to break the date without hurting my feelings? What if he's at home with another woman?

I practically stumble on my feet. The thought of him with another woman makes me crazy.

I stop on the sidewalk, then turn to look behind me and then back in front of me. Before I can talk myself out of it, I put one foot in front of the other and keep walking

until I'm standing on Colter's porch. I breathe in, trying to calm my nerves, and then tentatively knock on the door.

I'm about to knock again when I hear footsteps and then the door swings open. Colter is standing in front of me wearing black shorts that hang low on his hips, and my mouth drops as I take in his bare chest with the smattering of hair. My first thought is I want to touch him, but when I see the way his eyes are closed to barely slits and the pain on his face, I know I can't just stand here and drool over him.

I hold up the bag and speak to him in a low tone. "I hope it's okay that I stopped by. I wanted to make sure you were okay and bring you a few things."

He leans against the edge of the door. He's trying to hide the pain he's in, but I can tell he's hurting. He brings a hand up to shade his eyes. "I need to lie down."

He turns on his heel, and I'm left standing at the front door. I don't even hesitate. I walk in, take my shoes off, put the container of food in the refrigerator, the headache relief wrap in the freezer, and then follow through the door that Colter walked through.

He's sprawled on his back, one arm up covering his face, and he groans. "I'm sorry, Poppy."

I sit on the edge of the bed beside his hip. I hate to see him in pain like this. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I didn't want you to see me like this, but maybe it's a good thing. This is me. This is the shit I have to deal with, and it's not pretty most of the time."

I run a hand across his arm. "And what? You think this is going to scare me off?"

He sounds so sad and dejected. “It should.”

“Well, you don’t know me very well then.” I don’t wait for him to answer. Instead, I open the bag and start pulling out the contents of my purchase. Pain reliever, over the counter, pain patches, ice packs, anti-nausea medication. I set them all on the nightstand. “Have you taken anything?”

He nods. “Yeah, I’ve taken two migraine medicines.”

“Okay, well, I put some headache wraps in the freezer. It will take a few hours for them to get cold. I have some pain meds, a pain patch, and I put some food in the refrigerator.”

His voice is soft as a whisper. “Do you need to be anywhere?”

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I shake my head. “No, I had hoped you’d let me help you, but if you want me to go, I will.”

He lifts his arm and peeks at me with one eye open. “You sure you want to stay?”

I lean over to look at him. “As long as I’m not bothering you, I’d like to stay.”

He scoots over to the middle of the bed. “Lie down with me.”

I turn off the lamp, and then I lie down next to him, making sure I don’t jostle him. He pulls me flush against his body, my head against his chest. I stroke his back, up and down, over and over. Softly, I ask him, “Is this okay? I read that some people can’t stand to be touched when they have a migraine, so if I’m bothering you?—”

He cuts me off. “You’re not bothering me. Don’t stop.”

We lie here for a while, and eventually, his breathing slows, letting me know he’s gone to sleep. I’m not sure how long we sleep, but when I wake up, he’s staring at me in the darkness.

“Hey,” I whisper.

He kisses my forehead. “I like this.”

I snuggle into him. “Like what?”

He kisses me again and then rests his cheek on my head. “Waking up with you in my

arms.”

I smile into the crook of his neck. “Can I heat up some food for you?”

He groans. “We’ll have to order something, I haven’t been to the store in a while.”

I raise up and disentangle my arms and legs from him. “I made dinner for you.”

He sits up slowly. “You made me dinner?”

I can feel the blush on my face before I answer. “Yeah, I thought instead of going out I would feed you.”

I disappear into the kitchen and pull out the plate of food. As I heat it up, I find a cup, put some ice in it, and then fill it up with water. He walks into the kitchen, and even though his hair is all over the place, the pain seems to be lifting.

As soon as the microwave dings, I set the plate down on the table along with his drink. “Eat up. I’m going to use your restroom.”

I go and freshen up, using his toothpaste and my finger to brush my teeth, and when I walk back into the kitchen, his plate of food is half empty. “This is so good.”

I open the freezer door and pull out the cool wrap. “Thanks. I’m glad you like it. I got you a cold wrap. The box says it helps with migraines. Do you need it?”

He shakes his head and then scoots his chair out from the table and gestures to his lap. “Sit down.”

I put the cool wrap away and then look at the three other chairs and then back at him. “You want me to sit on your lap?”

He nods and pats his leg.

I laugh like he's joking until I realize he's serious. "I'm not going to sit on your lap."

He reaches for my hand and threads our fingers together. "Why not?"

I point to his plate. "Because you're eating, and I'm too big to be sitting on anyone's lap."

He sucks in a breath. "I'm not asking you to sit on anyone's lap. I'm asking you to sit on mine." He tilts his head to the side and looks up at me like this is something he really wants.

I jut my chin at him. "Why?"

He tugs me toward him. "Because I want to be close to you, but I also want to finish my food."

How can I argue with that? Gingerly, I sit down on his leg. I mean to hover, holding my weight on my legs, but he circles his arm around my waist and pulls me to him. He's turned me to the side so that I'm facing him, and he's all smiles now.

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He twirls the spaghetti on his fork and brings it up toward me. I put a hand up to stop him. “I ate earlier, and I just brushed my teeth.” When I say the words out loud, I realize my blunder. “I mean, I didn’t bring my toothbrush to your house. Shoot, I didn’t use your toothbrush either... I used my finger and your toothpaste. I had morning breath and...” I let my voice trail off, embarrassed.

He brings his hand up and cups my neck. “You sure you’re not hungry?”

I don’t trust myself to answer him without rambling on like an idiot, so I just nod my head.

He finishes his food while I sit awkwardly on his lap. As soon as he’s done, he stands up, putting me in the chair he just vacated.

I watch him move around the kitchen, cleaning the plate and fork. He empties the cup of water, and I just sit and stare at him. It’s not fair that he’s as handsome as he is.

As soon as he’s done, he holds his hand out to me.

I grab it without thinking, and he pulls me to my feet and then walks with me back to the bedroom.

He directs me to the bed and then walks into the bathroom with an “I’ll be right back” thrown to me over his shoulder. I sit awkwardly on the edge of the bed, and when he opens the door, he walks toward me like he’s a man on a mission.

He climbs into the bed and pulls me down with him.

I lie breathing softly next to him. I'm not a good person. He's recovering from a migraine, and all I can think about is sex. "I should probably go."

He doesn't lift his head; he just locks his arm around me and pulls me flush against his body. I can feel his hard manhood pressed against me, but I try to ignore it. "You know, so you can rest."

He snuggles against me. "I am resting. Thank you for coming over here, Poppy."

"You're not upset? I sort of just barged in."

He chuckles. "Honey, you can barge in here anytime you want to. I'm sorry I canceled on you."

I let out a sigh. "I wanted to help you, but I almost talked myself out of coming. I was worried I'd get here and you'd be with another woman."

He shakes his head. "I wouldn't do that to you. Plus, since I first laid eyes on you, you're the only woman I want."

I sigh and let myself lean into him. "You sure you don't want me to go home? You should be resting."

He sighs as he strokes his hand up and down my back. "I am resting."

I lie against him, and even though he is feeling better, I can tell he's not a hundred percent. Maybe I should leave, but I don't want to. This may not be what we had planned for tonight, but maybe this is just as good because I feel closer to him now than I did even yesterday.

His breath ruffles my hair. "What are you thinking about?"



I kiss his neck and whisper, “I’m glad I came here.”

He leans back so he can look into my eyes. “I’m glad you did too. Before tonight, I would never have thought of asking you to come and see me like this. I’m not weak?—”

I cut him off. “Weak? Have you looked at yourself? No one could say you’re weak.”

He searches my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

I nod. “I do know what you mean, and no, you’re not weak. I’m glad I came here because I want you to know that you can trust me, Colter.”

Something flashes across his face, but before I can question it, it’s gone. He leans into me and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is everything and all-consuming, but before we go too far, I pull back. “Sleep. Get better, and then we can do that.”

He tightens his arms around me. “Are you going to be here when I wake up?”

I traces circles along his collarbone. “I won’t leave while you’re sleeping.”

He snuggles into me, and it isn’t long before he’s back to sleep. I lie here thinking about everything I’ve learned about Colter and wanting more than ever to be a part of his life. I’ve never felt so welcome, needed, and protected before, and I don’t want to lose it. He wraps his legs and arms around me, and I fall contentedly into sleep.

## CHAPTER12

COLTER

This is not the impression I wanted to make on her, and sure enough, she's going to wake up and feel my hard manhood digging into her ass, and she's going to freak out.

I'm holding my breath, trying not to move while I try to will my dick into behaving, but it's not happening.

I'm not sure what I expected, but having Poppy's curvy body pressed against mine is not helping the matter at hand.

I try to move my hips back, but her back arches, pressing her ass against me as if she's seeking my touch.

She's awake.

I can feel her tremble against me, and I know I should apologize. "I'm sorry. My body..." I start to explain but then let my voice trail off. What am I supposed to say? My dick is hard because you're pressed against me? I don't want her to move so instead I say nothing.

She slides her hand to her belly where my hand is resting. She slides our hands down her body, under her shorts and underwear, and parts her legs. She doesn't have to guide me any farther because I dip my finger into her swollen, wet folds. She groans. "You don't have to apologize. My body reacts to your touch too."

I slide my finger through her core, coating it with her desire. My palm presses against

her clit, and her body rocks against my hand. “Yes,” she hisses.

“Fuck, you feel so good.”

She turns in my arms and searches my face. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

I stop my finger from exploring even further, but I don’t remove my hand. “Do you not want this?”

She grabs my arm, holding it against her. “No... I mean, yes, I want this, but we shouldn’t be doing this while you’re having a migraine. I didn’t come over here to take advantage of you.”

Take advantage. Does she really think she’s taking advantage of me? “You’re not. If anything, you’re giving me exactly what I want.”

I move my thumb to her clit and slide it back and forth. She sucks in a breath and tenses under my touch.

I can’t stop smiling. “Did you think about what I said?”

Her eyes drift open as I stroke her clit. “When you said what?”

I apply more pressure. “That this is more than a one-night stand.”

Her eyes light up, and she smiles. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

I lean down and kiss her mouth. She opens to me, and I slide my tongue against hers. I pummel my finger in and out of her, and she parts her legs even farther.

I end the kiss. “You need more, don’t you, baby?”

She nods her head, lifting her hips to me.

I tug at her shirt. “You have too many clothes on. Take this off.”

She leans up and pulls her T-shirt off. Then her bra is the next to go. I watch as she slides her shorts and panties down her hips, and when she’s completely naked next to me, all I can do is stare at her. She’s all curves and soft skin, and I have to force myself to slow down.

She tugs at my waistband. “Your turn.”

I lift my hips and pull my shorts and underwear down, kicking them off my feet. My cock is hard, standing straight up, and I suck in a breath when her hand circles my girth. My hips pump into her hand, and I groan as she tightens her hold on me.

I pat my chest. “Climb up here, baby.”

She raises up to look at me. “Climb up where?”

I pat my chest again. “Up here. I want to taste you.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not sitting on your face.”

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I pull her on top of me, and she straddles my hips. I want to touch her everywhere, and I raise up to kiss her breast. I suckle one before moving to the other. She's gyrating her hips, and the need to have her is overwhelming.

"I want you, Poppy."

She puts her hands on my chest. "I'm yours."

I let my hand slide down between us and stroke her clit. "I want to taste you here."

She bites her lip, but it's obvious she's tempted.

I grab her hips in a tight grip. "Get up here and fuck my face, baby."

She gasps, and I'm not sure if it's the dirty words I'm using on her or the thrill of what I'm asking. She shakes her head. "Just remember, you asked me to do this."

She crawls up my body, and I help position her over me. She's hovering, and I hook my arms around her thighs and pull her down until she's sitting on my face. I bury my nose in her, breathing her in, and then because I can't stop myself, I swipe my tongue from her hole to her clit. Her hips pump, and she groans when I cross over her swollen nub.

I grip her hips, pushing and pulling her as I suck her clit into my mouth. She loses control, arching her back as her orgasm shoots through her body.

It comes fast and hard, and I don't relent as she rides my tongue. She's quick to climb

down my body. I know where she's going, but I stop her, pressing my lips to hers. I take her with a deep kiss, and she moans. When I break away, I whisper to her, "You taste good, don't you?"

She just shakes her head and laughs. "My turn."

She climbs down my body, kissing along the way. When she reaches my belly button, I grip onto the sheets and suck in a breath. She doesn't stop until she's kissing the tip of my cock.

I groan as she takes me in her mouth, and I hold still even though I want to pump my hips. She pops off my cock and looks up at me. The sight of her big blue eyes and puffy lips is my undoing. She gives me a stern look. "Don't hold back, Colter."

She slides her tongue along my length, and it's like a slow torture. I'm not going to last with much more of this. I grip her by the arms, dragging her up my body until she's straddling my hips. My cock is resting along her ass, and she leans over to kiss me. "You stopped me."

I cup her face. "I don't want anything between us."

Her eyes get big, and I continue, "I'm clean."

She swallows hard. "I'm on the pill, and I'm clean too. I've always used protection."

I groan. "I don't want to hear about other times. I want to make you forget every man before me."

She loops her arms around my neck. "That won't be hard. It was only one."

I growl because I hate to think of any man touching Poppy. I almost tell her that I'm

going to be her last, but that may freak her out, so I keep my mouth shut. But I have a whole new determination to show her that I'm the only man that she's going to want.

I push her to her back and position myself at her entrance. She puts her hands on my chest. "Please go slow, Colter. My ex was a lot smaller than you."

I grunt, and before I can think twice about it, I put a hand around her neck and hold her loosely. "I don't want you thinking about him."

She shakes her head. "I'm not. I wasn't. I mean, I just didn't want you to hurt me, that's all."

I lean down and press my lips to hers. Slowly, I kiss her with the tip of my cock at her core. I enter her, inch by inch, and when she bites my lip, I thrust into her.

She gasps, and I wait for her to adjust to me. She's so tight, hugging me like a glove. She slides her hands across my chest, hooking them around my neck. "I'm okay," she assures me.

I pull out slowly and then plunge back inside her. She sucks me in and grips me as her pussy vibrates around me.

"You feel so good," I tell her, working in and out of her.

I pull her hips up, hitting her at a different angle, and she moans. She starts writhing, pulling at the sheets, and when her orgasm hits, she spasms around me, clamping on to me like a vise.

The orgasm hits me fast and hard, and I shoot my cum deep inside her.

I'm grunting and groaning through my release.

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Panting, I hold myself on my arms so I don't hurt her.

Her eyes are closed, and she's smiling.

I lean down and kiss her. "What are you smiling about?"

She stretches her arms up over her head and shimmies her hips. I'm still inside her, and my flaccid cock is already hardening at her movements. Reluctantly, I pull out of her and do a roll and fall on the bed next to her.

She rolls to me. "What am I smiling about? You really have to ask me that?" She strokes her finger around my nipple. "You're good, Colter."

I grab her hand and hold it to my chest. "You mean we're good together."

She blinks at me, and I can't miss the insecurity on her face. Softly, she says, "You know, I don't normally do this."

I kiss her hand that I'm holding. "Do what?"

She gestures between us. "Sleep with someone on a second date."

I pull her naked body against mine and hold her in my arms. With my chin resting on her head, I tell her what I'm feeling. "Honey, I've been right here with you. There's no denying the attraction, and this was going to happen sooner or later." I lean back so I can see her face. "I'm glad you came to see me last night."



She giggles. “I came to take care of you, and you ended up taking care of me.”

I laugh out loud. “Come on.”

I lift up, but she just lies on the bed, not moving. “Where are we going?”

I tweak her nipple with my finger. “Shower and then we’re coming back to bed.”

She puts her hand in mine, and I pull her to stand next to me. With my arms around her, I walk her to the bathroom. I feel clingy, not wanting to let her go, but I guess it’s something I hope she’s all right with because there’s no way I can be with her and not touch her. Not after I’ve had her. From this point forward, she’s mine, and I’m going to do everything I can to keep her.

## CHAPTER13

### POPPY

Colter’s hand is on my thigh drawing circles, and when he squeezes me, I suck in a breath. The console is up and I’m sitting next to him in his truck. I’m wearing a skirt tonight, and the feel of his rough hand on me has me opening my thighs. His hand slides higher, and I laugh as I put my hand over his. “You keep that up and we’re not going to make it to Abby and Davis’.”

“That’s okay because I want to take you back to bed anyway.”

Surprised, I just shake my head. “How can you want to do it again already?”

His voice is deep and thoughtful. “Trust me, honey. I’m always ready when it comes to you.”

My whole body trembles at his words because the same is true for me. It's been a week since the first time we had sex, and it's become an addiction for me. I can't seem to get enough of Colter.

I lean my head on his shoulder and make him a promise. "Afterward, I'll come to your house if you want me to."

He turns and kisses the top of my head before focusing back on the road. "Oh, you're coming to my house."

I laugh and lean back to look at him. "Oh, I am, huh?"

His hand slides up my thigh. "Yeah, I want you again tonight."

There's no arguments out of me. I lay my head back down on his shoulder, and we're quiet the rest of the way to his friends' house.

Davis and Abby's house is beautiful and cozy with a white picket fence outside. As we walk up the front steps, nerves start to take over. "You okay?" he asks me.

I nod my head. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just hope your friends like me, that's all."

He looks almost shocked at my confession. "Honey, they're going to love you."

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:34 am*

I try to hide my doubts and stand next to him as he knocks on the front door. Almost instantly, as if they'd been waiting on us, the whole family is standing in front of us as they open the door. Davis has a little girl on his hip, and Abby has a baby boy in her arms. Abby is smiling ear to ear, and she points between Colter and me. "So I guess it was okay I told her where you lived, Colter?"

I look up at Colter, who is openly gazing at me, and a blush forms on my face. He kisses me on the forehead and then chuckles. "Yeah, I'm glad you did. I owe you one, Abby." He turns to the little girl in Davis' arms. "Come on, sweetheart. I hear you're playing soccer now."

The little girl bounces from her father's arms into Colter's, and I'm pretty sure my ovaries are going to explode. Colter gestures to me. "Alexis, this is my girlfriend, Poppy. Poppy, this is Alexis."

The cute little girl smiles at me shyly. "Hi."

I give her a little wave. "Hi."

Colter bounces her up and then leans toward the baby. "This little guy is DJ."

And Davis leans toward me, holding his hand out. "And I'm Davis."

I shake his hand, and even though he's smiling at me, I can see he has something on his mind.

Colter leans over and kisses me. "We're going to go kick a ball around. You'll be

okay?”

I nod. “Yes, of course, go.”

As soon as Colter, Davis, and Alexis walk through the house, Abby pulls me inside the door. “Come in, come in. Dinner will be ready soon, but we can sit on the back porch and talk while they play.”

I follow behind her through the house. “Sounds good.”

As I sit in the rocking chair, I soak it all in. It’s a little chaotic and loud, but it’s perfect and makes me want things that I didn’t know I was ready for. I can feel Abby looking at me, and I smile. “You have a beautiful family.”

She nods. “Thank you. I think they’re pretty perfect, but I’m a little biased.”

We chat some more, and I can’t take my eyes off of Colter. At one point he stumbles, but Davis grabs him and holds him upright. I can see the connection they have, and even though I don’t know everything about their past, it’s obvious their bond is unbreakable.

After everyone gets washed up for dinner, I set the table as Colter plays with the kids and Abby and Davis finish preparing the meal. It’s a group effort, and it feels good to be a part of it.

Abby brings in the last of the food as Davis brings in the platter of grilled chicken and steaks. When Colter walks into the dining room holding baby DJ and Alexis skipping behind him, I feel my heart pounding in my chest. I want to have this man’s babies.

I don’t know where the thought comes from, but all through dinner, that’s all I can

think about.

I try to focus on what they're talking about, I really do, but it makes it hard since Colter holds the baby through most of dinner. He's a natural.

Abby clears her throat. "Colter, have you heard anything about Zach and his mission?"

Davis chimes in. "Honey, you know he can't talk about that."

She nods. "I know that, but my brother has been on this mission for six months, and I haven't heard anything from him. I mean, no one knows anything."

I look at Colter, and he's uncomfortable with the question. He looks down at DJ. "You know I can't talk about it, Abby."

Abby is frustrated, and I can't say I blame her. If I had a brother, I would be worried too. It's obvious that Davis and Colter know something, and she's not going to just let it go. "Can you at least tell me if he's alive?"

Davis reaches for her hand and holds it. "Honey, I told you he's alive, and you know if he was in trouble, I would go and get him. But we can't tell you anything other than that."

She looks at her husband and nods before putting on a smile. "Right, I'm sorry. I get a little crazy, ya know. I just miss him."

I can feel the tension around the table, but soon Alexis has us laughing at her antics.

We finish dinner and talk some more, and before I know it, I'm helping clear the table with Davis.

“Yeah, yeah, you go ahead, Colter. You get the fun job of playing with the kids. We got this.”

Colter laughs and disappears into the living room with the two kids. Abby is in the kitchen while I help load up plates.

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Davis looks at me, opens his mouth, and then closes it. I'm left with the feeling again that he has something he wants to say to me, so I stop, holding the plates in my arms. "Go ahead. Ask me."

He tilts his head to the side, and I nod. "You have something you want to say or ask me. Go ahead."

He looks into the living room and then back at me. "He's a good guy. One of my very best friends, and he's been through hell." He blows out a breath and runs his hand through his hair. "Just don't hurt him."

I juggle the plates in one arm and point at myself. "You think I'll hurt him?"

His face turns red. "I'm saying this all wrong. It's just he likes you... a lot. He's different with you. Happy. I just..."

His voice trails off, and I know I need to step in. "I won't hurt him, Davis. I like him a lot too."

He sighs in relief. "Okay."

He takes the plates from me, and after I thank him, he walks into the kitchen. He's a man of few words and reminds me a lot of Colter. I look at the man in question, and he looks happy with the kids.

We finish cleaning up, and soon it's time for us to go.

Colter helps me into his truck, and I've already slid to the middle by the time he gets in. We're driving across town, and I can't wait a second longer. "Colter."

His hand is on my thigh. "Yeah, honey?"

I point up ahead. "There's a turn up here. Can you take it?"

He looks at me, confused. "You want me to turn on the old dirt road that leads out to Makeout Point?"

I nod, glad it's dark so he won't see the embarrassment on my face. I mean, how do I explain that seeing him with those kids has made me feral for him, and I don't even want to wait until we get to his house to have him?

Instead of happy, his face turns down, but he does as I ask.

"If you don't want to go, we don't have to."

He shrugs. "I want to go with you, but I'm struggling thinking that you've been here before with someone else."

I lean into him. I love this possessive side of him. "I've never been there before, but I've heard about it."

He's still tense next to me, so I grab his hand at my thigh, part my legs, and bring his hand up to my core. I press his finger against the wet patch of my underwear. "That's what you do to me, Colter, and I don't want to wait until we get home to take care of it."

He steps on the gas, and we bounce across the dirt road. He stops when we get to the opening. There are no other cars around, and as soon as he puts the truck into park, I



lift up and throw my leg over to straddle him.

“Whoa!” he says. “What’s the rush, honey?”

I’m undoing his jeans, and I push his pants down so I can reach in and wrap my hand around his erection. I stroke him once, twice, and his precum coats my hand. His hands are on my hips, and he’s staring at me in awe.

I waste no time. I pull my panties to the side, line him up, and impale myself on his hard girth.

Moans fill the cab of the truck as I ride him.

He pulls my shirt up, discards my bra, and suckles me. I should be worried that we’re in a public place and someone could show up at any moment, but I trust Colter, and I know he’s not going to let that happen.

“Oh God, you feel so good,” I tell him breathily.

“Fuck.” He groans as I buck against him. He’s kneading my breast and kissing my neck, and when his other hand slides between my legs and strokes my clit, I come unglued. The orgasm takes over my body, and I writhe uncontrollably, but I don’t stop until he’s coming inside me. For just a second, I let myself believe that he’s putting his baby in me.

Just the thought intensifies everything.

## CHAPTER14

## COLTER

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:34 am*

I'm lying on my back with Poppy's naked body pressed against my side. We got home, showered, and after I convinced her pajamas were a waste of time, we lay down to cuddle, still trying to recoup from the sex we had at Makeout Point.

Poppy sighs happily next to me, and I hold her tighter. "I had a good time tonight."

She presses her body against me, threading her leg with mine. "Me too. Davis and Abby's kids are adorable."

I yawn. "Yeah, they're good kids."

She's quiet, and then her voice is a little stilted. "Have you thought about it?"

I lean my cheek against her head. "Thought about what?"

She turns her head so I can feel her breath against my neck. "About having kids of your own."

I tense, and it's like a punch in the gut. "No. Absolutely not. I'm not having kids."

She gasps and sits up to look at me. "Why not?"

I cover my face with my arm. I'm trying to keep my tone indifferent, but I can't help but let it go all through me. It's just a reminder of all the things I can't have. "I'm not talking about this."

Poppy puts her hand on my chest. "Colter, you introduced me as your girlfriend.

We're dating. I think this is something a boyfriend and girlfriend talk about, don't you?"

I lower my arm. "I can't."

Her eyes widen. "You can't... you mean, you can't have children?"

I shake my head. "No, I mean, I can have kids."

She throws a hand up, trying to understand. "But what? You don't want to?"

I sit up next to her, and the sheet slides to my waist. "I do want kids. I want a family. But I shouldn't have one."

She stutters, "Shouldn't have one? I saw you tonight with Alexis and DJ, and if there's anyone that should have kids, it's you."

I sit on the edge of the bed, holding my head in my hands. "You don't understand."

She moves next to me and puts an arm around me. "Explain it to me, Colter. I want to understand."

I lift my eyes to look at her. I want her to see how much I want kids but also why I can't. "Honey, listen. Kids need a good dad."

She leans her head on my shoulder. "Why do you think you wouldn't be a good dad?"

I lift my head up and look at the ceiling. All the emotions are coming to the surface, and all I want to do is tamp them down. "They deserve a normal dad."

She gasps and snaps her head back. “Colter.”

I hold a hand up. “Stop. Nothing is going to change that, Poppy. I am who I am, and yes, it’s manageable, but no kid should have to explain why their dad is just not right. Kids deserve a dad that is whole.”

She pushes my shoulder so I have to look at her. “So you’re saying that Davis, Jason, Kanan, and Elias shouldn’t have kids?”

I shake my head. “What? No! Of course not.”

“So why are you different?”

I stand up and pace across the room. I can’t think straight with her touching me. My stutter comes back, and I want to punch a wall. “I, I just am.”

She walks over toward me. She’s holding her hand out toward me, and even though she doesn’t touch me, I feel calmer knowing that she’s here and not walking away from me. She gestures to her hand. “Take my hand, Colter.”

I put my hands on my hips. “You can’t convince me that I should be a father.”

*Source Creation Date: May 27, 2025, 6:34 am*

She holds her hand up higher. “Colter, I’m not going to try and convince you of anything. I’m going to talk to you, and you’re going to listen.”

I can’t reject her when she’s looking at me the way she is. I reach for her hand and thread our fingers together. She pulls me back to the center of the room and pushes me back on the bed. She straddles my lap, putting her knees on each side of my thighs.

I put my hands on her bare hips. “You don’t play fair, Poppy.”

She presses her breasts to my chest, and I let my hands slide to her ass and hold her to me. My cock is rock hard between us, but neither one of us is doing anything about it at this moment.

“I watched you tonight, and I know that you’d be a great dad. Any kid would be lucky to have you as their father.”

I shrug. “Poppy, do you not see the real me? Because the real me is not pretty. It’s painful, ugly...” I shake my head, unable to finish.

She reaches for my chin and raises it so I have no choice but to look at her. “There’s nothing ugly about you, Colter. You have the best heart of anyone I know. All that matters to a kid is that you love them.”

For the first time since the bombing, I let myself think what it would be like to have children. I always thought I would be a father, but after the accident, I gave up all hope of that. As I look at Poppy, I let myself think about little kids with brown hair

and big blue eyes, and I want it more than I've wanted anything in my life.

Without breaking eye contact, I tell her what I'm thinking. "Poppy, even if I changed my mind, no one would want to have kids with me."

She loops her arms around my neck and smiles. "I would."

I let out a harsh breath. Two words have never had this kind of impact on me, and right now they have me losing my mind. Everything I gave up on and with two words, Poppy makes me believe it may be possible. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I love her and convince her to be my wife. The only thing that's holding me back besides the fact it's all happening so quickly is that there are some things she still doesn't know about me.

So since I can't tell her right now, I sure as hell can show her.

I stand up, holding her to me, and then turn to lay her down on the bed. I put everything I'm feeling into the kiss, and with our lips meshed together, she makes me feel that maybe, just maybe, I can be whole.

I break off the kiss as she wraps her legs around my waist. She searches my face. "I need you, Colter."

I brush the hair off her face. "I'm yours," I tell her.

And then I show her, over and over, just how much I need her and want her, and hopefully she knows that I'm never going to let her go.

## CHAPTER15

### POPPY

I grab my purse from the passenger seat of my car and then pull down the mirror on my visor. After touching up my makeup, I check myself out in the mirror, and I can't seem to look away.

There's a glow about me, and I know exactly what it is. Everything between Colter and me has been perfect. So perfect it scares me a little bit.

He shows up at different locations when I have the food truck out in town. He brings me lunch. He was worried about one of my tires and had it fixed. He has gone above and beyond to show me that he cares for me, and it's obvious to anyone and everyone I'm around that I'm being loved well.

I close my visor and then get out of my car. I got off work early, and Colter and I had plans for me to come over later, so I hope he's okay with me showing up early. If he's working, I can read or just catch up on some much-needed sleep.

I practically skip down the path, and when I get to his door, I adjust my shirt and try to open it. It's locked, though, and without thinking, I knock softly.

I'm holding my breath in anticipation, but when the door opens and there's a woman in nothing but a towel standing there, it feels as if I've been sucker punched. I take a giant step backwards. There has to be an explanation. Colter is not a man that cheats.

He tells anyone and everyone that I'm his girlfriend, so I know he wouldn't do this.

"Uh, hi."

The beautiful blonde leans against the ajar door. "Hi. Can I help you?"

I look at the numbers on the house and then up and down the path. Am I in the wrong place? But no, I'm at the right cabin. I put a hand to my chest as if I'm trying to calm

my racing heart. “Is Colter here?”

Her smile gets bigger. “No, my husband had to step out, but he should be back soon.”

I swear the world starts to rotate, my vision blurs, and it’s like a train is speeding straight toward me. I shake my head. Surely I didn’t hear her right. “I’m sorry. Who are you?”



“Carrie Lynn. I’m Colter’s wife.”

I take another step back and run into the banister at my back. “Oh, okay, thank you,” I stutter before jogging down the steps. I’m practically sprinting down the path as tears fall from my eyes. I slow to a fast walk just so I can try to get a hold of myself. I can’t wipe my eyes fast enough, and when I see Colter coming toward me, I get sick to my stomach and feel as if I’m going to puke, right here and now. I make the decision to walk past him. His face is lit up as if he’s happy to see me. He has no idea that he just demolished my world. I keep walking past him, eyes straight forward.

“Poppy, stop. What’s wrong?”

I keep walking. He has to jog to catch up, and he stops in front of me. As soon as he puts his hands on my shoulders, I jerk from his touch. “Don’t touch me,” I growl.

His eyes are wide, and he’s searching my face for an answer. He’s holding his hands up, palms toward me. “Poppy, talk to me. What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I need to go home.”

I try to step around him, but he sidesteps me, blocking my path. “You’re not going anywhere like this. Tell me what’s wrong.”

I’m deciding if I can sprint past him, and he widens his stance. “I’m not letting you drive when you’re upset like this.”

I cross my arms over my chest and hold myself, trying to block out the pain. “You’re

married.”

Guilt flashes on his face, but instantly he answers, “I’m not married.”

Clenching my eyes shut, I shake my head. The pain is real, and it feels like I’m going to die from it. How could I have trusted him like this?

He takes a step toward me. “I’m not married, Poppy.”

I point at him and with disgust, I tell him about my run-in with his wife. “I just met her, Colter, so you can quit lying to me. I just met your wife. She’s in your house... naked.”

He holds his hands in front of him. “There has to be a mistake. You were at the wrong cabin?”

I’m glaring at him. “Really? I went to your cabin and some shapely, beautiful, blond-haired woman was in a towel, and she claimed to be your wife. I wasn’t at the wrong cabin.”

He groans, shaking his head. “She’s not my wife, Poppy. She was, but we were divorced after the bombing.”

I don’t know what to do about this new bit of information. It doesn’t make me feel any better because even if they’re not married and she is his ex, he never even told me he was married in the past. And why is she naked in his house? None of this is making sense, but I do know that I’m not going to just put up with it and allow him to lie and withhold things from me.

He repeats himself. “She’s not my wife, Poppy. She’s my ex-wife.”

I hate to even hear my voice. Even I can hear the heartbreak. “She says she is your wife. Why is she in your house, wrapped in nothing but a towel?” I don’t let him answer. “None of that matters. I’m not a fool, Colter, and I’m not falling for this.”

I try to step around him again, and we practically dance down the path. He groans and then wraps his arms around me. I struggle in his arms, but I’m so fuckin’ weak when it comes to him. I start to cry again, and this time I can’t stop. Big wracking sobs that shake my whole body. I can’t stop, and Colter just holds me, stroking the back of my head down my hair over and over.

When I’m finally able to pull myself together, I don’t jerk from his hold or yell and scream like I want to. “Let me go,” I tell him.

He does so instantly, and the pure anguish on his face forces me to look down at the pavement between us. I point down the path that I came down. “That woman thinks that she’s still your wife.”

He interrupts me. “She’s not. I don’t want her, Poppy. I love you.”

I gasp, and my eyes meet his. “You did not just tell me that you love me for the first time after I found your naked wife in your home?”

His hands fist, and he grabs the front of his shirt. It’s like he needs to do something with his hands, and since I won’t let him hold me, he’s holding on to himself. “She’s my ex-wife, Poppy. I’m going to make this right.”

I nod. “Yeah, maybe you should tell your ex that because I don’t think she knows.”

I walk around him, and this time he lets me, but he still follows me out to the parking lot to my car. I get in, and he’s holding the door open. “I don’t want you driving like this.”

I put my sunglasses on my face. “I can drive.”

He blows out a frustrated breath. “I’m going to fix this, Poppy, and then I’m coming to you.”

I should tell him to leave me alone or that I need time, but I know the hold he has on me, and already I’m weakening toward him. Is she really his ex-wife? Is it really over between them or are they reconciling? Like there’s a crack in my chest, I rub my hand over my heart. “I need to go. Please just let me go.”

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He doesn't want to, but he raises up. I'm not looking at him, but I hear the emotion in his voice. "This isn't over, Poppy. I'm going to fix this. I'm not letting you go."

He shuts my door, and I put my car into reverse and then start driving away. I know I shouldn't, but I look in my rearview mirror, and Colter is standing there with his hands on his hips, watching me drive away. I can't help but wonder if this will be the last time I'll ever see him and if I'll ever recover from it.

### CHAPTER16

#### COLTER

As soon as Poppy is out of sight, I stride down the path toward my cabin. I have so much anger inside of me right now, and I'm trying to rein it in so I don't lose it. I want to settle this fast so I can get back to Poppy and make things right. I just pray she will forgive me.

I push open the door, and my ex-wife is sitting on the couch. The only good thing is that she's fully clothed. I don't want to even be in the same room with her, but if I have to be, I don't want her to be without clothes. Hell, even being alone with her makes me feel like I'm betraying Poppy.

I leave the front door open. Carrie's suitcase is by the front door, and I roll it to the porch. "Get out," I tell her.

She doesn't move from her spot on the couch.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m not sure what the hell you think you’re doing, but you know we’re not married, and you have no right to be here and disrupt my life.”

She waves her finger at me. “The stutter is better. You look good, Colter.”

I grit my teeth. “I want you the fuck out of my house.”

She shrugs. “I was just passing through. I thought we could catch up for old times’ sake.”

“We can’t.”

She points at the door behind me. “Because of your girlfriend?”

My nostrils flare. “We can’t catch up because I don’t want anything to do with you, and she’s not just my girlfriend. She’s my future wife if I can convince her to forgive me for this little trick of yours.”

She points at her chest, and her nose snarls. “You were my husband first.”

I laugh out loud. “Yeah, and you didn’t want me anymore. It’s over between us, and as far as I’m concerned, we have no reason to see each other. I’ll be back in an hour, and I want you gone.”

I don’t wait for a response. I turn on my heel and walk down the path toward the parking lot. It’s not until I’m sitting in my truck that it all starts to catch up with me. If Poppy won’t listen to me, I’ll have lost everything. Somehow, some way, I need to fix this.

I drive faster than I should across town. The parking lot is full, and I pull my truck up

in the grass before sprinting toward Poppy's condo. I knock and yell at the same time. "Poppy, open the door."

She's on the other side, but she doesn't open it. "Go away, Colter."

I lean against the door. "I'm not leaving until you hear me out."

"Go. Away," she yells again.

I take a deep breath. "I can't, Poppy. Please just open the door. I can't lose you."

There's silence on the other side of the door, and when I think I'm going to be standing out here for hours, I hear the locks turning, and I back up when she opens the door. "Poppy." I say her name worriedly. Her eyes are red-rimmed, her lips are swollen, and there's so much sadness in her eyes it guts me. "I'm so sorry."

She snuffles her nose and crosses her arms over her chest. "So you are married?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm not married. I'm sorry that you had to find out I was married before. This is a horrible way to find out. My ex and I have been over for a long time, and I don't even think about her anymore."

She juts her chin at me. "If that were true, why wouldn't you just tell me you were married before?"

When I don't immediately answer, she uncrosses her arms and holds her fists at her sides. "I thought we were..."

Her voice trails off, and when she doesn't finish, I take a small step toward her, not wanting to spook her but needing to be closer to her. "You thought we were what?"

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter.”



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I put a hand on the door jamb. “It matters to me.”

When she doesn’t answer, I know I need to come clean, but I don’t even know where to start.

She blows out a breath. “So you’re not married. Anything else you want to say because I’m tired and I want to lie down.”

I put my other hand on the door too. “Poppy, please.”

She laughs bitterly. “Please, what? There’s a naked woman in your home, and she said she’s your wife. I’m not sure how you expected me to react, but I think?—”

I cut her off. “You have every right to be mad.”

Her arms cross again. “Okay, anything else?”

I point inside her apartment. “Please, let me come in and explain. If you don’t like what I have to say, I’ll leave.”

I’m not lying to her. I will leave, but there’s no way I’ll be giving up.

“Where is your wife now?”

I groan. “She’s my ex-wife, and I told her to be gone by the time I get home.”

I’m almost positive she’s going to refuse me, so I’m surprised when she steps back

and waves for me to come in.

I walk in and sit down on the chair next to the couch. She doesn't sit down. She walks across the room, putting a couch and table between us. "I didn't tell you that I'd been married before because I would have to explain to you why I was no longer married."

She's staring at me, waiting patiently, and I hate what I'm about to say. "After the uh, accident?—"

"When you were hurt?"

I nod, and some of the anger starts to fade from her face. "And?"

I grit my teeth, hating the way this confession makes me feel. "When I got home and with my injuries and everything, Carrie didn't want to be married to me. She didn't want to have a family with me."

Poppy gasps and shakes her head. She walks from behind the couch and sits down in it across from me. "I'm sorry. Are you saying she divorced you because you were hurt?"

"It was more than that. I had a TBI and?—"

She bangs her hand on the coffee table. "You were hurt! It says it in the vows, in sickness and in health."

I lift my shoulders. "It was bad then, Poppy. I was angry and?—"

She moves to the coffee table and sits on it before grabbing my hands and holding them. "I'm sure it was bad, Colter. But you don't divorce your husband when... he needs you most." She stops and sits up a little taller. "Oh my God! Is that why you

said you don't want kids? Because she said she didn't want to have kids with you?"

I'm not sure how to answer. I don't want to push all the blame on Carrie. Not because I want to protect her but because I wasn't innocent in all this. I was difficult to deal with. I was angry and scared, and it seemed like every day I was having a new symptom. "Poppy, the person I was back then... it was ugly... and that person shouldn't have kids."

I want to beg her to be with me, but I can see she's trying to process everything. I don't want to end up pushing her away, but I don't want to miss my chance either. She's still holding my hands, and I turn them so I can hold hers. I thread our fingers together, and a calm comes over me. That's what Poppy does to me.

## CHAPTER 17

### POPPY

He's looking into my eyes, waiting for me to say something, and I say the one thing I've been thinking since I walked away from his house after seeing his ex-wife there. "Can you put yourself in my shoes? What would you do if you showed up here and some naked man answered the door?"

His face turns red and twists in anger. "I would kill him."

I laugh and squeeze his hand. "Trust me, I felt the same way..." I let my voice trail off and shake my head, trying to get the image of that woman in a towel in Colter's house out of my head.

He scoots to the end of the chair, and my knees are caged between his. "She's my past, Poppy. You're my future."

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I want to believe him, I really do, but it's all so fresh. I ask him again because I have to know. "Is she the reason that you don't want kids?"

He tilts his head to the side. "I do want kids. I just didn't think I should. After everything that happened with Carrie, I just never thought I would have kids. I just never thought it would be an option. I had mentally prepared myself for that fact."

"And now?" I ask him.

"Since I met you, I've been picturing a little girl with brown hair and blue eyes calling me Dad." He squeezes my hand. "You make me want things I never thought I could have, Poppy."

I want to believe him. I would like to think that we could work through this and be together, but I still have to be sure. "I don't want to be your second choice. If you still love your ex-wife?"

He reaches for me, puts his arms around me, and then pulls me over to his lap. I can't help but laugh. "What is it about you always wanting to hold me?"

He squeezes me like he never wants to let me go. "I want you close to me, always." He lets out a breath slowly. "And I don't love my ex. I haven't loved her in a long time. You could never be my second choice." He puts his hand on my chin and brings my face up so I have to look at him. "You're my only choice, Poppy. I love you."

I gasp, but he continues. "I know you said it was bad timing earlier, but for me, it's never a bad time. I do love you, and I should have told you before today."

I can't resist him. This whole thing scares me, but I have to tell him how I feel. "I love you, too." I suck in a breath. "I love you so much, Colter."

He kisses me, and as soon as our lips meet, I get lost in his touch. When I pull away, I'm panting, but I'm not finished yet. I need some assurances from him. "Colter, from this point on, you can't keep things from me. I get it, I understand why you didn't tell me, but if we're going to do this, we have to be honest with each other."

The possessive man that I've become addicted to nods his head. "Well, we're happening. I'm not letting you go, Poppy, and I promise that I won't keep anything else from you."

Unable to just give it up, I put a hand to his chest. "If you decide you don't want to be with me, you tell me, Colter. If you decide you'd rather have her?—"

He puts his hands on each side of my neck and holds me steady. "That's not going to happen. I promise, that's not going to happen."

I want to believe him, so I nod my head and lean into him, pressing my head to his chest. He sighs as if he's had the weight of the world on his shoulders and he's finally been relieved of the stress. His arms go around me, and even though he squeezes me tightly, I don't complain.

He whispers against my hair, "You're stuck with me baby, because I'm not letting you go."

I lean into him and let his words soothe me. "I love you, Colter."

He groans. "I love you too." After kissing my head again, he says, "You're coming home with me."

I don't want to deny him, but just thinking about it, I'm picturing Carrie in her towel, and I have to clench my eyes shut to get the image out of my head. "I don't think..."

He leans back and looks in my eyes. "Honey, I need to go home because my computers are there, and I need you there with me."

His face is filled with remorse, and I know he feels bad for what I had to deal with today. This is not payback or anything; this is me not wanting to deal with Carrie again. "Maybe you should go and deal with your ex-wife."

He shakes his head. "No, I sent security a text message, and Carrie is off the premises by now and has been warned not to come back."

Before I can ask him, he tries to reassure me. "But I still want you home with me. I want to sleep next to you." I can feel myself caving, but he continues. "And I don't just mean tonight, Poppy."

I trust him, and if he says Carrie is gone, then I have to believe that. "I'll pack enough for a few days."

He strokes his hand up my arm. "Okay, but we're going to talk soon about more than just spending the night with each other. I want something more permanent with you."

I pat him on the chest. "Let's get through today first."

He nods. "Yeah, I get it. Today was a lot."

Without looking him, I tell him everything I'm feeling. "I told you I love you, Colter, but what I didn't tell you is that I'm always thinking about you. When I'm with you, I feel safe, I feel loved, and I don't want this between us to end."

“Oh, baby, it’s not going to. I want to be with you, and even though I’m scared about everything I want with you, I’m not backing down because I’ve been given just a glimpse of what our life can be like these past few weeks, and I’m not letting you walk away. I’m going to spend my life making you happy.”

I’m feeling overwhelmed because I’m loving everything I’m hearing from him, but at the same time, I’m scared to believe it. I push up from his lap. “I’m going to go throw some clothes in a bag.”

I can feel his eyes on me, and it’s not until I’m in my bedroom that I let out a breath. As I pull out a bag and start filling it, I’m hoping that I’m making the right decision.

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Only time will tell.

After I pack my bag, he carries it outside. He keeps walking to his truck, and I stop at my car. When he realizes I've stopped, he turns and comes back to me. "Ride with me."

I shake my head in denial. "No, I'll need my car to get back and forth to work."

He measures me with a look. "I can take you, and if I'm working, you can use my truck."

I grab onto the door handle like it's a lifeline. "No, I need my car."

He walks toward me until we're toe to toe. "What's this about, Poppy?"

I shrug, not really wanting to get into it right here and now. "I want my car... just in case."

He puts a hand to my chin. "In case you need to run?"

I jerk from him defiantly. "I'm not going to run, but in case you have another nude woman claiming to be your wife, I'm not going to want to stick around."

He lets out a deep sigh. "We were doing so good, honey. Don't let this come between us."

I'm looking over his shoulder instead of at him. I know he's right. We were doing so



good, better than good. His voice is soft and filled with patience. “Poppy, look at me, baby.”

I openly glare at him. “What?”

“It’s you and me. I need you to remember that. I should have told you that I was married before, and trust me, if I could go back in time, I would. No more keeping things from you, and I’m going to prove to you that you’re the only woman I want. I love you.”

I sigh. “I love you too.” Gesturing to my car, I tell him, “I’d really like to take my car though.”

He nods and walks around to help me in. He kisses me until I’m breathless. “I’ll follow you, honey.”

He closes the door, and I watch him walk to his truck, put my bag in, and then get into the driver’s side.

I follow him to the Heroes Rehab Center. It’s only when I’m alone that I’m able to process everything that has happened today. It’s been a roller coaster of emotions. I understand why he did what he did, and I’m hoping we can work through it because more than anything, I want to be with Colter. I don’t want to lose him.

I park beside him in the parking lot, and he carries my bag on one side and holds my hand with the other. I can feel myself getting tense the closer we get to his house. I wish I could let it go, but it’s going to take me some time, it seems. Hopefully he understands where I’m coming from because he said himself he wouldn’t like it if someone tried to claim me.

He must feel me tense next to him because he asks me, “What’s wrong?”

I look around, wondering if we're going to run into Carrie again or not. "Nothing is wrong."

He sighs softly and leads me up the steps to his cabin, using his keys to unlock the front door. We walk in, and Colter drops my bag on the couch, but I am a little slower in following him. I'm looking around, searching for any remnants of his ex-wife.

Colter is looking around too, and I'm wondering if he's doing it for the same reason as me. "What can I do to fix this?"

I inhale. "There's nothing to fix. I understand why you didn't tell me, but I just don't want to be in that position again, that's all."

He kisses my forehead. "I promise, there's no more secrets between us, honey."

I put my hands on his arms and look up at him. "I just don't want to lose you."

He shakes his head. "That's not going to happen. I'm yours."

I loop my arms around his neck. "Prove it. Make love to me, Colter."

He lifts me in his arms and carries me to the bedroom. "Gladly."

As he lowers me to the bed, he's looking at me intently. There's a sadness to him, and I cup his face. "What is it?"

He swallows. "I've been to hell and back, Poppy. I've been through war, I've had my best friends—my brothers—permanently injured and even die. I've experienced it all, and at one point I even wished my life was over."

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I whisper his name with a shuddered breath. “Colter.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not saying that to you to feel bad for me, I’m telling you because with all that, I’ve never been as scared or felt as hopeless as I did today when you walked away from me. I can’t go through that again. Promise me that no matter what, we stick together. Whatever tries to come between us, we fight it... together.”

My heart does a little flip in my chest. I know exactly the anguish he’s describing because I felt it too. “I won’t walk away again. We fight together.”

He nods and then leans over to seal our promise with a kiss before making sweet love to me.

## CHAPTER18

### COLTER

Poppy raises her head and looks at the clock then groans. She’ll have to get up to go to work soon, and I don’t want to let her go. I can’t help but notice how much my life has changed, hell I’ve changed, since I met Poppy. I used to value my time by myself and would look for ways to skip events and hang out at home alone. Now I’ll do anything that Poppy wants to do. She wants to go to dinner with our friends, I’m there. She wants me to go to the grocery store with her or for her, I’m on it. She wants to go to a baking class, movies, and group date nights, I’m all for it.

She sighs next to me, and I know she’s about to get up.

“Don’t go,” I murmur, tucking her against my naked body.

She curls into me, and I smile as she kisses the crook of my neck. It’s been a week since everything with my ex-wife, and I’ve done everything I can to assure her that nothing like that will happen again. We’ve been in a good place, and I know it’s only going to get better.

She groans. “I have to go to work.”

I thread our legs together, binding her to me because I really don’t want to let her go. “What time do you get off?”

“Hmmm. Six. And then don’t forget, I’m going home tonight.”

I raise up to look at her. “No, you’re staying here... tonight.” It was on the tip of my tongue to say forever, but I know there’s other things I need to do first. I think about the ring I’ve had in my nightstand for the last week. I’ve been fighting with myself on when to give it to her.

She shakes her head and laughs. “I need to do laundry, straighten up my apartment, and?—”

Just the thought of her not being here for one night makes me panic. “Move in here.”

She gasps. “What do you mean move in here? I can’t just move in.”

I push her to her back and lean over her. “We’re getting married anyway. Why can’t you move in?”

She laughs, and then when she realizes I’m not joking, she shakes her head in awe. “What do you mean we’re getting married?”

I cup her face. “I mean, we’re getting married.”

She just shakes her head at me. “We just met a month ago...”

“I knew the first time I met you, I wanted to marry you.”

Hope flairs on her face, but she shakes her head. “It’s too soon.”

“Do you love me, Poppy?”

She smiles instantly. “You know I do.”

I nod and then climb out of bed, grab the box from the nightstand, and then go down on one knee. “I tried to figure out the best way to do this. I’ve been thinking about it and wanted to get it right, but I don’t want to wait any longer. Marry me. Be my wife. Be the mom to my babies. Make all my dreams come true.”

When she doesn’t answer right away, it’s like a jolt to my system. “If you want to wait, we can, but I want to do it with my ring on your finger.”

“Yes,” she murmurs.

I suck in a breath. “Yes?”

She laughs and cries at the same time. “Yes! Yes, I’ll marry you.”

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Relief comes over me, and I'm trembling as I pull the ring from the box. It slides on her finger easily, and she glances at it. "It's so beautiful."

I lift her chin. "Nowhere near as beautiful as you."

She leans over and kisses me. Not wanting it to end, I push her to her back and climb over her. I break the kiss reluctantly. "Ugh, this was horrible timing. I know you need to go."

She looks at the clock on the nightstand and slides her hands up my chest. "We've got time as long as you don't mind sharing your shower with me."

I groan. "I'd love to."

I'm kissing my way down her body as she gently gyrates her hips against me. I'm loving the feel of her against me, and as I kiss her belly, the ringing of my cell phone has me pausing. I put the sound out of my head and nip at Poppy's soft skin. She moans as my phone rings again. I try to stay focused, but I'm reminded that what I do is important and I need to answer my phone.

I raise my head, and Poppy is looking at me. "Answer it."

I groan, "I'm so sorry."

She sits up, reaches for the phone, and hands it to me. "Here. We'll celebrate after work."

As I answer the phone, I watch Poppy's ass shake side to side as she walks to the bathroom. I'm sitting here with a hard-on, wanting to cuss whoever is on the other end of the phone. "What?" I bark impatiently.

"Meet me at the warehouse. Fifteen minutes."

I'm a little stunned because I haven't been called into the warehouse since I was injured. The warehouse is where they prepare for missions and coordinate all the ins and outs. If Walker is calling me in, it has to be something important.

When I don't answer him, his voice drops. "It's Zach. Wheels up in an hour, and I'm going to need you to go on this one. You good?"

I lift my head, and Poppy is looking at me with a worried glance. Instantly, I know my answer. Even after everything I've been through, there's no way I won't be there to serve. "Yeah, I'll be there."

I hang up the phone and stand up. Poppy rushes to me. "What is it? What's happening?"

I grip her upper arms. "Poppy, I have to go."

She sucks in a breath, and I know I've shocked her. I've told her that my work is from here, and that wasn't a lie. Hell, does she think I've lied about something else?

It's important she knows the truth. "I promise you, when I said I work from my office here at home, that was the truth. But Walker is sending us on a mission... I have to go."

Her mouth drops, and before she can talk me out of it, I say, "It's Zach."

She puts her arms around my neck. “Oh, Colter.”

I run my hand through her hair. “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. I may be able to call, and I may not. I’ll make sure the girls all check on you while I’m gone and?—”

She cuts me off. “Stop, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“I have to be there in fifteen minutes.”

She backs away from me. “Okay, what can I do?”

I grab a duffle bag out from under my bed. I grab some underwear, T-shirts, and socks out of the drawer and stuff them in the bag. I keep one clean pair of underwear out and pull them on. “I can get this. I know you need to get to work.”

She puts clothes on, and I wish I had time to watch her and savor the sight, but I don’t. I throw an already packed toiletry bag into my duffle bag and then shove in the last few items I need.

Poppy is standing in the doorway to the bedroom, hugging her arms around herself. This part sucks. I don’t want to say bye to her.

She gives me a look. “Promise that you’ll come back to me, Colter.”

I put the strap of the bag over my shoulder. “I promise. Now will you make me a promise?”

She nods. “Anything.”



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I circle my hand around the room. “Stay here while I’m gone. I need to know that you’re okay while I’m away, and the only way to do that is if you’re here.”

She wants to argue with me, but she must see how important this is to me because she agrees. “Okay, I love you, Colter.”

I hug her to me, “I love you too, baby. I’ll be back as soon as I can, and I’ll call or text you if I can.”

We kiss, and I have to force myself to back away from her. I get to the front door before she stops me. “Wait, what if you can’t call? How will I know if you’re okay?”

I smile softly at her. “I’ll have Brooklyn put you on the wife list. She’ll keep you updated.”

She sighs. “Okay, I love you, Colter. Don’t forget you promised. You have to come back to me.”

“I promise.” I walk out the door and have to run through the compound to the get to the other side of the property where the warehouse is. The whole way, I’m thinking about Poppy. She’s my life and soon to be wife. And the promise I made to her is one I’m going to keep.

## CHAPTER19

## POPPY

## TWO WEEKS LATER

I'm sprawled on Abby's living room floor, holding my sides from laughing so hard. It started out as a subdued night. Walker, Kanan, Davis, Elias, and Colter are still gone. We don't know anything except that they are okay. I'm not ignorant. I know that status can change in an instant, but as of right now, they are okay.

Abby had the idea that we should all get together. A part of me wanted to stay at Colter's house and wait for his call, but Abby insisted that I needed to be with the girls. And right now, as I look at their smiling faces, I know she's right. I need this more than ever.

Brooklyn picks up her drink and holds it out. "Toast. To our men that make this world a better place."

I somber quickly and sit up, holding out my can of soda. I didn't want to drink tonight because no matter what, I want to sleep in Colter's bed. I feel closer to him when I do, so no drinking for me.

Brooklyn, Abby, and Emerson, Kanan's wife, and I all clink glasses. We're all quiet afterwards, and I look at the other women. They're all amazing women, and I'm not going to let this pass me by. "How do you guys do it?"

I don't have to explain because they all know what I'm asking. "You just have to believe." Abby nods and then with a smile on her face, she continues. "Plus, Davis knows he can't leave me with these two kids."

We all laugh, and Brooklyn leans toward me. "I wish I could say it gets easier, but it doesn't. Every time Walker goes on a mission, I'm half out of my mind with worry. Sometimes it's easier, like when I can talk to him and hear for myself that he's okay, but other times, when we don't know what's happening or when they're coming

home, it gets harder.”

I blow out a breath. “It’s been horrible. I jump at every tone on my phone. I’ve texted with him a few times, and that’s been good... I just wish I knew when he was coming home, that’s all.”

We talk about the kids, the food truck, and a little bit of everything else. When I bring out the special dessert I made, they all ooh and aah over it. We’re all eating when my phone rings. I see Colter’s name on the caller ID and squeal. “I’ll be back, it’s Colter.”

My friends all cheer, and I walk out onto the front porch. I’m smiling ear to ear when I answer. “Hey.”

Colter’s voice is soft, but there’s a loud noise in the background. “Poppy. Are you there?”

“Yes, yes, I’m here.”

“Fuck, I miss you so much.”

I sit down on the rocking chair. “Oh, Colter. I miss you, too.” I hate to add any pressure to him, but I have to know. “Have you found Zach? When are you coming home?”

“We found Zach. He’s going to be okay.”

I hold my breath, waiting for what I want to hear.

His voice gets louder as the noise around him gets louder. “I’ll be home in the middle of the night.”

“Tonight?” I screech.

He laughs. “Yes. I’ll be home tonight.”

When the noise level goes down, he talks normal again. “I’m about to get on the flight. Will you be home?”

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“Yes, yes. I’m at Abby’s right now, but I’ll be at your house later.”

“Our house,” he insists. “Are you hanging out with the girls?”

I laugh, happy to just have a normal conversation with him. “Yes, Abby invited all us girls so we wouldn’t be alone.”

“Good. Did you tell them we’re engaged?”

I look inside, and all the women are on the phone. They each have big smiles on their faces. They must be getting word that the guys are coming home. “No, I didn’t tell them. I didn’t know if we’re telling people yet or not.”

He laughs. “Hell, honey, the boys all know. Tell your friends, fuck, tell everyone that you’re mine. I have been.”

I laugh with him. “Okay, I’ll tell them.”

I’ve been so worried about him, and hearing his voice is like a balm to my soul. I don’t know what I would do if I lost him. His voice is loud again. “I have to go, but I’ll see you at home. I love you, baby.”

“Oh, Colter, I love you too. I’ll see you soon.”

He hangs up first, and I hold my phone in my hands. My fiancé is coming home.

I stand up, and when I walk inside, my friends are all laughing and hugging. Abby

holds her hand out to me, and I join in, hugging each of them. “They’re coming home,” I say.

We all cheer, and everyone is talking at once. I hate to interrupt the celebration, but I want to tell them before I leave. “So there’s something I need to tell you guys.”

I unlatch my necklace, pulling off the engagement ring and making a big to-do of putting it on my finger. I hold my hand out. “So before he left, Colter and I got engaged.”

They all squeal and take turns hugging me.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell us!” Abby says.

Emerson puts her hand on her hip. “Heck, we could have had the wedding planning done in these last two weeks. Congratulations, Poppy!”

We spend the next hour celebrating, but we’re all ready to call an end to the night earlier than planned since all the guys are coming home.

My man is coming home, and I’m going to make sure I’m home, waiting for him.

## EPILOGUE

### COLTER

Two years ago, if someone had told me this was going to be my life, I would have told them they didn’t know what they were talking about. But here I am, surrounded by all my friends, engaged to the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.

Jason, Elias, Kanan, Davis, and Zach are all surrounding me, but I keep looking

toward the bathrooms waiting for Poppy to come out. Of course, it may be a while because she went in there with Teresa, so I'm sure they're talking.

“Congratulations, man. You deserve this.”

Zach holds his beer bottle up. “I've never seen you this happy. The woman must be a miracle worker or something.”

I nod, unable to keep my smile contained. “She's the best.”

Davis nudges him in the ribs. “What about you, man? When are you going to settle down?”

He holds the beer in his hands, and I noticed he's not drinking. “Haven't you heard? I'm not tameable.”

We all laugh. Zach has no idea because love comes when you least expect it.

Elias holds his hand out. “Wait, haven't you guys heard? He is going on his first assignment.”

It's been two months since we found Zach and four of Walker's other mercenaries in some jungle across the world, and Zach has been hard at it since he got home. The guys started a private security firm called Stronghold. They haven't found a building—hell, I don't think they've done most of the things people do before starting a business, but it seems Zach is already taking on clients.

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“What’s the assignment?” I ask Zach.

Before he can answer, Elias cuts in. “He can handle it. He’s babysitting some kid.”

Zach looks at Elias. “She’s not a kid. She’s Logan’s little sister.”

Elias points at him, laughing. “Wait, hold up, you’re protecting your best friend’s little sister? Isn’t this the same woman that followed you around and told everyone you were her boyfriend?”

“Stop,” Zach says.

But there’s no stopping Elias once he gets going. “No, seriously, she’s the one that would tell people you were going to marry her someday.” He shakes his head. “Dude, you are in so much trouble, and you don’t even see it.”

Zach looks confused. “What do you mean?”

Davis takes pity on him. “Forget him. It will be fine, I’m sure. Just don’t break any rules and you’ll be good.”

“What rules?” Zach asks.

Davis looks at him. “Like messing around with your best friend’s sister.”

Zach shoves Davis playfully. “Fucker, you’re married to my sister and have kids with her. You broke all the damn rules.”



Davis doesn't look the least bit ashamed and just shrugs his shoulders.

They keep giving each other shit, and as soon as I see Poppy walking toward me, I hold my hand out to her. "See you later, guys."

I lead Poppy to the dance floor. "You okay?"

She melts into me. "Well, let's see, I'm engaged to the man of my dreams, and you're marrying me in two months. Yeah, I'd say I'm more than okay, Colter."

I kiss her forehead because I know if I touch her lips right now, I won't be able to keep it PG. "I wish we were already married."

She rubs her pelvis against me. "Me too."

I freeze against her. "Don't say that to me because I'll have you at the Justice of the Peace tomorrow."

She puts her arms around my neck. "I told you I didn't care where we got married. We can do that if you want to."

I stop dancing and look into her eyes. "You would do it, too, wouldn't you? If I asked you to marry me tomorrow, you would?"

She ruffles the hair at my nape. "You know I would."

"Fuck." I grunt. "Baby, there's nothing I want more than to be married to you, but I'm not ruining your dream wedding. We're going to do this right."

She tilts her head to the side. She knows me too well, and it's obvious when she asks, "What's this about? What's the rush? Are you leaving again?"

I shake my head. “I told you that was a one-off. It was Zach, I had to go.”

She interrupts me. “I know, I understand too. I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on in that head of yours.”

I let my hands slide down her back, and before I touch her ass, my fingers dig into her lower back. Hell, I can’t wait to get her home tonight. “Because I want to put a baby in you.”

She gasps and pulls back to search my eyes. “A baby?”

I bring my hand up and tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. “Yeah, I want us to have a baby. I told you that I want a kid with brown hair and blue eyes like their momma.”

She puts a hand to her mouth, trying to contain her excitement. “Well, let’s go.”

She reaches for my hand, ready to walk out of here, and I laugh as I pull her to a stop. “Poppy, this is our engagement party. We just got here, and there’s no way I’m taking this away from you.”

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She measures me with a heated look. “Okay, how about you take me to one of the rooms upstairs? We can be back before anyone notices we’re gone.”

“Honey, I’m yours. You want to sneak away for some love, I’m in.” I put my arm around her and try not to draw any attention to us as we walk through the room. We manage to get through the crowd and into the hallway, and we’re waiting on the elevator as I lean down to whisper, “You know you have to go off birth control if you want to have kids.”

She gives me the biggest smile. “I did. Last week when you said you couldn’t wait for us to have kids.” When I don’t say anything, she puts a hand at my waist. “Don’t be mad. I should have talked to you about it, but I wanted to surprise you and?—”

“Mad?” I push the elevator button again. “Where is this damn elevator?”

When it doesn’t come, I look up and down the hallway. “Come on.”

I pull her along with me and find a closet, pulling Poppy in with me. “I’m not mad, but I want to be inside you, and I can’t wait.”

She kicks off her shoes, slides down her panties, and hands them to me. I stuff them into my jacket pocket as she pulls my already hard cock out of my pants.

I hold her against the door and impale her on me in one quick thrust. “Yes.” She groans.

I push in and out of her, taking her deeper with each thrust. “I love you, Poppy. Take

me, baby. Come for me and let me fill you up. I want to breed you.”

I reach between us, and with just a few strokes of her clit, she’s coming undone. I fill her up, claiming her, just because I want to say it again. Hell, I’ll say it every day for the rest of my life. “You’re mine, Poppy. Mine.”

She moans, squeezing my manhood with her tiny aftershocks. “And you’re mine.”