



# Finally (Neighbor from Hell 12)

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**Category:** Young Adult

**Description:** From New York Times bestselling author R.L. Mathewson comes the next installment in the Neighbor from Hell series...

For readers who enjoy touching stories that make them smile, laugh, and fall in love.

Sometimes life doesn't go the way that we expected. That's what happened to Devin Bradford when he received the news that turned his life upside down seven years ago. Determined to be there for his children, Devin has put his life on hold, putting his children first even if that meant telling himself that he couldn't have the only woman that he'd ever wanted.

After years of putting off taking the next step, Charlie was finally ready, mostly because her best friend had threatened to make her life a living hell if she didn't. Knowing that she wouldn't be able to pull this off unless she made some changes, Charlie somehow finds herself moving into the in-law apartment of the man that seemed to go out of his way to avoid her only to find herself wondering if she was chasing the wrong dream after all.

**Total Pages (Source):** 47

# Page 1

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## Prologue

Well, this was unfortunate, Charlie thought as she stood there, taking in the large man standing in front of her, noting that he was soaking wet, covered in flour, and what appeared to be cocoa powder, his tie was burnt, his shirt was destroyed and he had absolutely no idea who she was, which was understandable since he normally went out of his way to avoid her.

That was confirmed seconds later when that familiar expression that she was used to by now crossed his features, the same one that told her that he was trying to figure out where he knew her from as his gaze darted down to her shirt, the one that she wore every day to work, the same one with “Bradford Creations” printed across it. Frowning, he took in her curly chestnut hair pulled back into a ponytail before looking down at her Harry Potter watch and-

That was apparently enough to jog his memory.

“What can I help you with, Charlie?” Devin Bradford, her boss for the past five years and the reason why she no longer left food unattended in the break-room, murmured absently, frowning as he reached down and pulled a pink jump rope that had somehow managed to wrap itself around his legs off and tossed it aside.

“I’m not really sure,” Charlie mumbled, suddenly regretting not taking that two-bedroom apartment on Cedar Street that smelled like garbage, kitty litter, and other things that had turned her stomach when she had the chance as she glanced back down at the post-it note in her hand to make sure that she had the right address.

She did, which meant...

“You’re here about the in-law apartment,” Devin said with a pained sigh as he rubbed his hands slowly down his face.

“Maybe,” Charlie murmured, mostly because she really didn’t think that this was a good idea, not with her quitting and everything. Not that he knew that she was quitting, and since she didn’t plan on telling him until she was ready, she felt that it would be in her best interest if she got back in her car, drove to work, and spent the rest of the day hiding in her office with the hopes that he would forget this ever happened. Then again, maybe she was worrying over nothing, Charlie thought as she stood there, blinking up at the large man glaring down at her.

Maybe not, Charlie thought, when he said, “This isn’t fucking happening.”

“Okay,” Charlie said as she bit back a sigh of disappointment because she’d been counting on getting this apartment.

If she was going to make this work, and god, she really hoped this worked, she was going to need a cheaper apartment. She didn’t want to give up her two-bedroom apartment, but she didn’t really have a choice right now. Well, she did, but since she’d let Ben talk her into setting a deadline to get her company, that she was still trying to figure out a name for, up and running within the year, she had to do this. The only way that she was going to be able to do that was by saving enough money to make this happen, and that meant cutting back on her expenses.

She’d already canceled her cable, figured out a way to cut her cellphone bill in half, switched her car insurance, canceled all those memberships that she’d told herself that she would use one day but never had, Googled ways to cut her utility bills in half, set a budget and at some point she would start sticking to it, gave up those expensive creamy Frappuccinos with an extra shot of butterscotch and chocolate

syrup that she liked so much, and fully planned on cooking more so that she wasn't dependent on takeout. As much as she hated doing this, getting a smaller place would help her reach her goal faster. This apartment was three hundred dollars cheaper than the rest of the apartments that she was considering and would definitely help, but it didn't look like that was going to-

"I quit!" the small woman covered from he

ad to toe in flour and green glitter said as she tightened her hold around the tan handbag covered in black magic marker and ran for it.

"Shit!" Devin said, looking anxiously over his shoulder before glancing back at the small woman as she tripped over her feet and-

Quickly picked herself back up as she threw a panicked look over her shoulder, released a terrified scream that kind of freaked Charlie out a bit, and kept going as Devin bit out, "Shit!" again. After one last look over his shoulder, he went after her. For a moment, Charlie simply stood there, watching as the small woman ran towards her car only to rethink that plan when she spotted Devin coming after her and took off down the street crying, "You can't make me go back in there!" as she went.

Wondering if she should expand her search to include rooms for rent, Charlie slipped the post-it note back in her pocket, turned around to head to her car only to turn right back around again and invited herself in when she heard a child say the magical words, "We're gonna need matches." Once she was inside the house that looked like it had been hit by a tornado, Charlie carefully made her way towards the sounds of cabinet doors shutting, stepping over toys, crayons, and Legos as she went. When she opened the kitchen door, she completely understood why the small woman ran screaming from the house.

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“This isn’t fucking happening,” Devin said as he stood there, forced to watch as the woman that he hadn’t been able to convince to give this another chance tore out of his driveway, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

What the hell was he going to do now?

He was going to panic. That’s what he was going to do, Devin decided as he walked back inside his house, pulling his phone out as he went and began scrolling through his contacts, trying to figure out how he was going to convince his mother to put off her vacation for another day so that-

“What’s your favorite dinosaur?” he heard Dustin ask as he opened the kitchen door and found the small woman that he’d spent the last five years avoiding gently working her fingers through his son’s soapy hair only pausing long enough to add more shampoo before she continued.

“That’s a tough one,” Charlie said with a thoughtful frown as Dustin, who never sat still, calmly sat in the large kitchen sink, waiting for her to answer him.

“I’m going to put down T-Rex,” Abbi, his baby girl, said from where she sat on the counter, wrapped in her favorite Mickey Mouse towel with her wet hair neatly combed and a clipboard with one of the rental applications that he’d printed for the in-law apartment on her lap.

He’d been putting off renting out the in-law apartment for a while now, but with the kids getting older and Bradford Creations growing, Devin didn’t have much of a choice. He needed help, which was why he’d been hoping to rent the apartment to a college kid or a middle-aged woman in exchange for low rent and a few hours of babysitting a week. What he hadn’t expected was for her to show up.

He didn’t know what it was about her, but since the day that she showed up for an

interview wearing an Indiana Jones tee-shirt and the cutest fucking smile that he'd ever seen, Devin hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. Within the first thirty seconds of meeting her, he'd realized that hiring her would be a mistake. He'd planned on thanking her for coming in and tossing her resume in the trash as soon as she left only to find himself sending her a text, telling her that the job was hers before she made it to the front door.

It had been a mistake, one that he'd been regretting for the past five years and it had nothing to do with her job. He wanted her. God, did he fucking want her. It didn't matter how many times he reminded himself that he couldn't have her, he couldn't stop thinking about her. It was the reason why he'd turned the second-floor storage room into her office and avoided the break-room when he knew that she was in there because he wasn't supposed to want her.

He'd made a promise to his children when they were born and he planned on keeping it. That meant avoiding the small woman that never should have caught his attention in the first place. She was nothing like the women that he used to date. She was a short, plump little thing with an unhealthy obsession with Harry Potter and the bluest fucking eyes that he'd ever seen.

"That's a good idea," Charlie said with one of those warm smiles that he tried not to think about most days as she finished working the glitter out of Dustin's hair and gestured for him to cover his eyes.

"What's the next question?" Dustin asked, obediently covering his eyes so that Charlie could rinse his hair.

Frowning, Abbi glanced down at the application and said, "What's your favorite ice cream?" making him smile.

"Hmmm," Charlie said, pursing her lips up, looking thoughtful before adding, "that's

a tough one, but I think I'm gonna have to go with chocolate chip cookie dough."

"That's Daddy's favorite, too," Abbi said, nodding solemnly as she scribbled something on the application with a green crayon.

"Are the brownies done?" Dustin asked, reminding him of the reason that they were in this mess in the first place.

"Almost," Charlie said, glancing over at the oven as the scent of warm brownies caught his attention.

"What about the muffins?" Abbi asked, making him frown.

She'd made muffins?

God, he fucking loved muffins.

"Five more minutes," Charlie said, making him realize how much time he'd wasted trying to convince the babysitter that hadn't lasted the week to come back.

"Are you going to take the apartment?" Dustin asked as Charlie picked up a facecloth and began working on removing the glittery-paste mess from behind his ears.

"That's up to your dad," Charlie said, rinsing the facecloth as Devin stood there, thinking of all the reasons that this was a bad idea, but one look at his smiling children's faces had him doing something that he already regretted.

## Chapter 1

One Week Later...

She should probably be concerned that someone was in her bed, Charlie thought as she rolled over and found herself smiling when she spotted her new BFF sitting on the bed next to her, wearing the cutest pair of tighty-whities that she'd ever seen, with a large bowl of Fruit Loops on his lap as he watched SpongeBob Square Pants.

"I made breakfast," Dustin said around a mouthful of Fruit Loops.

"You did?" Charlie asked, biting back a yawn as she sat up next to him.

"You were out of toast," he said, gesturing to the tray on the bed in front of him.

"I see," Charlie said, taking in the large bowl of Fruit Loops, the glass filled to the rim with chocolate milk, fruit snacks, a Hostess Cupcake, and the mess covering the tray and felt her lips twitch.

"That looks delicious. Thank you," she said, helping herself to the other bowl of cereal and settled in next to him to watch SpongeBob.

"You're welcome," Dustin said as she glanced at her alarm clock and noted the time.

"Why are you up so early?" Charlie asked as she reached over and turned her alarm off before it could go off.

"Meeting with my teacher," Dustin said, shrugging it off as he placed his bowl down and reached for the Hostess Cupcake and broke it in half.

"That sounds like fun," Charlie said as she accepted her half of the cupcake and took a bite.

"She doesn't like me," Dustin mumbled, making her frown.



“Why do you say that?” she asked, finishing the cupcake.

Shrugging, Dustin said, “Because I can’t read,” only to follow that up with, “Why is your bed in the living room?” before she could say anything.

“Because a bed is more comfortable than a couch,” Charlie said, deciding not to mention that she’d decided to use the bedroom as an office so that she could get her unnamed business up and running part-time to make sure that this was going to work before she risked everything.

“It really is,” Dustin readily agreed with a nod as he reached fo

r the glass of chocolate milk only to make a bigger mess.

“Here,” she said, smiling as she carefully pulled the tray closer so that he could lean over and take a sip.

“Thank you,” he said, wiping his mouth on the back of his arm before returning his attention to his bowl of Fruit Loops as something occurred to her.

“How did you get in here?” Charlie asked, already deciding that she’d leave the door unlocked from now on since there really was nothing like being served breakfast in bed by an incredibly handsome man.

“The key,” Dustin said around a mouthful of cereal.

“That would do it,” she said, nodding solemnly as Abbi walked in and climbed onto the bed with a yawn as she sat down on the bed next to her twin brother.

“Daddy’s looking for you,” Abbi mumbled sleepily as she reached over and helped herself to a spoonful of her brother’s Fruit Loops.

“I’m with my lady,” Dustin said, making her lips twitch.

“We’re not supposed to be in here,” Abbi said, confirming Charlie’s suspicions.

Over the past five years, Devin had been going out of his way to avoid her, barely acknowledging her existence and forgetting who she was when he did, and now...

Now he wouldn’t stop glaring at her.

It started when he’d told her that the apartment was hers as he’d handed her the rental agreement to sign. She’d considered pointing out that she hadn’t seen the apartment yet, but that glare had her quickly deciding that it would be in her best interest to sign the agreement before he changed his mind and she knew that he wanted to change his mind. She could see it on his face every time he looked at her, which unfortunately for her, was something that he’d been doing a lot more over the past week.

Yesterday when she showed up with a moving truck and Ben by her side, she’d expected him to tell her that he’d changed his mind. What she hadn’t expected was for Devin to meet them at the door with a glare. Okay, so maybe after a week of glaring she’d expected it, but she hadn’t expected him to shift his glare to Ben as he told her to go have a seat while he took over unloading the truck. Once he had her things moved inside, he’d sent her one last glare and left, locking the door that connected the in-law apartment to the rest of the house behind him and then...

## Page 2

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That was it.

She hadn't seen or heard from him since. She'd assumed that she could expect him to avoid her at home like he did at work. It would probably make this easier, Charlie thought as she found herself watching her boss/landlord walk into her apartment wearing a pair of black boxers and another glare. She took another bite of cereal as she ran her eyes over him, taking him in from his messy short black hair all the way down to his legs, noting all those tan muscles in between and couldn't help but wonder why he didn't dress like this for work. It would certainly help boost employee morale, Charlie decided with a wistful sigh.

"What are you guys doing in here? I thought I asked you to leave Charlie alone," Devin said, only to be met with blank stares.

"Why are you in here?" Dustin asked, blinking up at his father.

Eyes narrowing, Devin said, "I was looking for you."

"You didn't knock," Abbi pointed out, making Charlie bite her lip to stop herself from smiling.

"You're supposed to knock," Dustin said with a sad shake of his head as he picked up his glass of chocolate milk and carefully took a sip.

"And did you knock?" Devin asked, reaching over to run his fingers through his son's messy hair.

“I’m having breakfast with my lady,” Dustin explained with an adorable smile.

There was a sigh and then, “I’m sorry if they bothered you,” Devin said as he plucked Abbi off the bed and set her down on her feet before reaching for Dustin.

“They were no bother,” Charlie promised even as she decided that it would probably be a good idea to pick up more Hostess Cupcakes and chocolate milk for her new BFF.

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“What did we talk about, guys?” Devin asked, leaning back against the wall painted with a large smiling sun as he glanced down at his phone and went over the orders that needed to go out today.

“Many things, Daddy,” Abbi said, nodding solemnly as she leaned back against him, making his lips twitch.

“That’s true,” Devin said, only to frown when he noticed all the online orders that were waiting for him.

Not that he was complaining, far from it.

When he’d started this business five years ago, he honestly hadn’t expected to be doing this well. His only goal had been to be able to make enough money so that he could take care of his children. Up until that point, he’d been working full-time as a police officer and pulling in shifts on the side as an EMT. He’d never planned on quitting, but then again, he’d also never planned on becoming a single father at twenty-two.

After Heather told him that she was pregnant, Devin realized that he was going to

have to make some difficult decisions. He'd loved what he did, the pay had been good, benefits had been great, and it would have allowed him to take care of his children, but he'd wanted more. He wanted to watch his children grow up and be there for all the big moments and that meant starting over.

He gave up his apartment and moved back in with his parents to save money, took every shift that he could get his hands on, worked for his Uncle Jared on his days off, and saved every penny while he tried to figure out what he was going to do. He'd considered going to work for his uncle full-time, knowing that his uncle would allow him to have more control over his schedule so that he could spend time with his children, but...

It wouldn't have been enough.

He needed something that would allow him to make his own hours. He'd never planned on going into woodworking, but he'd realized pretty quickly that it was his only option. So, late at night after he came home and the only thing that he wanted to do was take a hot shower and pass out, he'd go into his father's old workshop and work until he was too fucking exhausted to see straight before he finally allowed himself to pass out for the night. Then he would get up the next day and do it all over again. He'd managed to sell a few custom pieces, did some cabinetry work, but it wasn't going to be enough.

His Uncle Mark asked him if he wanted to help him out with Bradford Furniture. His uncle was looking to retire and needed help until it was time for his youngest son to take over. Since it allowed him to spend time with his children, Devin jumped at the chance. By the time that his children were born, he'd had enough money put away so that he could rent a small two-bedroom house with a large garage that he was able to turn into his workshop. His uncle sent him the orders that he needed filled and sometimes he'd send him something that needed to be fixed, which was how Devin came up with the idea for Bradford Creations.

A customer came across an old chest that one of his great-grandfathers had built. It had some damage, a bit of wear and tear, but the problem was that they couldn't seem to get it open. His uncle sent it to him to see if he could restore it, which he did. It wasn't until he was putting the finishing touches on the old chest that he found the small latch that opened a secret compartment at the bottom.

He'd been amazed at how well it had been hidden and the craftsmanship. That had led him to take a closer look at some of the furniture that had been passed down through the family over the years. He'd found several hidden compartments, each one more intricate than the last. He'd spent weeks studying them, trying to figure out how they worked, and how they'd managed to work them into the design without giving anything away.

That had led him to trying to work hidden compartments into some of his designs. He'd quickly realized that wouldn't work since the compartments had been easy to find. He'd decided to have another look at some of the stuff that had been passed down through the family. He took a few bureaus and chests apart so that he could get a better idea of how they'd managed to pull it off and after a few months of trial and error, he'd finally figured it out.

He'd started playing with ideas, chests, bureaus, beds, bookshelves, cabinets until he ran out of space in that tiny two-bedroom house. His uncle started featuring some of his work on Bradford Furniture's website and not long after that, Devin found himself the proud owner of an old fire station and in desperate need of someone to handle all the online stuff and marketing.

That's where Charlie came in.

Even as he hired her, he knew that it was a mistake, but thankfully it wasn't one that he regretted. Whatever she did in that back office had made Bradford Creations incredibly successful. He had orders coming in from all over the world, people

willing to pay top price to get their hands on his designs, and more work than he could handle, and it was all because of the small woman that he'd been avoiding for the last five years.

Curious, he decided to see what his son's new best friend had been up to. He pulled up Bradford Creation's website and couldn't help but notice that she'd been very busy lately. She kept his blog up to date, made sure to feature his latest designs, answered questions, and was very active on social media, keeping all two-hundred and fifty thousand followers engaged, and...

He needed to stop thinking about her, Devin reminded himself as he turned off his phone and slid it back in his pocket. That lasted for all of thirty seconds before he found himself thinking about how fucking adorable she'd looked this morning, sitting on her bed in her smiley face pajamas with a bowl of Fruit Loops on her lap, smiling at something Dustin said, and-

He really needed to have another talk with the kids about leaving her alone.

"Daddy?" Abbi said, dragging his attention down to find her staring up at him through innocent baby blue eyes.

"Yes, baby girl?" Devin asked as he crouched down so that he could talk to her.

"You remember that we love you, right?" she asked with the sweetest smile that he'd ever seen, making him narrow his eyes on her before he shifted his attention to find his son watching him with a devious smile that immediately turned innocent.

"Yes," Devin said cautiously as he shifted his attention back to his daughter. "Why?"

"No reason?" Abbi said, sounding really fucking hopeful.

“What did you do?” D

evin asked even as he kissed her forehead simply because he couldn’t help himself. She was his baby girl...no matter how much she terrified him.

“Why do you think we did something bad, Daddy?” Abbi asked, blinking at him and-

“Oh, thank god, you’re here,” a woman said, drawing his attention to find their teacher standing in the doorway looking really fucking relieved and found himself frowning because he didn’t remember her having gray hair when he met her last month.

Then again, something told him that his children might have something to do with that, especially when Abbi said, “Just remember that we love you, Daddy,” with a nod that Dustin matched as he added, “A lot.”

## Chapter 2

“What’s new?” Charlie asked absently as she double-checked to make sure that she’d put a new memory card in her camera.



## Page 3

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“That armoire by the back wall,” T.J. said, gesturing to an incredibly beautiful armoire in the back as Charlie stepped out of the way as two men carried a dresser towards the shipment room.

“That’s so beautiful,” Charlie said, walking over to the armoire with an intricate Celtic design running down the side as she took in the large double-doors and the drawers and couldn’t help but wonder what this one hid.

Sometimes when she worked late at night, Charlie came down here and looked around, curious to see Devin’s latest designs, which usually led to her spending a few hours trying to figure out where the hidden compartments were until she finally gave up and looked at the cheat-sheet that came with every piece of furniture that left this building. Deciding that she would come back later to have a better look, Charlie took a few pictures for the website before she stepped back with a wistful sigh, wishing that she could justify the cost because she would love to own something this beautiful.

“Can you send me the specs?” Charlie asked, forcing her attention away from the beautiful armoire before she did something stupid like asking how much it was because she knew that even with her employee discount that she couldn’t afford it. She had to save her money, Charlie reminded herself even as she found herself looking back, unable to help but notice that it was the perfect size for her living room/bedroom.

“He’d probably sell it to you at a discount,” T.J. said with a pointed look at the armoire that she really didn’t need, but really, really, really wanted.

It was so beautiful, Charlie thought, biting back a groan because she had to be good and save her money. She wasn't going to ask, she reminded herself.

Definitely wasn't going to ask because she didn't need to know.

She had to be good.

Stick to her plan and...

"How much is it?" Charlie found herself asking as she sent a hopeful look at the most beautiful thing that she'd ever seen in her life.

"Five thousand dollars," T.J. said, before adding, "after our employee discount," destroying what little hope she had that she could afford it.

One day, Charlie told herself as she forced herself to look away.

"Yeah, I'll just go put that online," Charlie said, earning a chuckle as she headed towards the back stairwell that led to the second floor and pouted every step of the way.

When she reached the second floor, Charlie bit back a curse and prayed that she made it to her office before-

"There you are!" Kelly, the incredibly beautiful woman that Devin hired two years ago to take over customer service, said with one of those warm smiles that she gave everyone as she walked over to Charlie, carrying a white bakery box that probably had two jelly donuts because they were Charlie's favorite, and-

Charlie didn't trust her.

While everyone loved Kelly and couldn't say enough nice things about her, Charlie didn't like her and even though that probably made her a horrible person, she just couldn't help it. It was something about the way that her smiles never quite matched the look in her eyes and the way she acted like everyone was her best friend, and...

She just seemed fake.

There really was no other way to explain it.

"Look what I got for you!" Kelly said with a conspiratory wink as she popped open the box and presented Charlie with two powdered jelly donuts.

"I actually already grabbed some on the way," Charlie said, absently gesturing to her backpack with a disappointed sigh. "But thank you anyway, Kelly."

With an over-the-top pout, Kelly said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, but thank you," Charlie said, already moving to head down the back hallway.

"Okay," Kelly said with a sad sigh, turning around only to get a calculating look in her eye that Charlie almost missed before it was gone and that fake smile that she was used to seeing slipped back in place.

Curious, Charlie followed the other woman's gaze and-

Yup, definitely time to get to work, she decided when she saw Devin coming their way. With that in mind, Charlie headed down the back hallway, past the storage rooms and the supply closets until she reached the part of the hallway where the sunlight streaming in through the second-floor windows didn't reach and kept going. She didn't bother turning on any lights as she went since she already knew that

nobody else was going to be coming down here. When she reached the door at the end of the dark hallway, she breathed a sigh of relief that she'd made it to her office without having to endure another glaring session from her boss.

In seconds, Charlie was stepping into her sanctuary. With a sigh, she toed off her shoes and kicked them aside into their customary spot. She placed her camera on the bookshelf that she'd helped herself to from one of the storage rooms, grabbed the lunch that she'd made to save money and the small white pastry bag holding her precious jelly donuts out of her backpack before dropping it by the door. She placed her lunch in the mini-fridge that she'd snuck in here a few years ago before dropping her donuts on her desk, which she may have also helped herself to from storage, grabbed the remote and turned on the large flat-screen television that she may have also been forced to sneak in here.

After selecting a movie for background noise, Charlie grabbed her second favorite Slytherin glass, walked back over to the mini-fridge, filled it with ice from the mini-ice machine that she probably wasn't supposed to have in here either, grabbed a Coke out of the fridge, and placed it on her desk before she grabbed her camera and got to work. Twenty minutes later, she found herself staring at the beautiful armoire from downstairs, making sure that it looked perfect in this resolution while she tried to force her finger to click publish, knowing that it would probably be sold by the end of the day.

Maybe she could do this, Charlie told herself, absently nodding as she thought it over. She had the money in her account to cover it. She'd have to readjust a few things, push her deadline back a few months, but she could do this, she told herself only to sigh as she finally forced herself to hit save. As much as she would love to get her hands on that beautiful armoire, Charlie wanted to start her own business more. She'd already dragged her feet long enough. It was time to-

"I wanted to talk to you about something," came the softly spoken words that had

Charlie slowly turning her head and taking in the large man sitting in the oversized leather chair that she may have helped herself to from the waiting room and couldn't help but wonder why Devin Bradford was in her office.

Well, technically it was his office since he owned the building, but since he hadn't stepped foot in this room since he'd banished her in here five years ago, she was surprised to find him in here. She still wasn't sure what happened. One day, she was stuck in a cramped, tiny office with too much light, squeezed in between the bathrooms and the break-room, making it impossible for her to focus, and the next...

T.J. was meeting her by the back door one morning with a sympathetic smile and announced that he was supposed to show her to her new office. When he gestured for her to follow him upstairs, she'd hesitated when she realized that the only other office available was the one

by the stairs. A moment later, Charlie was following him upstairs, debating on handing in her two weeks' notice immediately or waiting until she found a new job because there was no way that she would have been able to get anything done if she had to deal with the noises coming from the shop below or the sounds of people coming and going all day.

She just couldn't do it.

Before she had a chance to figure out what she was going to do, he was walking past the small office by the stairs and heading towards the back-storage rooms. Curious, she followed him, noting the sympathetic glances that he kept sending her, and couldn't help but wonder what they were doing when he opened the door to the extra storage room that nobody used and announced that this was her new office. Since it worked for her, she'd absently waved off his apology and set to work creating the perfect workspace.

“What did you want to talk about?” Charlie asked, unable to help but wonder why he was in here talking to her when he normally had T.J. deal with her if he had a question or needed to tell her something.

“I wanted to...” Devin started to say only to frown when his gaze shifted to her desk. “Where did you get this?” he asked, already getting up so that he could run his hand over the top of her desk.

“I found it?” Charlie said, watching as he leaned over so that he could run his hands over the front of her desk as his curious gaze took in every detail as well as the dents, and scrapes that marked her desk.

“Where?” he asked, running his hand over the top as he moved around the desk and-

She found herself jumping out of her chair and stumbling out of the way when he moved to crouch down so that he could run his fingertips over the drawers, knobs, and-

Click.

“Those aren’t mine,” Charlie found herself saying when a hidden drawer slid open, revealing her secret stash of candy bars.

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Devin looked up from the drawer that could really use some more Reese's peanut butter cups as he reached over and-

Click.

"Okay, those might be mine," she reluctantly admitted when he found the bag of M&M cookies that she picked up from Dixon's Bakery yesterday.

Keeping his gaze locked on her, he pulled out the bottom drawer that she used for extra wires and-

Click.

"I have no idea how those got there," Charlie said, rubbing the bridge of her nose as she tried to fight back a wince when Devin slowly turned his head and took in the office supplies that she'd been hoarding.

"I'll have T.J. bring up a new desk," he said, sighing heavily as he closed the drawers.

"Why is he bringing up a new desk?" Charlie asked, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

"To replace this one," Devin said, gesturing to her desk.

"What's wrong with my desk?" she asked, unable to help but frown as she tried to figure out how they'd ended up talking about her desk in the first place.

“Too many flaws,” Devin said, shaking his head as he gestured towards the desk that she loved and planned on buying when she left.

“I don’t want a new desk,” she said, but he wasn’t listening.

“I should have thrown this thing out years ago,” Devin said, moving around her desk as he continued his inspection, shaking his head in disgust as he took in all the imperfections that covered her desk.

“Umm, you’re not throwing out my desk,” Charlie said because this was her desk.

“If you can’t find anything that you like downstairs, I can make you a new one. It might take a little time, but I should be able to finish it by Halloween,” he said as he moved back around her desk so that he could finish his inspection.

“No, that’s okay. I don’t want-”

“In the meantime, I’ll have T.J. put this out front to see if anyone wants it,” Devin said, cutting her off as Charlie looked from the desk that she loved more than anything to the man that had just suggested throwing it in the trash and back again and...

This just wasn’t going to work for her.

### Chapter 3

“I wasn’t done talking to you,” Devin bit out as he glared at the door that had just been slammed in his face.

“And you can tell me what you needed from out there,” the ungrateful brat said, making him narrow his eyes on the door as he grabbed a donut from the small paper



bag that he didn't remember grabbing and took a bite of the delicious jelly donut as he narrowed his eyes on her door.

Since he didn't actually have anything that he needed to tell her, Devin considered bringing up all that shit that she had in her office, the movie posters lining the walls, the flat-screen television, mini-fridge, microwave, and sound system that he would have fired anyone else over, but...

Fuck it, Devin thought as he finished off the rest of the donut and headed back the way that he came. He didn't give a damn what she had in her office because he knew that she worked her ass off. He just...

He just wanted to see her.

After this morning, he just wanted to see her and get his mind off things for a while. He hadn't realized what he was doing until he found himself standing in front of her door. They weren't friends, never really talked before, but she was the only one that he wanted to talk to after the twins' teacher broke the news that his son was probably going to have to repeat the first grade.

He had no fucking clue what he was going to do and he had no idea why he wanted to see her. The only thing that he knew was that when he sat in the chair that she'd helped herself to from his waiting room, watching her work, he'd felt himself relax. There was just something about her that...

Made him realize that he was a fucking idiot, Devin thought, shaking his head in disgust as he headed towards the back stairs only to bite back a curse when the woman that had taken his decision not to date as a personal challenge, headed towards him. When he'd hired her a few years ago, he'd barely managed to get the words out that the job was hers when she'd offered to thank him with a home-cooked meal and a look that told him exactly what he could expect for dessert.

“There you are! I was hoping to talk to you about something,” Kelly said with a huge smile as though she hadn’t been waiting for him.

“What did you need?” Devin asked, helping himself to the other jelly donut and-

Found himself watching as the vicious woman that had shoved him out of her office, plucked the donut out of his hand, took a bite with a sad shake of her head and a mumbled, “You owe me a donut,” as she turned around and walked away, leaving him standing there, unable to help but run his eyes over her, noting the way that her ass swayed gently back and forth as she walked away.

“Did...did you just growl?”

“No,” Devin said absently as he watched until Charlie disappeared around the corner only to find himself moving to go after her and-

“So, I was thinking,” Kelly said, stepping in front of him and cutting him off before he did something stupid.

“What’s that?” he asked, biting back a curse as he forced his attention back on the woman smiling sweetly up at him.

“Well, it’s about the website. I have a few ideas that I thought would really help Bradford Creations. I was thinking that we should change the color scheme to something more welcoming like pink and that maybe we should integrate some pictures of puppies and kittens on the homepage to give the page a more personal touch,” Kelly said with a warm smile and a shrug as he stood there, trying to figure out what puppies, kittens, and a pink color scheme had to do with Bradford Creations.

“Charlie’s in charge of the website,” Devin said, deciding that he’d wasted enough time up here and headed for the stairs.

“Well, I know that, but I thought that I would talk to you about it since she really doesn’t seem to know what she’s do-”

“Charlie’s in charge of the website,” he repeated, cutting her off as he made his way downstairs and headed towards the glass wall that cut across the back. It had been the first thing that he’d installed when he bought the building so that his children would have a safe place to play while he worked. He’d divided the large room in half, using one side for his office and the other half for the kids’ playroom so that he could keep an eye on them.

He opened his office door and sighed when he stepped on a pile of Legos. After a glance at his watch, he made quick work of picking up all the toys that had found their way onto his side and tossed them back into the playroom before he grabbed his toolbelt and headed to the computer Charlie set up for them so that he could check which orders needed to go out today.

“How did the meeting go?” T.J. asked as he joined him by the back table.

“They want to hold Dustin back,” Devin said, still trying to figure out how he was going to fix this. Dustin was insanely bright. His teacher kept stressing it over and over again even as she told him that they would have no choice but to keep him back.

Dustin couldn’t read and wasn’t learning his ABCs like the rest of the children and Abbi...

God, he didn’t know what he was going to do about his baby girl. She was determined to make sure that her brother wasn’t left behind, which apparently meant refusing to do her classwork as long as Dustin struggled with his. They wanted to split the twins up and put them in different classrooms, but he didn’t think that would go over well.

He had until May to get Dustin caught up with the rest of the children or they were going to have to talk about other options, including the possibility of putting Dustin in a remedial class. Devin was already doing all the things they'd recommended to help Dustin catch up with the rest of the class. Every day, he worked with Dustin on his homework, went over the alphabet with him, used flashcards, and read a story to him every night. He had no idea what else he was supposed to do to fix this.

"It's only October and they're already t

alking about keeping him behind?" T.J. asked, frowning as he pulled out his phone and-

"What did you do?" T.J. asked, lips twitching as he read something on his phone.

"What are you talking about?" Devin asked as he pulled up today's orders.

"Just wondering if there was a reason why Charlie was threatening to commit violence if I touched her desk," his best friend said, looking amused as he slid his phone back in his pocket.

"It's flawed," Devin bit out as he angrily scrolled through their orders, wondering why she was being so goddamn stubborn about this. He'd offered to build her a new desk, a better desk, but instead of thanking him, the ungrateful woman had pushed him out of her office and told him to keep his damn hands off her desk.

"She loves that desk," T.J. murmured absently as he pointed at something on the screen. "That went fast."

"What went fast?" Devin asked, still debating making her another fucking desk just to piss her off for banning him from her office.

## Page 5

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“Charlie barely had a chance to put it online before someone grabbed it,” T.J. said, pointing towards the order for the armoire that he’d finished yesterday.

“You priced it for ten?” he asked, noting that it was an international order.

“Probably could have got fifteen for it,” T.J. said, sighing as he glanced over his shoulder at the armoire that they were going to have to put in a crate. “Charlie’s going to be heartbroken.”

“Why’s that?” Devin absently asked as he clicked on the order to make sure that everything was right before he accepted the offer.

“I think it was love at first sight. She asked how much it was and looked torn when I told her that you’d probably sell it to her for five,” T.J. said as Devin looked over his shoulder at the armoire that had taken him a month to build and would make him a small fortune.

“She liked it?” Devin asked as he stepped away from the computer.

“More like loved it,” T.J. said, chuckling as he took over Devin’s spot to make sure that the order was correct before they accepted it.

Nodding absently, Devin said, “Cancel the order,” as he pulled his phone out of his back pocket and ordered a dozen jelly donuts from Dixon’s Bakery for the ungrateful brat.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

“Ow! Why are you hitting me?” Ben asked, pulling back his hand before she was forced to slap it again.

“You’re supposed to be working,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head, wondering why it was so difficult to find good help these days as she took her time selecting a blue crayon.

“I’m not working until you give me a donut,” Ben said, folding his arms over his chest as he narrowed his dark brown eyes on her.

“Sorry, but donuts are for workers,” she said, sending her best friend a pitying look as she gave up her search for the perfect blue crayon and helped herself to one of the oversized jelly donuts that had been delivered to her office earlier.

“Then why does he get one?” Ben asked, gesturing to the cute little boy helping himself to a donut.

“Because he’s cute?” Charlie asked, blinking up at her best friend.

“I really am,” Dustin said, nodding solemnly as he settled back on the chair next to her as she returned her attention to finding the perfect blue crayon to help emphasize her turtle’s cuteness.

“Why do I have to unpack while you get to color?” Ben demanded as he gestured to the stack of coloring books that Dustin brought down so that they could color after she worked on his letters with him.

“Because moving was your idea,” Charlie reminded him, giving up her search for the perfect blue and started looking for a brown crayon to color her turtle’s eyes.

“Speaking of ideas,” Ben said, pulling a chair out so that he could join them. “Do you

really think this was a good one?” he asked with a pointed look around her new apartment.

“Probably not,” she said as she debated making her turtle’s eyes green instead.

“It’s going to make things awkward,” Ben said, sighing heavily as he reached over to steal a donut only to glare when she pulled the box out of his reach.

“Probably,” Charlie said absently as she glanced from the sea turtle that she was coloring to the stack of Disney coloring books and couldn’t help but regret her decision not to color Eeyore when she had the chance.

God, she loved Eeyore.

“And you really think you’ll be able to pull this off?”

“Absolutely,” Charlie said with absolutely no hesitation because she was more than ready to finally see this thing through.

## Chapter 4

“Not again,” Devin mumbled weakly as he rubbed his hands roughly down his face while he stood in front of Charlie’s apartment door, listening to the sounds of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse coming from the other side of that door, praying that this wasn’t happening because he honestly wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take.

“Morning, Daddy,” his baby girl said around a yawn as she walked past him, opened the door and left him with no other choice but to follow her.

“Abbi,” he said, sighing her name heavily as he went after her, praying that his children took fucking pity on him today only to find himself biting back a groan

when he walked into the small apartment and found Charlie lying on her stomach with her chin resting on her folded arms, wearing a small tee-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts. Before he could stop himself, he found himself running his eyes over her, taking in the delicate slope of her back hidden by the soft baby pink tee-shirt, the generous curve of her ass, short tan legs, and...sighed when Abbi climbed on the bed.

“Why must you do this to me, Daddy?” Abbi asked, sighing heavily as Devin threw her over his shoulder and reached for Dustin, who was currently nibbling on a Hostess Cupcake.

“We need to get ready for school. Let’s go,” he said, reaching over to pick Dustin up only to end up sighing when his son shoved the rest of the cupcake in his mouth, grabbed the other cupcake off the small tray between them, crawled off the bed, and made a run for it.

Resigning himself to giving Dustin another bath, Devin turned around and-

“The desk stays,” came the announcement that had his lips twitching as he headed for the door.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

“How exactly is this staying on a budget?”

“Because you’re buying me lunch,” Charlie said as she perused today’s menu as she stood in line, waiting to order.

“Why exactly am I doing this?” Ben asked as he continued playing Scrabble on his phone.

“Because I spent most of the night cleaning up the mess that you made of your



company's website," she reminded him as she bit back a yawn, wishing that she could call it an early night tonight but that wasn't possible with the hectic schedule that she'd set for herself.

After she put in nine hours at work, she had to go home and work on her new business, setting up her website, researching, watching videos, and working on her social media presence so that she was established by the time the company that she really needed to figure out a name for was ready to go. God, there was just so much to do and she was starting to wonder if a year was going to be enough time to get it done.

"That was last night. What have you done for me today?" Ben asked as he glanced up from his phone to throw her a questioning look.

"Let you live?" she said, blinking up at him even as she pointed towards the large glass display where today's selection of pastries, cookies, brownies, cakes, and other delicious-looking baked goods awaited her. "You're also buying me dessert."

"I'm really not," Ben said with a sad shake of his head as he returned his attention to his phone.

"Make that two desserts," Charlie murmured absently as she found her attention drawn to the incredibly handsome man that better think twice before going near her desk again as he walked into Dixon's Bakery.

She watched as Devin walked up to the counter and-

Did

he just gesture to her? Charlie couldn't help but wonder as her eyes narrowed on the man that had sent his henchmen to her office this morning to do his dirty work. As

she stood there, admittedly glaring at him, she found herself running an appreciative eye over him, taking in the tight fit of his Bradford Creation's black tee-shirt, his large biceps, cargo pants and couldn't help but wonder if he'd be willing to work topless...to help with morale, of course.

"Why hasn't he fired you yet?"

"I honestly don't know," Charlie said, because she'd been wondering about that for a while now.

It was clear that he didn't like her, which made her wonder why he'd hired her in the first place. When she'd showed up to her interview five years ago, she'd been nervous but hopeful that this would work out only to wonder why the incredibly handsome man interviewing her wouldn't stop glaring at her. Really hoping that he didn't end up being one of those serial killers that Grandma Bea used to warn her about when she watched Dateline, Charlie had given him her best smile, prayed that she made it out of there alive, and did her best to get through the rest of the interview without making any sudden movements.

When it was over, or rather when she ran out of things to say, she'd cleared her throat, thanked him for the chance, and after another awkward moment when he didn't say anything, she nodded, cleared her throat again, smiled, and hoped for the best as she stood up and headed for the door, resigned to keep looking. Before she reached the door, he'd texted her, letting her know that the job was hers if she wanted it. Since it meant that she no longer had to crash on Ben's couch, she'd accepted the job only to end up wondering if she should keep looking the next morning when she showed up for work bright and early to find out that her new boss expected her to leave him alone.

That had been fine with her, more than fine in fact, since it reduced the chances of him trying to lure her to a secondary location, something that Grandma Bea had

warned her about after watching America's Most Wanted. It also allowed her to do her job without having to worry about having a boss that tried to micromanage her. To be honest, she'd actually expected him to fire her within the first year, only he never did and she had no idea why.

## Page 6

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“I would have fired you,” Ben said, nodding solemnly.

“I know you would have,” Charlie said, watching as Devin headed for the door.

“I really would have,” Ben said as they stepped up to the counter and-

“All set,” the cashier said with a smile as she placed a large brown bag on the counter in front of Charlie.

“We haven’t ordered yet,” Charlie said, only to frown when cashier said, “The gentleman in front of you took the liberty of buying you lunch.”

“He bought us lunch?” Ben asked, sounding just as confused as she was only to chuckle when the cashier said, “No, he only bought lunch for her.”

“He did?” Charlie asked only to once again find her lips twitching when the cashier turned the bag around and she saw “The desk goes,” written across the back.

## Chapter 5

“Don’t you love us anymore, Daddy?” Abbi asked, her bottom lip trembling as she glanced up from her plate to look at him.

“Are you mad at us, Daddy?” Dustin asked with the saddest fucking expression that Devin had ever seen as he pushed a broccoli spear off his plate with his fork.

Sighing, Devin reached over and scooped more broccoli onto his son’s plate. “It’s

good for you,” he promised his son as he glanced over to find Abbi dumping the fish that he’d baked for dinner, into her napkin. When she saw him watching her, she dropped the napkin on the floor, cleared her throat, shifted, cleared her throat again, tried to discreetly kick the napkin filled with fish away from her chair all while trying to appear innocent.

Narrowing his eyes on her, Devin pushed his chair back and-

“I don’t know how that got there, Daddy,” Abbi said, making his lips twitch as he picked up the balled-up napkin filled with fish that he’d accidentally left in the oven too long and tossed it in the trash.

“I bet you don’t,” Devin murmured, scooping more fish onto his daughter’s plate as she narrowed her eyes on him.

“Why are you doing this to us?” Abbi demanded, folding her arms over her chest as she sat back in her chair.

“Because I love you and I want you to be healthy,” Devin said, gesturing for her to eat.

“I see,” she murmured, looking from her untouched plate to his with a pointed look.

Eyes narrowing on his daughter, he took a bite of fish and forced himself to keep chewing the tasteless dry flakes and swallow before he popped a lukewarm piece of broccoli in his mouth as he kept his gaze locked on his daughter. “Delicious,” Devin said, popping another piece of broccoli in his mouth.

“Why must you lie to us?” Abbi demanded as she reached over and pushed her plate away.

“Why must you make everything so difficult?” Devin countered back as he pushed her plate back in front of her.

“Because it’s my job,” she said, pushing her plate away again and then for good measure, she reached over and pushed her brother’s plate away as well.

“I thought you said Blackjack’s wouldn’t deliver here,” Dustin said, drawing his attention to find his son watching a kid wearing a Blackjack’s tee-shirt and carrying a large delivery bag walk up their driveway before cutting down the small walkway that would take him to the in-law apartment where the woman that he refused to think about, lived.

“Another lie?” Abbi said with a sad shake of her head.

Narrowing his eyes on the little troublemaker, Devin reached over and added another spoonful of broccoli onto her plate.

“Please don’t make me call Grandma,” Abbi said, which earned her another piece of the fish that he was probably going to end up throwing out after dinner.

“Daddy, I have to go potty,” Dustin said, worrying his bottom lip as he shifted in his chair.

“Go, but be quick or your food will get cold,” Devin said, biting back a sigh as he reached over and pulled Dustin’s seat out for him.

“Thank you, Daddy!” Dustin said as he raced for the door, leaving Devin with his daughter as she narrowed her eyes on him.

“I’m not eating that,” Abbi informed him.

“Then I guess I won’t be able to check your room for monsters tonight,” Devin drawled, watching as a look of pure panic took over before she managed to pull it back with a shrug.

“I guess you won’t.”

“Good,” he said, nodding as he forced himself to eat more fish.

“Good,” she said, keeping those beautiful baby blue eyes locked on him.

“Can I have the salt, Daddy?” Dustin asked as he climbed back onto his chair and reached for the saltshaker.

“Just a tiny bit,” Devin said, keeping his gaze locked on the stubborn little girl glaring at him, knowing better than to look away first. He’d learned that lesson well during potty training and it wasn’t something that he was going to forget anytime soon.

“Thank you, Daddy!” Dustin said as he wrapped his small hand around the saltshaker, carefully climbed off his chair, and quickly made his way back out of the kitchen, making Devin frown as he pushed his chair back, wondering what his son was up to and-

“Ooops!” Abbi said, making him realize his mistake as he glanced back to find his baby girl standing next to the trashcan, dumping the rest of her dinner in the trash.

When he narrowed his eyes back on her, she dropped her plate in the trash, and-

“Don’t do it!”

Grabbed her brother’s plate, dumping it in the trash before he managed to grab her.

“Oh, you’re in big trouble now,” Devin said, shifting his baby girl in his arms as he went after his son to see what he was up to.

“Worth it,” Abbi said, making him sigh as he pushed the kitchen door open and found himself drawn to the sounds of SpongeBob SquarePants annoying the shit out of Squidward.

Really hoping that he was wrong, Devin headed towards the half-open door that led to the in-law apartment and sighed, just fucking sighed when he spotted Dustin sitting next to Charlie on her bed with a plate of pizza on his lap.

“You’re supposed to knock,” Dustin said as he picked up the large slice of cheese pizza and took a bite.

“And you’re supposed to be eating dinner,” Devin pointed out with a sigh as he put Abbi down only to groan when she took that as an invitation to climb onto the bed and help herself to a slice of pizza.

Frowning, Dustin said, “I am eating dinner, Daddy. See?” as he held up his slice of pizza as Devin’s attention shifted to Charlie and stayed there.

Eyes narrowing on him, she finished her bite of pizza with a look that told him exactly what would happen if he mentioned touching her desk again. She was so fucking adorable, Devin thought, taking in her curly dark hair pulled up into a messy bun, the Team Slytherin tee-shirt that made it very clear that she wasn’t wearing a bra, the plaid cotton shorts that ended mid-thigh and gave him one hell of a view of short, curvy golden legs, tiny feet, and cute little toes with the toenails painted baby pink.

When he found his gaze running back up her legs, Devin cleared his throat and forced himself to focus on getting his children to move their little butts so that he could start



the long process of getting them tucked in for the night that was one day going to lead to a nervous breakdown. With that in mind, he picked Dustin up and-

Sighed, just fucking sighed when his son shoved the slice of pizza in his hand into his mouth and grabbed another slice before Devin could stop him. He shifted his son under one arm and reached for his baby girl only to have her grab another slice of pizza and a chicken tender out of the box that he'd somehow missed, ducked out of his reach and made a run for it.

"I love pizza," Dustin said with a dreamy sigh as he took a bite of his pizza, making Charlie's lips twitch.

"I know you do," Devin said, shifting his son in his arms as he risked one last glance at Charlie to find her smiling as she watched Dustin.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 6:34 am*

God, she was beautiful...

“The desk stays,” Charlie said, not bothering to look at him as she took a bite of her piz

za.

And so fucking adorable, Devin thought as he reached over and plucked the pizza out of her hand with a mumbled, “We’ll see,” and headed for the door.

Seven soul-crushing hours later, Devin was ready to call it a night. He tossed the pencil that was barely more than a nub onto his desk and pushed his chair back with a heavy sigh. He needed to finish this design, but he was too fucking exhausted to see straight. He needed to start it on Monday, which gave him two days to finish it. Deciding to call it a night, Devin pushed his chair back and headed for his office door, making sure to lock it behind him so that the twins couldn’t sneak in and color his designs, again.

Once he made sure the door was locked, Devin headed down the hallway, checking in on the twins along the way to make sure that they were asleep before heading to his room. Ten minutes later, he was standing in his shower, savoring the first real break that he’d taken all day.

He loved his children, fucking adored them, but some days he thought that he was going to lose his fucking mind. From the moment he woke up until he was too fucking tired to do anything more than pass out, he was either working or spending time with his children. He looked forward to this time when his children were asleep

and he could finally relax and get his mind off everything that was waiting for him tomorrow.

It was also the time when he found himself unable to stop thinking about the small woman that he'd told himself was off limits. Every night for the past five years without fail, Devin thought about her. He thought about how beautiful she was, her smile, the way that she worried her bottom lip when she was focused on something, the way her Bradford Creations' shirt clung to her curves and found himself wondering what it would be like to touch her.

God, what he wouldn't give to be able to touch her, Devin thought, licking his lips only to groan as he reached between his legs and wrapped his hand around his hardening cock. By the time his hand slid over the tip, his cock was hard and his thoughts had turned to all those things that he wanted to do to Charlie.

He wanted to fuck her.

He wasn't even sure when he started to think about her like this, but he knew that she was the only one that he wanted. He'd tried to imagine touching another woman, thought about the last time that he'd been with Heather, but his thoughts always turned to Charlie. He thought about how it would feel to run his hands over her, imagined what it would feel like to cup her breasts in his hands, how it would feel to touch her pussy, if she'd be wet, how she would moan when he fingered her, licked her, and how it would feel when he slid his cock inside her.

He wondered if she'd moan, lick her lips, or whimper as he slid his cock inside her until his balls touched her ass only to beg him to fuck her harder. He wondered how hard she liked to be fucked, if she'd moan his name in his ear as he fucked her, and if she would like it when he-

"Charlie!" he found himself groaning as his cock jerked in his hand as the thoughts of

losing himself inside Charlie had his balls pulling up tight. A moment later, an orgasm tore another groan from him as he watched his hand work over his cock as he found himself groaning her name one last time.

“Charlie...”

## Chapter 6

“I peed the bed,” came the announcement that had Charlie frowning as she looked over her shoulder to find Dustin standing near the doorway, hugging a blanket against his chest and shifting nervously.

“Are you okay?” Charlie asked as she tossed her notebook on her desk and pushed her chair back.

Worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, Dustin mumbled, “Daddy won’t wake up.”

“What do you mean Daddy won’t wake up?” Charlie asked, unable to help but frown as she got to her feet and walked over to make sure that Dustin was okay, noting that his tighty-whities looked wet.

“He won’t stop snoring,” Dustin said with a shrug, making her lips twitch as she leaned down and playfully ran her fingers through his hair with a, “Well, I guess it’s up to us to clean, huh?”

“I need a bath,” he said, nodding solemnly.

Matching his nod, Charlie said, “I think we can handle that.”

“And a snack,” he quickly added, making her smile as she reached down and took his

small hand in hers.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked as they left her office and headed back to the house.

“Something yummy,” Dustin said, making her chuckle as they made their way through the surprisingly clean living room that looked nothing like the living room that she’d navigated through the first time she came here. Everything was back in its place, toys in bins, and books were neatly lining the bookshelves.

“Something yummy, hmmm. What sounds yummy at three in the morning?” she asked as they made their way upstairs.

“Pancakes,” Dustin said, making her lips twitch.

“I was thinking of something along the lines of half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with some grapes,” Charlie said as they headed down the hallway.

“What about the pancakes?” he asked as they came to the first open doorway.

“I was thinking that we could have those for breakfast,” Charlie said absently as she glanced into the brightly lit bedroom and spotted Devin passed out on the large bed in his boxers with a small stack of papers loosely held in his hand.

“With bacon?” Dustin asked, sounding hopeful.

“With bacon,” Charlie said with a firm nod as she gestured for him to stay where he was.

“Be right back,” she whispered as she quietly walked into Devin’s bedroom to make sure that he was okay.

She didn't know Devin well, but she knew that he was an amazing father. Everyone at Bradford Creations knew that he was dedicated to his children. Over the past five years, she'd caught glimpses of his children when he'd brought them upstairs for a snack or when he was playing outside on the playground that he'd built for them and saw the way that his face lit up when he was with them. She'd also knew that he put his children first and had heard the tales that most of the female employees shared with heartfelt sighs.

God, he looked exhausted, Charlie thought as she took in his handsome face and the whiskers lining his jaw as she reached for the blanket folded over the chair near the window and gently tossed it over him. She pulled the blanket up to his shoulders before picking the stack of papers off the bed and set them on the nightstand next to the framed picture of Dustin and Abbi smiling, noting that they were articles on trying to teach a child how to read. Such a good dad, Charlie thought as she reached over and turned off the lamp before heading back to the hallway and quietly closed the door behind her.

"Let's go get you cleaned up," Charlie said with a warm smile as she took Dustin's hand in hers and followed him into the bedroom across from Devin's.

"My bed is wet," Dustin said as she reached over and turned on the light, noting that Dustin loved dinosaurs, the stack of children's books by his bed, and the picture of Devin smiling down at the small baby in his arms on the wall.

"Why don't you grab a new pair of underwear and we'll take this downstairs and get everything clean?" Charlie suggested as she made quick work of stripping the bed, relieved when she saw the bed pad covering the mattress because she wasn't sure how she was supposed to get pee out of a mattress.

Once she had his blankets and sheets balled up in her arms, they made their way back downstairs to her apartment. After throwing everything in the washing machine, she

started a bath for Dustin and couldn't help but smile when Dustin stripped out of his undies and quickly climbed into the tub with a satisfied sigh and a mumbled, "Bubbles?"

"I guess we could do that," Charlie said, selecting a bottle of bubble bath off the counter and poured some in the tub as Dustin helped himself to a facecloth off the stack that she'd placed by the tub, grabbed her soap, and set to work.

An hour later, Dustin was wearing a fresh pair of tighty-whities, his snack was cleaned up, the blankets were in the dryer, and she wasn't a

ll that surprised when he climbed into her bed and curled up on his side. Deciding to call it a night, Charlie took a quick shower, changed into her pajamas, and crawled into bed next to the sweet little boy that had stolen her half of the peanut butter jelly sandwich when he didn't think that she was looking.

Just as she was about to close her eyes, Abbi walked into her room and after a slight pause, she climbed into bed next to her brother, curled up and went to sleep with a sigh. They were so damn cute, Charlie thought as she closed her eyes only to smile when Dustin snuggled closer.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

"Damn," Devin managed to get out on a groan as he rubbed his hands down his face, wondering when the last time that he felt this well-rested was.

Definitely before the twins were born, Devin thought as he turned the bathroom light off and headed back into his bedroom, absently going over everything that he had to do today. He needed to get the kids up, run to the store, and-

Couldn't help but frown when he noticed that it was still dark outside. Trying to make

sense out of what he was seeing, Devin glanced at the alarm clock by his bed and felt his stomach drop when he saw what time it was.

“Oh, shit!” he snapped, trying not to panic when he realized that he’d slept for twenty hours.

There was no way that he should have been able to sleep all day, not with two six-year-olds in the house. With that frightening thought, Devin grabbed his phone off the nightstand and moved his ass. He headed across the hallway to find his son’s room empty. A quick look into Abbi’s room found her room empty as well and had him racing towards the stairs, praying that his mother stopped by earlier and took the kids even though he knew that she would never just take the kids without telling him.

“Dustin? Abbi?” he called out as he headed down the stairs, feeling his stomach drop when he didn’t find them.



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“Dustin!” he said, moving his ass and headed into the kitchen to find it empty and...

He turned around and headed back to the living room and the closed door that he'd been trying to pretend didn't exist, praying that the kids hadn't listened to him. He didn't bother knocking, he simply walked inside and-

“Damn it,” came the sadly sighed words that drew his attention to the left as his mind registered something soft sliding against his legs in time to see a large lilac sheet fall down onto a large lump on the bed. There was a soft grumble, and then, the sheet was pushed aside and Devin sighed with relief when he spotted his children curled up on Charlie's bed, fast asleep.

“They just fell asleep,” came the whisper that drew his attention to Charlie to find her sitting on the bed with a warm smile as she pushed the sheet aside. At his questioning look, she gestured absently to the sheet with a sighed, “We tried to make a tent in the living room, but we couldn't get it to stay up so we decided to make one in here instead.”

“I see,” Devin said, watching as she pushed the covers aside and climbed out of bed.

“I hate to say this,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head, “but your daughter cheats at tic-tac-toe, checkers, and hide and go seek.”

“She really does,” he murmured absently as he watched Charlie make her way around the bed, untying the jump ropes that they'd used to create a tent as she went.

“Your kids are lightweights,” she said with a teasing smile as she walked past him

and headed towards his living room.

“Oh, yeah?” he asked, following her through the living room and into his kitchen.

With a sigh and a sad shake of her head, Charlie headed to his refrigerator and said, “They couldn’t cut it playing Go Fish.”

“They don’t like losing,” Devin murmured absently as he watched her pull two foil-covered plates out of the refrigerator and placed them on the counter.

“They really don’t,” she said, smiling as she grabbed a carton of chocolate milk and some condiments out of the fridge and placed them on the counter before she set to work on replacing the foil with paper towels and-

“I’m not a bad father,” he found himself saying, for some reason hating the idea of her thinking that he was a horrible father more than anyone else.

“Why would I think that you’re a bad father?” Charlie asked, looking genuinely curious as she placed a plate with a large stack of pancakes, bacon, and home fries in the microwave.

“I don’t make it a habit of staying in bed all day,” Devin said, sighing heavily as he tried to figure out how this happened. No matter how fucking exhausted he’d been before, he’d never left his kids to fend for themselves.

“You were exhausted,” she said, shrugging it off like it was no big deal.

“I’m always exhausted,” he said, chuckling without humor as he rubbed his hands down his face.

“I know,” Charlie said, making him frown as he dropped his hands away to find her

shrugging it off as she pulled the plate out of the microwave.

At his questioning look, she said, “The kids told me. They told me that you always get up with them in the morning and take care of them. They got nervous when you didn’t wake up, so we checked on you during the day so that they could make sure that you were okay. I think the selfies helped.”

Eyes narrowing on her, he swiped his phone open and-

Felt his lips twitch when he saw the first photo of the kids sitting next to him on the bed, giving a thumbs up. The second picture was of Dustin lying across his back, smiling. Another of him surrounded by dinosaurs, one of him with his daughter’s pink princess tiara on his head, one of his son kissing his cheek, one of his daughter kissing his cheek, and one of-

Charlie sitting on his bedroom floor with Dustin and Abbi sitting on her lap, smiling. For a moment, Devin simply stood there, staring down at the picture until he found himself murmuring, “Thank you,” as he saved the picture into his favorites folder.

## Chapter 7

At least he wasn’t glaring anymore, Charlie thought, only to bite back a sigh when Devin looked up from whatever T.J. was showing him to narrow his eyes on her.

Great.

Giving up on trying to figure out what she did to piss him off, Charlie shifted to get more comfortable on her new lounge chair as she reached over and grabbed her glass off the small patio table that she’d purchased along with this lounge chair this morning to help her enjoy what was quickly becoming her favorite part about this apartment. She’d never had a deck before, but now, she was definitely hooked, she

absently thought as she took a sip of her drink while she watched the man that really seemed to love to glare as he pulled himself back up the tree that they were building a tree house in and-

“I thought you were trying to save money,” came the heavily sighed complaint that drew her attention to the man who really didn’t seem to know what he was doing to find him running his hand through his meticulously cut jet-black hair as he released a frustrated sigh.

“And I did,” Charlie said, taking another sip before she gestured to all the patio furniture that she’d purchased this morning along with the gas grill that didn’t look like it was going to be finished anytime soon before adding, “All this stuff was half off.”

“I don’t understand why they couldn’t put this together at the store,” Ben said, sighing as he tried to make sense out of the directions that came in the box.

“It would have cost twenty more dollars,” she pointed out as she gestured for him to get back to work.

With a grumble, Ben shifted his attention back to the directions in his hands as she glanced over to watch as Dustin chased his sister around the large backyard, trying to show her something in his hand. They were so damn cute, Charlie thought as she found herself glancing back at the tree surrounded by tools and stacks of wood and-

“He looks pissed,” Ben pointed out as she once again found Devin glaring at her.

“He really does, doesn’t he?” Charlie murmured thoughtfully as she watched Devin continue to glare at her as he reached down and grabbed the board that T.J. was handing up to him.

“What did you do?” Ben asked, making her frown as she glanced back to find Ben trying to figure out how to attach the two metal bars in his hands.

“What makes you think that I did something?” Charlie asked, even though she’d been wondering the same thing.

Last night, he’d thanked her for watching his children before gathering them in his arms and brought them upstairs to tuck them in only to come back a few hours later when they snuck back downstairs and crawled back in her bed. That’s when the glaring started or rather, resumed. That had been followed by glaring at her when she made muffins for the kids and offered him one, which led to her deciding to go check out the end of summer sales at the mall, hoping that he’d grow tired of glaring at her by the time she came back.

He didn’t.

No, that short break seemed to rejuvenate his glaring skills. She’d barely had a chance to open the hatch on the back of her SUV when he was there, glaring at her until she stepped aside so that he could unload her car for her. When Ben showed up a few minutes later, mostly because she may have lied to her best friend and offered to make him lunch if he came over, he’d shot her one last glare before tossing the patio chair to Ben, who really needed to work on his reflexes, before heading back inside.

“Because I know you?” Ben said with a look that told her that it was more than obvious that she’d done something to piss off the man that she was almost ninety percent sure was still glaring at her.

“That hurts, Benjamin,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head as she picked up her iPad and returned her attention to the article on small business accounting that she was trying to get through.

“The truth hurts.”

“So would throwing this iPad at your head,” she pointed out as she wiggled her toes, enjoying what was probably going to be the last warm weather

they had before fall hit.

There was another grumble and then, “Are you planning on helping me?”

“I’d only get in the way,” Charlie pointed out as she swiped to the next page and-

“Charlie, look what I found!” came the excited announcement that had her looking up in time to watch as Dustin came running up the small stairway with his hand held out only to accidentally knock over her table, sending her glass flying in the process before she could grab it.

The sound of glass crunching followed by a small gasp had her moving, she was off the lounge chair and had Dustin in her arms before the first tear had a chance to roll down his face.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Charlie said, trying not to panic as she turned around and placed him down on her chair.

“I-It was an accident,” Dustin managed to get out through sobs as she leaned down and felt her stomach drop when she saw the thick piece of glass stuck in the bottom of his shoe.

Forcing her trembling hands to work, Charlie quickly untied his small sneaker as she absently mumbled, “It’s fine, Dustin. Accidents happen,” and carefully pulled his shoe off and-

Felt her shoulders sag with relief when she spotted his pristine white sock covering his small foot.

“You’re okay,” she said, giving him a warm smile as she leaned over and kissed his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” Dustin mumbled softly, making her chuckle.

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“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I didn’t like that glass anyway,” Charlie lied even as she made a mental note to hop onto eBay later and see if she could find another glass with the Slytherin symbol on it.

“Oh, shit...” came the weakly whispered words that had her frowning before Dustin was suddenly plucked off the chair.

Sighing, Charlie looked up to tell Devin that his son was okay, but the look on his face...

Really freaking scared her, especially when he handed Dustin off to T.J., who wasn’t looking so good right now, and followed that up by reaching down and picking her up and placing her on the chair. She opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong when the second, “Oh, shit...” drew her attention and had her turning her head to see what was wrong when Devin reached over and stopped her.

“It will be okay,” he said, gently caressing her cheek, but something, mostly Ben’s next, “Oh, shit...” told her that it definitely wasn’t going to be okay.

Then again, Abbi’s hysterical sobs and Dustin’s, “Where did all that blood come from?” clued her into the fact that something was very wrong.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asked, trying not to panic as Devin looked down at the bottom of her foot and clenched his jaw as another, “Oh, shit...” drew her attention to the left and-

“Oh, my god...” Charlie found herself weakly whispering when she saw all the blood



covering the deck right around the time that she became aware of the pain tearing through her left foot.

She probably would have been okay if Ben hadn't followed that up with another, "Oh, shit..."

## Chapter 8

"You know, it's probably nothing. I'll just go home and put a band-aide on it," Charlie said absently as her hold around his arm tightened right around the time that she decided to bury her face against his arm, whimper, and mumble, "Oh, god," when his cousin Aidan reached for the first syringe.

"I'm afraid that you're going to need stitches," Aidan said with an apologetic smile as he sat there debating how he was going to pull out the thick pieces of glass stuck in Charlie's foot as the woman in question began shaking her head with a, "I don't want to do this," as her hold on him somehow tightened.

"It will be over before you know it," Devin promised her even as he shot his cousin a glare that told him what would happen if he fucked this up.

"I want it to be over now," Charlie mumbled sadly as Devin glanced back at the asshole that was always hanging around her as he dropped his head between his knees with another, "Oh, shit..." as he slowly exhaled, looking really fucking pale.

"Ben?" the woman hugging his arm said.

"Yeah?" the man that hadn't stopped saying, "Oh, shit..." since this all started, said.

"You are the worse best friend ever!" Charlie said with a whimper that had Devin biting back a curse as he pulled his arm away and picked her up, careful of her foot,

and shifted her halfway down the stretcher before he carefully climbed onto the stretcher behind her and pulled her back against him.

Before his back hit the stretcher, Charlie was grabbing back onto his arm and hugging it against her chest with a murmured, “I really hate him.”

“What the hell, woman? How is this my fault?” Ben demanded, raising his head in outrage only to spot all the blood covering the bed and floor and followed that up with another, “Oh, shit...” as he dropped his head back between his knees.

“It’s going to be fine, Charlie,” Devin said, pressing a kiss against the top of her head as Aidan gave her legs a pointed look that had Devin raising his legs and carefully placing them over hers to stop her from moving and making this worse.

“Wait! I’m not ready for this!” the woman in his arms said, starting to panic when she realized what they were doing. “Can’t we talk about this?”

“We need to take care of this now, Charlie,” Aidan said as he gently grabbed hold of Charlie’s small foot and-

“No, no, no, no, no! Please, just leave it! It will eventually push its way out like splinter, right?” Charlie said, trying to pull her leg back but she couldn’t move it, not with his leg holding it down.

“It has to come out, Charlie,” Devin said, glad that he’d managed to stop her from seeing the damage, but god, had she tried.

The entire drive over here, he’d been forced to drive with one hand on the wheel so that he could keep her foot trapped on his lap to stop her from looking. The only thing that had stopped her from yanking her foot back so that she could get a glimpse of the large chunks of glass impaling her foot was the fact that every time she tried, she

ended up gasping in pain.

“No, it doesn’t!” she said, shaking her head frantically as she tried to pull her foot back and-

“Charlie!”

Immediately relaxed and shoved his arm away with a bored sigh when Dustin came running into the exam room, carrying a large teddy bear in his arms.

“Hey, sweetie, what are you doing here?” Charlie asked, sounding relaxed and even a little bored as his son walked into the room, looking worried.

“I wanted to make sure that you were okay,” Dustin said, watching as Aidan grabbed hold of her foot and-

“Oh, I’m fine, sweetie. This is no big deal,” Charlie said, waving it off with one hand as her other hand grabbed hold of his other hand where his son couldn’t see and held on tightly as Aidan slowly slid the large needle in the bottom of her foot.

“It looks like it hurts,” Dustin mumbled as he glanced back at her foot before adding, “There’s a lot of blood,” which had the asshole sitting against the wall dropping onto his side with a mumbled, “I-I think I need to lay down.”

“Is there? I hadn’t noticed,” Charlie murmured absently as she asked the question that he’d been wondering. “Where’s Abbi?”

“We dropped her off with grandma and grandpa, but I wanted to make sure that you were okay,” Dustin mumbled as he watched Aidan work.

“What’s that in your arms?” Charlie asked, distracting him.

“Uncle T.J. let me get this from the gift shop for you,” Dustin said, holding it out to her as her hand tightened around his and he heard what sounded like the start of a whimper before she managed to pull it back.

“Aw, that is so sweet! Thank you, Dustin,” she said, reaching over to run her fingers through Dustin’s hair as Devin was forced to bite back a grunt when she’d somehow managed to squeeze his hand a hell of a lot harder than Heather had when she gave birth to the twins.

“There you are,” T.J. said, walking into the room and cringed

when he saw Charlie’s foot before he could pull it back.

“Why don’t you take Dustin to the cafeteria and have a snack while we finish up here?” Aidan suggested absently as he placed the syringe down on the small metal tray and grabbed another one.

“T-That sounds like a good idea,” T.J. said, clearing his throat as he forced himself to look away from Charlie’s foot.

“I wanna stay with Charlie,” Dustin said, stepping closer to the stretcher.

“I was hoping you’d get me some ice cream,” Charlie said, sounding hopeful.

Dustin worried his bottom lip between his teeth, looking torn only to reluctantly nod. “Okay, I’ll go get you some ice cream,” Dustin said, nodding as he turned around to leave.

“Hey, do I get a hello?” Devin asked, absently running his thumb over the back of Charlie’s hand only to sigh when his son ran off without another word, determined to get ice cream for Charlie.

“What...the...hell...” Devin said, shaking his head in disbelief as he watched his son leave only to end up grunting when the woman that had been playing it cool released his hand so that she could grab hold of his arm, wrap her arms back around it as she buried her face against his bicep with a muttered, “Oh, god!”

“I’m almost done numbing your foot,” Aidan said as he continued working while Charlie shook her head somewhat frantically with a, “I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to-”

“I forgot to give you your bear!” Dustin said, running back inside the small curtained room just as the small woman hugging his arm suddenly shoved his arm away.

“Oh, thank you, sweetie,” Charlie said, sounding touched as Dustin placed the stuffed bear down on the chair the nurse had dragged in here earlier for Devin.

“You’re welcome!” Dustin said, already running back out of the room as he once again found his arm grabbed and-

“Just cut it off,” she whispered hoarsely, making him sigh as he wrapped his other arm around her.

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“It’s almost over,” Devin promised her.

Sniffle. “No, it’s not,” Charlie said, once again shaking her head frantically as Aidan reached for the forceps.

“No, no, no, no, wait! I can’t do this!” she said, trying to pull her foot away only there was nowhere to go.

“I have to take the glass out, Charlie. I’m sorry,” Aidan said as he carefully wrapped his hand around her foot and-

“Oh, shit...”

“Oh, my god! Oh, my god! Oh, my god!” Charlie mumbled frantically as she watched Aidan pull a large piece of glass from her foot and placed it in a small metal basin on the tray next to him.

“Okay, that’s it, right?” Charlie said, sounding hopeful only to start rambling again when Aidan went back for more.

“Don’t look at him,” Devin said, trying not to wince when Aidan dropped another large piece of glass in the basin.

“T-Tell him to stop,” Charlie mumbled, sounding terrified.

Biting back a sigh, Devin pulled his arm free so that he could reach up and cup her face, pulling her focus to him. “It’s almost over, Charlie,” he whispered, gently

caressing her jaw as he looked down into her beautiful blue eyes.

Shaking her head, she said, “No, it’s not.”

God, she was beautiful, Devin thought as he traced his fingertips along her cheek and-

“You want the bear, don’t you?” he found himself asking when Charlie worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

With a nod and a sniffle, she said, “I really do.”

## Chapter 9

“You’re dead to me,” Charlie said, crossing her arms over her chest as she pointedly looked away from the man that she was no longer speaking to.

There was a heavy sigh that she really didn’t appreciate at the moment and then...

“I have to go to work,” Ben said, walking around the bed only to grumble something that she chose to ignore as he turned around and walked back the way he came when she turned her head again, deciding that he deserved nothing less for what he put her through yesterday.

“Come on, don’t be like that, Charlie. I said I was sorry,” he said, sighing when she turned her head so that she could narrow her eyes on him.

“Oh, I must have missed that. Was that before or after you ran out of the hospital yelling ‘Good luck!’?” she demanded, shaking her head in disgust.

“I don’t understand why you’re mad. I waited until you passed out before I left,” Ben

said with a helpless shrug as though she hadn't just disowned him and dropped a white bakery bag on her lap as though that would somehow make up for this latest betrayal.

"They were sewing me up, you jackass!" Charlie said, grabbing the bakery bag and went to toss it at him only to decide to hold off on doing that until after she found out what was in the bag.

"And watching you go through that was just too much for me to take because I love you so much. Doesn't that mean anything?" Ben asked with a heartfelt sigh as she opened the bag and noted that the cheap bastard only brought her one jelly donut.

"No, it doesn't," Charlie said, pulling the small donut out of the bag and taking a bite while she sat there, glaring at him.

"Would it make you feel better if I promised to swing by and check on you at lunchtime?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

She considered him as she took a bite of the donut that tasted a little stale. "Do you actually plan on coming back here at lunchtime or are you hoping that I'll forgive you and forget your promise when you don't show up later?"

Looking thoughtful, Ben said, "The second one."

"I should have pushed you off that swing when I had the chance," Charlie mumbled bitterly as she took another bite of her donut and was forced to bite back a wince when the move somehow caused her foot currently wrapped in gauze to brush the wrong way against the stack of pillows that it was currently propped on.

"I would have just told Grammy Bea on you," he said, shrugging it off and making her eyes narrow on him.



“She never would have believed you,” Charlie pointed out as she popped the last bite in her mouth.

“She really would have though since I was her favorite.”

Eyes narrowing dangerously on the man that had been there for her since she was five years old, she said, “Is that really what you think?”

“It’s what I know,” Ben said, nodding as he stood up and gestured towards her foot. “Do you need anything before I go?”

“You’re really going to leave me like this?” Charlie asked, worrying her bottom lip as she did her best to look pathetic.

For a moment, Ben stood there, looking torn, and then...

“Yes, yes, I am,” he said, shrugging it off as he reached for the crutches the emergency room had sent her home with and placed them closer to her bed with a satisfied sigh.

“This is why I hate you,” Charlie said, returning to glaring while she watched as he pushed the bottle of water on her nightstand a few inches closer.

“What are you talking about? I’m making sure that you have everything that you need,” Ben said, gesturing between the remote on the bed next to her and the bottle of water.

“What if I have to use the bathroom?” she asked, narrowing her eyes on him.

“It’s only a few feet away,” Ben said, gesturing absently towards the bathroom that had taken her fifteen minutes to get to this morning.

“Food?”

“What the hell are you talking about? I just fed you,” Ben demanded, gesturing towards the empty bakery bag by her side.

“I took better care of you after you had your tonsils taken out,” she pointed out with a glare.

“You’re really going to compare that to this? I could have died!”

“You had a mild case of tonsillitis. They only took them out to get you to stop bitching,” Charlie reminded him.

“That’s what they told you so that you wouldn’t worry.”

“You can leave now,” Charlie said, nodding slowly as she gestured for him to get out.

“I’ll check on you later,” Ben promised as he reached over and pushed the bottle of water a tiny bit closer.

“We won’t be speaking later if you go out that door, Benjamin Lopez,” Charlie said, watching as he headed towards the door.

“I’ll see you later, Charlie Marshall,” he said mockingly with a chuckle that she did not appreciate, not at all.

“You’re dead to me!”

“I love you, too!” he called back as he closed the door behind him, leaving her sitting there, seething with righteous anger.

Definitely should have pushed him off that swing, Charlie thought, continuing to glare at her front door as she absently reached over for her bottle of water only to accidentally knock it to the floor.

“Damn it,” she said, sighing heavily as she sat there, debating leaving it but...

The fridge was way too far to get to right now, Charlie realized as she carefully shifted closer to the edge of the bed with a pained wince when the move caused her stitches to pull. Closing her eyes, she slowly exhaled as she waited for the pain to go away, only to feel her shoulders sag in defeat when the pain doubled.

Great.

She should have taken an Advil when she had a chance, Charlie thought as she opened her eyes and found herself wondering what Devin was doing here since he'd left for work over an hour ago. That led to her wondering what was in the small white bakery bag he'd placed on the bed next to her. Curious, she picked up the bag and looked inside, noting that there were two very large jelly donuts waiting for her attention.

Pleased with his offering, Charlie selected the plumper of the two donuts and took a small bite while she watched as Devin shifted the grocery bags in his arms so that he could lean over and pick up her bottle of water. Without a word, he placed it back on the nightstand before adding a second bottle of water and a small prescription bottle, which she assumed was the prescription of painkillers that she'd to

ld him that she didn't need last night.

That was followed by watching him walk over to her kitchen and setting aside the moving boxes that she hadn't had a chance to unpack yet so that he could put away the food that he'd picked up for her. Once that was done, Devin grabbed one of the

rolls of gauze that his cousin had given them last night and walked back over and sat down on the edge of her bed. She nibbled on the incredibly delicious donut as she watched him unwrap the gauze on her foot and inspect her stitches before carefully rolling the new roll of gauze around her foot.

Once that was done, he asked, “Do you need anything else?” while she sat there, considering the large man glaring at her as she continued to nibble on her donut and decided that there were one or two things that she could probably use a hand with since he was offering and all.

## Chapter 10

“This isn’t what I had in mind when I asked if you needed anything else,” Devin bit out as he stood there, rubbing his trembling hands down his face as he struggled to figure out how this happened.

“Which is why I really appreciate it,” came the mumbled response from the woman currently stripping naked on the other side of the black shower curtain.

He should have kept his big fucking mouth shut, Devin thought as he watched helplessly as she tossed her shirt through the small gap between the shower curtain and the wall seconds before the light gray shorts that she’d been wearing joined the shirt.

“Can I ask you something?” the reason that he was on the verge of losing his fucking mind asked as the last item was thrown through the small opening, forcing him to reach back and grab hold of the bathroom counter before his legs gave out.

“No,” he bit out as he tried to get the image of her white panties on the bathroom floor out of his mind.

God, he really couldn't fucking take much more of this.

"Fair enough," Charlie murmured as she carefully slid her legs beneath the curtain and onto the stack of towels that he'd placed on the floor so that her stitches stayed dry while she took a shower.

Just when he felt himself relax, she said, "I'm ready!"

Sighing heavily, Devin released the counter and reached inside the shower so that he could turn the water on for her.

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“Cold!” came the gasped response that had him cursing under his breath as he quickly turned the knob until he heard, “That’s good.”

Deciding that he’d tortured himself enough for one day, Devin headed towards the door and-

“Why do you hate me?” came the question that had him rubbing his trembling hands down his face with a humorless laugh because god, he really fucking wished that he could hate her. It would make his life easier if he could hate her that way he wouldn’t find himself thinking about her every fucking minute of the day.

“I don’t hate you,” Devin said, dropping his hands away as Charlie murmured, “No, of course, you don’t.”

“I don’t,” he bit out evenly.

“And I totally believe you,” Charlie said, making him narrow his eyes on the shower curtain.

“I don’t.”

“Then explain the glaring,” she said, sounding curious.

“I don’t glare,” he said, narrowing his eyes in her direction.

“Uh-huh,” she murmured slowly before asking, “And my office?”

“What about it?” Devin asked, deciding that it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to tell her the truth.

“Just wondering if there was a reason behind my banishment, that’s all,” Charlie said as she began wiggling the toes on her good foot.

“I didn’t banish you.”

“Then what would you call it?”

Salvaging as much of his fucking sanity as he could.

“Giving you a bigger office,” he said, using the excuse that he’d come up with at the time.

“And avoiding me at work?”

“I wasn’t avoiding you,” he lied.

“Really? Then why do you have T.J. deal with me whenever you need something, but you don’t do that with anyone else?”

“Shouldn’t Ben be here taking care of you?” Devin asked, hoping to change the subject.

“He really should,” Charlie murmured in agreement before asking, “Can I ask you something else?”

“No. Why isn’t Ben here?”

“We do not speak his name,” Charlie said with a snuffle.

“Why is that?” he asked, settling back against the counter as he watched her continue to wiggle her toes and couldn’t help but find the move endearing.

“He’s dead to me.”

“Is that why he’s not here?”

There was a long-suffering sigh and then, “He had to go to work.”

“I see,” he murmured, “and exactly how were you planning on getting around today?”

“I felt that it was in my best interest to move as little as possible today,” came the reply that had him biting back a sigh.

“And how was that working out for you?” Devin asked as he pulled his phone out of his back pocket to let T.J. know that he was going to be working from home today since Charlie didn’t have anyone to help her.

“Can’t complain,” she said, making his lips twitch.

“How’s your foot?” he absently asked as he sent T.J. a text of everything that he needed done today.

“It’s fine,” Charlie mumbled after a slight pause that had him glancing up from his phone to narrow his eyes on the shower curtain as he asked, “Are you lying to me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want a painkiller?”



Sniffle.

“Yes, I believe that would be lovely, thank you,” Charlie murmured as he left the bathroom, grateful for the small reprieve.

He walked into the living room and once again found himself wondering why she wasn’t sleeping in the bedroom. It was definitely big enough, Devin thought grabbing the small prescription bottle off her nightstand as he found his attention on the half-opened bedroom door as he headed back into the bathroom.

“Why aren’t you using your bedroom?” Devin asked as he placed the bottle of painkillers on the bathroom counter.

“I’m using it for my office,” the woman that was driving him out of his fucking mind said.

“What was wrong with your last apartment?” he asked, folding his arms over his chest as he leaned back against the bathroom counter while he waited for her to finish her shower.

“Nothing,” she said with a sad sigh.

“Then why did you move?” Devin asked, deciding to use this opportunity to find out a few things about the woman that he thought about more than he should.

“I’m trying to cut down on my monthly expenses,” she said while he stood there frowning.

“Are you having problems?” he asked, already reaching for his phone so that he could send her Christmas bonus early when she said, “No, I’m just trying to save money. Can I ask you something?”

“No,” Devin said, moving to fold his arms back over his chest only to drop his head back with a sigh when she asked him anyway.

“I think I figured out why you hate me,” she said, not asked, he noted as he reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a migraine coming on.

“I don’t hate you,” he said, again.

“I have a theory,” she announced.

“And I can’t wait to hear it,” he drawled, dropping his hand away to look over his shoulder to see if she had any Advil so that he could-

“You’re in love with me,” Charlie announced, making everything in him go still.

“What?” he asked hoarsely as he slowly turned his head to stare at the shower curtain.

“Shhh, it’s okay. There’s no shame in your feelings. I have this effect on men. They just can’t seem to help themselves. God, why did I have to be this irresistible?” she asked with a long-suffering sigh, making his eyes narrow in the little brat’s direction as he reached over, turned the sink on, and-

“Cold!”

## Chapter 11

“Are you still mad?” Charlie asked the large man double-checking her bandage to make sure that she didn’t get it wet with clipped movements as that muscle in his jaw clenched again. “Because you look mad.”

When Devin didn’t say anything, she decided that it would probably be a good time

to stop talking. Well, that and the fact that she was close to crying. God, her foot really hurt, Charlie thought as she carefully rolled over onto her side, shifting her injured foot so that it was resting on her other foot. She slowly exhaled as she slid her trembling hand under her pillow and grabbed hold of the sheet while she took a shaky breath.

Knowing just how close she was to crying, Charlie said, “Thank you for helping me,” hoping that he would take that as the excuse that he needed to leave so that she could-

“God, you really are a pain in the ass,” Devin said, not really sounding all that happy about something that Ben learned to accept when they were little as she watched him leave.

“What are you doing?” she couldn’t help but ask a few seconds later when he walked back into her apartment carrying a chair.

“You should have been more careful,” Devin said, sounding pissed as he placed the chair next to her bed, sat down, and glared as he reached over and pulled her hand free so that he could wrap his hand around it.

“Didn’t exactly do this on purpose,” Charlie said, squeezing his hand as she tried to breathe through the pain, wondering when that painkiller that he’d forced her to take was going to finally kick in and put her out of her misery.

There was a pause and then...

“Why did you do it?” he asked, sounding curious as he absently ran his thumb over the back of her hand.

“Do what?” Charlie absently asked, wondering if he had any idea just how good his touch felt.

“The glass. Why did you do that for Dustin?”

“Why wouldn’t I do that for him? He’s my B.F.F.,” Charlie said, watching as his lips twitched.

“I had noticed that you’ve stolen my son,” Devin said, chuckling as she closed her eyes even as she had to admit that he had an incredibly sexy smile.

## Page 12

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“He’s everything that I could ask for in a B.F.F.,” Charlie murmured sleepily, noting that the pill was finally starting to work.

There was a pause and then, “What about Ben?”

“Shhh, we do not speak his name,” she whispered softly.

“I see and how long have you and he who must not be named been friends?” he asked, making her lips twitch.

“Since we were five and we decided to run away,” Charlie mumbled around a yawn.

“Run away from what?” Devin asked, continuing to gently caress her hand.

“Our evil foster mom,” she said, unable to help but smile for poor Mrs. Manford, who’d had no idea what she’d gotten herself into by taking them both in.

“You grew up in foster care?” came the curious question.

“Sort of,” Charlie said, smiling as she explained, “We were both placed in this foster home with this woman that didn’t know what she was getting into when she agreed to take both of us in. It was Christmas time and she didn’t have a Christmas tree, so we took it upon ourselves to go find one during a blizzard.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” he drawled as she felt his hand tighten around hers. “What happened?”

“Well, we made it all the way across the street before we realized that it was too cold to find a Christmas tree in our pajamas. That was followed by deciding that it was too late to turn back and that we were going to have to live the rest of our lives in an igloo. But, thankfully, Grandma Bea spotted us trying to build an igloo in her front yard and decided that it would probably be for the best if she took us inside before we froze to death.”

“How did your foster mom handle it when she realized that you were gone?”

“She may have umm, had a nervous breakdown for which we apologized once the paramedics assured us that she couldn’t break out of her restraints,” Charlie explained, really thankful that the EMTs had doubled the restraints since Mrs. Manford had seemed determined to wring their necks for scaring the hell out of her.

Not that Charlie blamed her, because she really couldn’t.

“And Grandma Bea...”

“Was a retired high school principal as it turned out who had a soft spot for troublemakers. After she got us cleaned up, she sat us down with some hot cocoa and some sugar cookies and explained how important it was to follow the rules. That was followed by us explaining that having a Christmas tree was a rule. After a brief glaring match, she went into her garage and started pulling out the fake Christmas tree that she hadn’t put up in years along with all the decorations that she could find before she finally gave up and dragged everything inside. That was followed by us making a huge mess decorating her living room while she made us a fresh batch of sugar cookies so that we could have something to leave for Santa Claus.”

“And after that?”

“She didn’t have any choice but to keep us,” Charlie said, unable to help but smile as

she thought of Grandma Bea. She'd been the closest thing that Charlie had to a mother, her best friend, and there wasn't a day that went by that she didn't miss her.

"What happened to your parents?" Devin asked the question that she'd been wondering about most of her life.

"I don't know," she said, shrugging it off. "My mother ran away when she was fifteen and five years later, I was dropped off on my grandfather's doorstep in the middle of the night. He took really good care of me, but it was too much for him. He ended up having a heart attack when I was three and had to put me in foster care. He tried to find my mother, hoping that she would come and take care of me, but they couldn't find her."

"I'm sorry, Charlie," Devin said, giving her hand a comforting squeeze.

"Don't be. I had a wonderful childhood and grew up with my best friend," Charlie said as she found herself wondering about something, but...

It was none of her business.

"Their mother's name is Heather," Devin said, correctly guessing where her thoughts had gone. It was something that she'd been wondering about for a while now. Granted, everyone at work was wondering the same thing, but as far as she knew, nobody had asked.

"What happened to her?" she asked, opening her eyes to find Devin watching her.

"Nothing," he murmured with a slight shake of his head.

"Then where is she?" Charlie asked, wondering why the kids never mentioned her or why there weren't any pictures of her around the house.

“When she found out that she was pregnant, she was twenty-four years old, in her second year of law school, and wasn’t ready to have children, but I was. She knew how much I wanted them and that I would love them more than anything. I thought that she would change her mind when the twins were born, but she’d made her peace with waiting until she started her career before having a family.”

“Are you mad at her?” Charlie asked, worrying her bottom lip as she thought about Dustin and Abbi growing up without a mother.

“Not even a little bit,” Devin said with a warm smile.

“Does she ever see the kids?”

“No, they don’t see Heather as their mother. They see her as the wonderful woman that made it possible for us to be a family,” he said, shaking his head ruefully as he watched his thumb slowly move over the back of her hand as she felt her eyes starting to close again and-

“I’m hungry,” came the softly spoken announcement that had Charlie opening her eyes and wondering what she was doing in Devin’s living room as she looked over to her right to find Dustin once again in his tighty-whities, sitting on the other part of the sectional couch, hugging the teddy bear that he’d given her in one arm while he took his time coloring the large coloring book on his lap.

“How did I get out here?” Charlie asked, rubbing her hands down her face as she struggled to wake up and make sense out of what was going on. The last thing that she remembered was lying on her bed, waiting for the painkiller to kick in.

“Daddy brought you out here so that we could keep an eye on you,” Abbi said, drawing her attention to find the little girl who really seemed to enjoy tormenting her father, sitting at the end of the couch on the other side of the stack of pillows where



Charlie's foot was propped up next to two large booted feet that definitely weren't hers and neither was that hand gently caressing her stomach.

"You were crying in your sleep," Dustin said.

"What?" Charlie asked as she slowly tilted her head back to find Devin watching her.

"Daddy got really upset because you wouldn't stop crying. We tried waking you up, but you kept crying. The only thing that helped was when Daddy held you," Dustin explained while Charlie laid there, unable to look away as Devin watched her through blue eyes that looked green from this angle. Without a word, he continued absently caressing her stomach as she realized just how much she liked being in his arms.

## Chapter 12

"But, Daddy-"

"I said no," Devin said quietly as he leaned over and kissed his baby girl's wet forehead as she sat there, doing her best to look sad.

"I have all this love to give and nobody to give it to," Abbi said with a helpless shrug and a sad shake of her head as she focused her attention on the rubber ducky floating past her.

"You have me," he pointed out as he slowly poured water over her head, careful not to get any in her eyes as he rinsed her hair.

"I need more, Daddy. I need fluffiness," Abbi said, nodding solemnly as she tilted her head back.

Chuckling, he said, "You're not getting a dog."

“What about a cat?”

“No.”

“A horse?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” she asked, looking really fucking hopeful.

“No,” Devin said, chuckling as he finished rinsing her hair while Abbi sat there, glaring at him.

“I will not forget this moment,” his baby girl warned him as she gestured for him to finish rinsing her hair

.

“I’m sure you won’t,” Devin murmured, unable to help but smile.

“I won’t,” Abbi vowed with a firm nod.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you that I loved you?” Devin asked as he reached over and pulled the drain up.

“Only if you said it with fluffiness,” Abbi said with a long-suffering sigh as she grabbed hold of the side of the tub and stood up before gesturing towards her Mickey Mouse towel neatly folded on the small cabinet next to him with a heavily sighed, “You may dry me off.”

“You’re too good to me,” he drawled as he grabbed her towel.

“I know, Daddy,” Abbi said, raising her arms so that he could wrap the towel around her.

“How about this? You finish getting ready for bed so that I can get some work done and I’ll consider taking you to the zoo this weekend. Deal?” Devin asked as he picked her up and carried her out of the bathroom.

“Can Charlie come?” Abbi asked, sounding thoughtful as Devin carried her into her room and placed her on her bed.

“You really like Charlie, don’t you?” he asked as he grabbed her comb off her nightstand.

Nodding, Abbi said, “We’ve decided to keep her.”

“And why’s that?” Devin absently asked as he carefully began working the comb through her hair.

“She’s very nice,” Abbi said, nodding.

“Yes, she is,” Devin easily agreed, because Charlie was incredibly sweet, kind, and had felt so damn good in his arms today.

Too damn good...

It had been a long time since he'd held a woman, but he couldn't remember a woman ever feeling that good before. The last time that he'd held a woman had been when Heather agreed to have the baby. He'd taken her in his arms and promised her that everything would be okay. It had also been the last time that he'd touched her other than holding her hand when the twins were born. By some unspoken agreement, they'd decided to end things after two years.

Once the twins were born, Heather moved to New York to finish law school and he'd decided to focus on the only thing that mattered to him, his children. He'd focused on taking care of them and making sure that they knew that they were loved and-

"She makes you smile, Daddy," Abbi said as he finished combing her hair.

"You make me smile," Devin said, leaning in to kiss the tip of her nose.

"But you always look sad, Daddy," Abbi said, worrying her bottom lip.

"I'm not sad, sweetheart," he promised her as he reached for his old Bradford Construction tee-shirt that she liked sleeping in.

"Not when Charlie's around," she said with a firm nod.

Sighing, Devin asked, "And what do I look like when Charlie's around?"

"Happy," Abbi said as he pulled the tee-shirt over her head.

“You and your brother make me happy,” he said, hating himself because that should be enough.

“You know what would make me happy, Daddy?” Abbi asked as he picked up the Disney princess panties that he’d had to go to six different stores to find for her and helped her pull them on.

Eyes narrowing on the devious little girl that owned half his heart, he said, “You’re not getting a puppy.”

“I need some fluffiness in my life, Daddy,” Abbi said as she climbed under the covers.

“You need to go to sleep. You have school in the morning,” he told her with a mock glare as he tucked her in.

“I’d sleep better with fluffiness, Daddy,” she said, nodding solemnly as Devin began the five-minute process of checking her room for monsters.

“Would you sleep better if I promised to let you feed the baby goats this weekend?” he asked, turning on her nightlight before he shut off her bedroom light.

“That might help,” Abbi murmured, making him chuckle as he leaned down and kissed her cheek. “I love you.”

“And...” she said, stretching out the word.

“And your room is monster-free,” he promised her as he gave her one last kiss before he stood up.

With a satisfied sigh, Abbi rolled over onto her side and said, “Goodnight, Daddy.”

“Goodnight, baby girl,” Devin said, closing her bedroom door behind him and headed to the room next to hers to find Dustin fast asleep, curled up in his bed with the teddy bear that he bought for Charlie in his arms.

Speaking of Charlie...

He had no idea what he was going to do about her.

The only thing that he knew was that he couldn't regret letting her move in, not when she made the twins happy. When he'd put the ad online for the in-law apartment, he'd hoped to find someone nice who could help out with the twins, but what he got was so much more. Charlie was great with the kids.

What she did for Dustin...

He still couldn't get the image of Charlie climbing off that chair and stepping on that glass to make sure that Dustin was okay out of his head. She was so much more than he'd thought, Devin decided as he headed downstairs and sighed when he didn't find her where he'd left her. She was so fucking stubborn, Devin thought as he headed towards the apartment door that she'd started leaving open at night for the twins and found her slowly hobbling towards the kitchen, gasping in pain as she used the wall to help her. When she reached the corner, she took a fortifying breath, slowly exhaled, and-

“Have you always been this much of a pain in the ass?” Devin asked as he picked her up and carried her the rest of the way into the kitchen so that he could place her on the kitchen island.

“Yes,” Charlie said with a wince as he leaned down so that he could check her foot to make sure that she hadn't torn her stitches.

“What are you doing off the couch?” he asked, readjusting the gauze so that it covered her stitches.

“Making banana bread,” Charlie said, gesturing to the sink next to her.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” he reminded her as he obediently washed his hands.

“I’m supposed to be making banana bread,” she said, gesturing towards the bananas on the counter.

“Why’s that?” Devin asked as he grabbed the bananas and placed them next to her.

“Because I promised the kids that I would make them banana bread for breakfast,” Charlie said, reaching over to grab two large mixing bowls out of the strainer before gesturing to the bread on the counter behind him.

Frowning, Devin grabbed the bread and-

“I need milk, sour cream, eggs, cheese, ham, mayonnaise, and mustard,” she said, only to add, “I’m starving,” at his questioning look.

Narrowing his eyes on her, Devin grabbed everything she wanted and placed it on the counter next to her. “I made you dinner,” he reminded her.

“And it was delicious,” the woman that had barely touched her dinner said, nodding solemnly as she reached over and grabbed a plate out of the dish rack and started making a sandwich.

“Is that why you didn’t eat it?” Devin asked, narrowing his eyes on the woman that he’d suspected had fallen asleep on purpose to avoid eating the dinner he’d made.

“That’s exactly it. I was intimidated by its deliciousness,” Charlie said, nodding as she plucked a butter knife out of the strainer.

“It was healthy,” he pointed out defensively as she spread mayonnaise on a slice of bread.

“Yes, it definitely was,” she murmured, her lips twitching with amusement as she finished making her sandwich and cut it in half.

“What was wrong with what I made?” he demanded with a glare, because there was nothing wrong with what he’d made for dinner. It had been fucking delicious.

“Besides the fact that you really made a casserole out of lima beans?” Charlie asked as she handed him half of her sandwich.

“Yes,” he bit out as he took a bite.

She shrugged with a mumbled, “You try too hard,” as she took a bite of her sandwich and before he could ask what she was talking about, she added, “I’ve decided that we’re going to b

e best friends.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you need me,” Charlie said and he couldn’t help but wonder if she had any idea just how much.

Chapter 13

“Pleeease!”



“No,” came the firm answer that had Charlie wondering why he was being so difficult about this.

“If you do this for me, I swear that I will never ask you for another thing,” she promised him as she shifted to get more comfortable on her front step only to rethink the move when the back of her foot accidentally brushed against the unforgiving walkway.

“Not fucking happening,” her newest best friend said, making her sigh.

Why must he be so difficult?

“Aw, come on, don’t be like that,” Charlie said as she absently reached down to adjust the gauze and debated trying to do this on her own, but...

She didn’t think it was a good idea, especially not after the incident this morning when she’d tried to use her crutches to get to the bathroom.

“You’re supposed to be resting.”

“And I fully plan on doing that, but first we need to decorate,” Charlie said with a hopeful smile as she reached over and picked up the giant spider that would look really good hanging from the tree by the driveway.

Narrowing his eyes on her, Devin folded his arms over his chest and shook his head, once.

“Think about how happy the kids will be when they see that we decorated the house,” Charlie said, gesturing towards the bins filled with Halloween decorations that she’d been hoarding since she was eighteen.

She loved holidays.

Every. Single. One. Of. Them.

She loved traditions, decorations, family gatherings, parties, and everything that they entailed. When she was little, she used to have to wait exactly twenty-five days before any given holiday before she was allowed to discuss her plans for the sake of Grandma Bea's sanity. It was a rule that Ben demanded that they continue following after Grandma Bea passed away. Not that she could blame him, Charlie thought even as she couldn't help but notice that the inflatable gingerbread house that she'd been eyeing for the past few years would look great in this yard.

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When he only stood there, glaring at her, she said, “Pretty please!”

With a sigh and a muttered, “God, you’re a pain in the ass,” Devin grabbed the spider and headed towards the maple tree only to sigh and head towards the oak tree when she shook her head since she planned on hanging a ghost from the maple tree.

“I really am,” Charlie said, reaching over and pulling the bin filled with gravestones closer.

“Can I ask you something?” Devin asked as he tossed the black rope over a branch and tied it off.

“Will you set up the cemetery if I say yes?” Charlie asked, because she wanted to ensure that the cemetery was set up otherwise she wouldn’t have anywhere to put the zombies that she bought at a yard sale last year.

Sighing, he walked over and grabbed the bin of gravestones and-

“Why were you crying in your sleep?” Devin asked as he set the bin down and grabbed the largest headstone.

Slowly exhaling, Charlie shook her head as she admitted, “I don’t know. I never remember why.”

“How long has this been going on?” Devin asked, glancing up at her as he set the gravestone in place and grabbed another one.

“Since I was little,” she said, shrugging it off.

It used to upset Grandma Bea and Ben, but they’d eventually stopped worrying about her. At least, they’d stopped letting her know that they were worried, but she saw it on their faces in the morning, the way they watched her, the forced smiles, and the extra hugs to go along with her favorite breakfast, silver-dollar pancakes. It hadn’t taken long before she’d started hating waking up to the scent of maple syrup.

“Does anything help?” Devin asked, glancing up at her as he grabbed another headstone.

“No.”

At least, not until yesterday, Charlie thought as she watched him. Devin Bradford was an incredibly handsome man. There was no denying that, but up until yesterday, she’d never realized just how much she liked him. She’d always known that he was a good father and a decent boss, but that was all she knew about him. Then yesterday, she’d realized just how good it felt to be in his arms. She liked the way that he’d held her, the way that he’d touched her, but it was the way that he looked at her that had her realizing that...

She didn’t need another complication in her life.

Not now when she was finally trying to stop making excuses and get her business going. It was going to be hard enough when it was time to tell him that she was leaving Bradford Creations, she didn’t want to make things more difficult. The problem was, she really liked him and she loved his kids. Her only hope was that she didn’t lose them when this was all over.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

“Tell me again why we’re doing this,” Devin said, looking from the television where a werewolf was tearing apart another unsuspecting camper down to the small woman sitting next to him with her hands pressed over her face and-

“Tradition,” was all she said before she released what sounded like a whimper, turned towards him so that she could carefully throw her legs over his lap, and pressed her face against his arm with another whimper.

“I see,” he murmured, placing his arm over her legs as he leaned forward, careful not to dislodge the small woman that had announced that they were having a horror movie marathon when he came back home after dropping the kids off at school, and helped himself to the bowl of Halloween candy that she’d put out.

“You can’t have Halloween without a horror movie marathon,” Charlie said as she gave up trying to cover her eyes so that she could wrap her arms around his and hold on tightly as the sounds of growls filled the room.

“It’s not Halloween yet,” he pointed out around a handful of M&Ms as the high school jock being ripped apart by a pack of werewolves released a bloodcurdling scream.

“Close enough,” she mumbled against his arm.

“And you do this every year?” Devin couldn’t help but wonder.

Nodding, Charlie said, “Every year since I turned twelve.”

“And before that?”

“Grandma Bea banned me from watching anything that could give me nightmares,” she mumbled, releasing her hold on his arm so that she could blindly reach back, grab

hold of the Mickey Mouse blanket that Dustin left on the couch and pulled it over her head.

“And she changed her mind when you were twelve because...”

“Because I promised that she wouldn’t find me hiding under her bed at two in the morning again if she did,” Charlie said, wrapping her arm back around his.

“And did she?” Devin asked, resting his other hand on her ankles.

“No, I kept my promise. She found me at one in the morning instead,” she mumbled against his arm, making him chuckle as he absently ran his thumb over her ankle.

“And you loved being scared so much that you decided that it was a good idea to continue the tradition?” Devin asked as he settled back against the couch with a heavy sigh as he resigned himself to spending the day watching shitty horror movies.

“Yes, I did,” Charlie said, reaching up to pull the blanket back up when it began sliding down, threatening to expose her to the horror movie that she’d picked out.

“Have you ever considered doing something else?” he asked, glancing at the woman curled up against him.

There was a heartfelt sigh and then, “I love traditions.”

“I can tell,” Devin said dryly.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

“I...” Charlie began to say but she was at a loss for words.

She closed her mouth, swallowed hard and watched as Devin continued destroying her will to live as he put the final touches on his pumpkin and-

“What are you doing?” she found herself asking, glancing from the man that kept her company all day while she’d secretly worked on her company that she really needed to come up with a name for and then to the pumpkin that he’d given two round eyes, a triangle nose, and a small, “O” for a mouth.

Frowning, he gestured to the pumpkin and said, “Decorating my pumpkin.”

“But we agreed on a scary theme,” Charlie pointed out.

“And he’s scared,” Devin said, nodding as he tossed the marker on the table and sat back in his chair as he waited for the twins to finish drawing their designs on their pumpkins.

“I just feel like this is a cry for help,” Charlie murmured weakly as she once again found herself looking back at the large pumpkin with tiny eyes and-

“What the hell are you doing?” Devin asked when she stood up, careful of her foot, hobbled the short distance over to his chair, and sat down on his lap.

“Saving Halloween,” Charlie said as she picked up his discarded marker, pulled the cap off, and focused on giving the pumpkin a terrifying face worthy of Halloween while the man that had drawn the saddest pumpkin that she’d ever seen sighed as he put his arm around her.

“It wasn’t that bad,” he said, only to grumble something when Dustin said, “Yes, it was.”

“Fine. Then let me fix it,” Devin said, reaching to take the marker from her only to

drop his hand away when she blindly reached back and absently patted his face with a, “Shhhh, not while I’m working.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a controlling little thing?” Devin asked as he absently caressed her stomach through her shirt while she did her best to focus on the task at hand.

“I prefer holiday perfectionist,” Charlie said, biting her lip as she turned the sad “O” into a terrifying smile.

“And I prefer a pain in the a-” Devin started to say only to get cut off when she was once again forced to reach back and slap her hand over his mouth with another, “Shh, not while I’m working.”

## Chapter 14

“Oh, don’t forget my bag,” the woman that refused to listen to reason, said as he debated leaving her in the car for a few minutes while he ran inside to make sure that everything was ready, but...

He’d seen the way that she’d been eying the crutches in the backseat

since he managed to get her in the car. If she’d been anyone else, he would have simply helped her out of the car and handed her the crutches, but this was Charlie, who couldn’t seem to remember that she wasn’t supposed to put weight on her bad foot whenever she tried using them.

“And my cousin told you to stay off your feet,” Devin said as he placed her backpack on her lap, handed her the bag of donuts that he’d grabbed from Dixon’s Bakery, and-

“Don’t forget the pictures and the teddy bear!”



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-grabbed the items that she'd promised Dustin that she would take to work with her and picked her up before she could argue. Once he had her in his arms, Devin forced himself to ignore just how good she felt, kicked the passenger door shut and headed towards the back door of Bradford Creations.

"Devin, I can walk if you'd let me get the crutches so that I could-"

"Forget that you're not supposed to put weight on your foot and end up gasping for air, struggling not to cry while I lose my fucking mind trying to convince you to take a painkiller that you're too damn stubborn to take because it makes you sleepy," he drawled, watching as her eyes narrowed on him.

"We're no longer speaking," Charlie said, slowly nodding as she hugged all the shit in her arms against her chest and pointedly looked away while he shifted so that he could open the door and carry her inside.

"Wait. Where are we going?" the woman that could never seem to remember that she wasn't talking to him, asked as he carried her past the back stairs.

"To work," Devin said, making his way to his office.

"Umm, my office is upstairs," Charlie said, gesturing towards the back stairs.

"Not anymore," Devin said, still wondering if he was making a mistake by letting her come back to work this soon.

He'd given her two weeks off, but the incredibly fucking adorable woman that had

spent the last four days making it difficult to remember why he couldn't be with her had adamantly refused to stay home one more day. She wanted to come back to work and no matter what he said, Devin couldn't convince her to wait until her foot was better.

"Wait. What are you talking about?" Charlie asked, throwing a wistful glance over her shoulder towards the stairs that there was no way in hell that she would be able to navigate right now.

"We compromised," Devin said as he pushed his office door open and carried her inside, careful of all the boxes filled with her things that T.J. packed and brought downstairs for her.

"We did?" Charlie asked as she glanced around their office, taking in the other half of the room set up for the twins before shifting her attention to the two desks facing each other, her mini-fridge plugged in the corner, her computer and monitors that had been placed on her new desk, the boxes, large windows overlooking the workshop, and-

"This isn't going to work," Charlie said hollowly, staring at the large glass windows in horror.

"It's either this or go home," Devin told her because there was no way in hell that he was leaving her upstairs in that office all alone.

Worrying her bottom lip, Charlie glanced around the office again before looking at her new desk with a sadly mumbled, "That's not my desk."

"It's better," Devin said, deciding not to mention that he'd decided to take advantage of this situation and had T.J. grab a new desk from the storeroom for her.

"I love my desk," Charlie mumbled sadly as she shifted her attention to the windows

and back again before sighing, opening the white bakery bag that she'd somehow managed to hold on to and helped herself to a jelly donut with a dejected sigh as he stood there, holding her and wondering why she had to be so damn difficult.

"The new desk is better," he pointed out.

"No, it's not," Charlie mumbled around a bite of donut as she forced herself to look away from the desk that was fucking perfect and laid her head against his chest with another, "I love my desk."

"And you'll love this one once you get used to it. This one is brand new. There are no dents, dings, or scrapes," Devin said, moving to carry her over to her new desk when she mumbled, "The beanbag."

Biting back a sigh, he turned around and headed towards the play area. "Are you planning on pouting for the rest of the day?"

Sniffle. "Yes."

"You do realize that this only works on Ben, right?" he pointed out only to be met with another sniffle.

"I'm not putting that desk in my office, Charlie."

Nothing.

"I built that thing out of scrap wood to test a design. It was supposed to go in the trash," Devin explained to the small woman who thought she had him wrapped him around her little finger.

When she still didn't say anything, he narrowed his eyes on her. "I'm going to work."

Don't let me catch you moving from that spot," he said while she continued to nibble on her jelly donut with the saddest fucking sigh that wasn't going to work on him.

"I'm not kidding, Charlie. Don't leave that spot," Devin said one last time before he left, determined to focus on everything that he needed to do to catch up with the orders waiting for him and-

"Damn it," Devin sighed, shaking his head in disgust as he headed to the back stairs only to find T.J. waiting for him.

"Didn't like the desk, did she?" his best friend asked only to chuckle when Devin leveled a glare on him and headed upstairs to get the desk for the little brat.

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"Okay, this might have been a bad idea," Charlie finally admitted to herself as her grip tightened around the bookshelf while she slowly put her foot down and-

Quickly rethought that decision with a shaky breath when pain shot through her foot. It wasn't as bad as it was a few days ago, but it didn't feel great either. Slowly exhaling, she hugged her camera against her chest as she slowly slid her other hand along the edge of the bookshelf, raised her foot and-

"Yeah, that's not going to happen," Charlie mumbled, glancing over her shoulder to gauge the distance back to the beanbag before shifting her attention to the office door and-

"Oh, sorry, Charlie. I'm looking for Devin," Scott said as Charlie stood there, taking in the large man that was in charge of shipping and realized that she may have found a way to make this work.

“Could you grab that chair for me, please?” she asked with a hopeful smile and a slight gesture with the hand that held her camera towards Devin’s desk chair.

“Yeah, of course,” Scott said, quickly making his way over to Devin’s desk and grabbed hold of the large chair that looked really comfortable so that he could push it over to her and once she sat down...

“Any chance that you could push me out there?” Charlie asked even as she gestured towards the small bakery bag that she’d been forced to leave behind.

Frowning, Scott walked over to the beanbag and picked up the bag. “You’re not supposed to be in the shop,” he said, handing it to her.

“It will only be for a minute. I just need to get some pictures for the website,” Charlie said, already using her good foot to move her towards the office door.

“I-I don’t know about this.”

“I’ll be in and out. Devin will never find out,” she promised him as she pulled one of the delicious donuts that Devin bought for her out of the bag and took a bite.

“Devin doesn’t like anyone in the shop that doesn’t belong there,” he reminded her even as he grabbed hold of the chair and slowly pushed it the rest of the way as she picked up her feet.

“Which is why he won’t find out that I was here. I’ll be in and out before he knows it,” she promised him since she knew better than to let Devin catch her in the shop.

That was the reason why she always made sure to get here before Devin in the morning and the reason why she stayed late a few times a week. Devin didn’t play around when it came to safety. If you didn’t belong in the shop, he’d better not catch

you anywhere near it. If you w

orked upstairs, you were automatically banned from entering the shop and while she absolutely agreed with that rule, the problem was that she couldn't follow it.

Not if she wanted to be able to do her job.

That's why she came in early before the saws were turned on and took pictures, talked to T.J. to see what Devin wanted pushed, grabbed a few new pictures of anything that hadn't sold in the past week to see if she could give some attention on Facebook and Instagram, and got the hell out of there before Devin caught her. Normally, if she missed work, which wasn't often, she would wait for Devin to leave for the day before she came downstairs and got her pictures, but since that wasn't an option today...

She was going to have to risk it and hope that Devin took pity on her if he caught her.

"He's going to kill me," Scott said, cursing under his breath as he pushed her towards the latest creations.

"You'll be fine," Charlie murmured absently as she took a bite of her donut as she took in the selection in front of her, taking in every detail as she tried to decide which one she should feature on the website when a large tan hand grabbed hold of the armrest of her chair and slowly turned her so that she was facing Devin, who she'd like to point out looked really pissed as he leaned forward so that there was really no missing that fact.

When he continued to glare at her, she held up the last bite of jelly donut for him. "Look, I saved you the best bite," Charlie said with a hopeful smile. Narrowing his eyes on her, Devin leaned forward and took the last bite out of her hand with his teeth and finished it off all while glaring at her.

“I needed pictures for the website,” she pointed out, cleared her throat, and gestured towards all the beautiful furniture that his men had finished this week.

When he began pushing her back towards the office that he’d told her not to leave, she nervously licked her lips and said, “I was careful?”

When he continued to glare, she shifted nervously in her chair, somehow resisted the urge to look over her shoulder and said, “I still need pictures for the website,” which was met with a narrowing of his eyes and her decision to shut up.

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That was followed by pushing her inside his office, giving her a look that told her exactly what would happen if she left the office again before he left, closing the door behind him and leaving her sitting there, deciding that she'd ask him about the pictures later.

### Chapter 15

“Are we going to talk about it?” T.J. asked as Devin stood there, watching as Charlie smiled at something that Dustin was showing her while Abbi carried over another small box for Charlie so that she could unpack.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Devin said as he forced himself to look away and focus on the bureau that he was supposed to be building.

“You don’t think letting the woman that you’re in love with move in with you is something that we should discuss?” T.J. asked conversationally as Devin grabbed a piece of sandpaper and carefully ran it over the edge of the secret drawer that he was working on.

“Drop it,” Devin said as he found himself glancing towards his office again.

“Okay. Then maybe we should discuss moving her into your office?” T.J. asked as Devin double-checked the slot to make sure that the drawer was going to slide in correctly.

“She can’t get up the stairs by herself,” Devin pointed out, picking up the drawer and slid it inside the secret slot that he’d created between the top two drawers.



“True,” T.J. murmured, sounding thoughtful before he asked, “Do we need to finally have that talk?”

“And what talk would that be?” Devin absently asked as he double-checked the thin drawer before he focused on the latches that were going to make this work.

“The one where I tell you that you should cut yourself some slack and finally ask her out.”

“That’s not a choice and you know it,” Devin said, shaking his head as he grabbed the wooden latch that he’d carved last night off his workbench. Sighing heavily, he grabbed a screwdriver and knelt down in front of the bureau so that he could slide it inside its slot to make sure that it blended in well with the design before taking it back out.

“Why not?”

“You know why,” Devin said as he placed the small latch back on his workbench and reached for the small can of stain.

“The kids are older now and they seem to really love her,” T.J. pointed out.

“I made a promise,” Devin said, grabbing the rag and dipping it in the stain so that he could rub it over the latch, making sure that the entire latch was covered before carefully placing it aside to dry.

“And you’ve kept that promise, but I don’t think you realized what you’d be giving up when you made it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Devin said, because he’d made a promise to his children and he planned on keeping it.

His children came first.

End of story.

He didn't have time for the drama or bullshit that came with dating or having to worry about his children getting close to a woman only to have her suddenly disappear from their lives when things didn't work out. Besides, he had enough to deal with right now with work, the kids, and-

"Daddy!" Abbi said, sounding upset as she drew his attention to find her standing at the red line that he'd laid down across the floor when she was a toddler to keep her from entering the shop.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" Devin asked, wiping his hands clean on a rag as he headed towards his little girl to find out what had her so upset and-

"The mean lady hurt Charlie!"

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"I'm so sorry. It was an accident," Kelly said with a sympathetic wince as Charlie struggled to breathe through the pain as she pulled Dustin closer only to have him push her hands away and stand his ground as he glared up at Kelly.

"No, it wasn't," Dustin bit out as Charlie gave up trying to pull him closer and wrapped her arm around him.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it," Charlie managed to get out as she pulled Dustin closer, afraid that he was going to kick the woman who had "accidentally" kicked the bottom of her foot when she'd taken it upon herself to deliver the junk mail that had piled up in Charlie's mailbox over the past few days.

“I feel terrible about this,” Kelly said, moving to come closer only to step back when Dustin moved to stop her.

“It’s fine,” Charlie said, biting her lip to stop herself from crying.

“You kicked her! I saw you!” Dustin snapped, trying to push her arm away and leaving Charlie with no choice but to pull him onto her lap before he did something that got him in trouble.

“It was an accident. I didn’t see your foot,” Kelly said with a helpless shrug and since Charlie didn’t believe her, she simply said, “Don’t worry about it,” as she was forced to close her eyes and try to breathe through the pain.

God, this hurt, Charlie thought, slowly exhaling as more pain tore through her foot. A moment later, she felt Dustin pulled off her lap. Afraid that he was going to do something to make this worse, she opened her eyes in time to see Devin hand Dustin over to T.J. before crouching down in front of her and-

“Shhhh, it’s okay,” Devin said as she found herself reaching for him.

He had her in his arms and was pressing a kiss against her forehead before she managed to take her next breath. “What happened?” Devin asked as he carefully set her down on top of her desk.

“It was an accident. I heard Charlie was back and I wanted to see if she needed anything. I didn’t see her foot and I’m afraid that I might have accidentally kicked her,” Kelly explained, sounding a little distracted as she watched Devin step back from Charlie so that he could lean down and check her foot.

“No, it wasn’t!” Dustin snapped as Devin carefully moved the gauze wrapped around her foot aside and clenched his jaw tightly shut as he stared at the bottom of her foot.

“It’s fine,” Charlie said, slowly exhaling as she grabbed hold of the edge of the desk as she waited for the pain shooting through her foot to stop even as she couldn’t help but wonder if Kelly’s high heels were tipped with steel because, god, this really freaking hurt.

“I’m really sorry, Charlie,” Kelly said, worrying her bottom lip with a pitiful look aimed directly at Devin.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” Charlie said, really wishing that Kelly would just leave so that she could focus on getting through this without crying.

“What are you doing down here?” Devin asked Kelly as he carefully pulled the gauze back over Charlie’s stitches.

“I-I came downstairs to bring Charlie her mail,” Kelly mumbled, watching as Devin stood up and cupped Charlie’s face in his hands and kissed her forehead with a softly whispered, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Charlie promised him, forcing a smile as he pulled back just far enough to look into her eyes.

“You’re lying,” he said, sighing heavily as he dropped his hands away and-

“Wait. What are you doing?” she couldn’t help but ask when he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder as he shifted his attention to Kelly.

“I appreciate the gesture, but you’re not supposed to be down here. From now on, if you need something send an email, but I don’t want to see you down here again,” Devin said as he grabbed Charlie’s bag and handed it to T.J. before heading to the door.

“Devin?” Charlie said, trying not to panic as he headed towards the exit. “I have work to do.”

“You can do it from home.”

“I still need pictures for the website,” she reminded him as she tried to push herself up so that they could discuss this as he carried her through the door only to find Kelly pausing by the backstairs to glare at her.

Oh, that couldn’t be good, Charlie thought as she looked past the woman that looked like she wanted to kill her with her bare hands and found T.J. carrying a child under each arm as they watched Kelly’s every move.

“You can do it when you get back,” Devin said, drawing her attention back to the man carting her around like a sack of potatoes.

r /> “And when might that be?” Charlie couldn’t help but wonder only to groan when he muttered to himself, “Pain in the ass,” since that wasn’t exactly hope-inducing.

## Chapter 16

“I don’t think we should be doing this,” the incredibly beautiful woman that he’d finally managed to get alone, said even as she reached up and cupped the back of his neck so that she could pull him down for a kiss that had Aidan backing her into a corner so that he could reach down and-

“You’ve held him for ten minutes, woman! It’s my turn to hold him,” came the unwelcomed demand from the other side of the laundry room door that had them both sighing.

“I’m going to kill my brother,” Aidan said, brushing his lips against his wife’s one

last time before pulling away.

“That would probably be for the best,” Melanie agreed with a solemn nod while he took her hand in his, entwining their fingers as he pulled her towards the door and-

“Christopher Bradford, you give me back that precious baby right now!”

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-debating faking an emergency so that he could save them from three more hours of this.

“Get your own baby, woman,” came the response as Aidan opened the laundry room door to find his mother chasing his brother down the hallway.

He really wasn't looking forward to trying to get his son back, Aidan thought, only to grunt when his wife pulled him back into the laundry room and pushed him up against the wall. Before he could ask what she was doing, she was pulling him back down for another kiss and-

Tearing a groan from him when she cupped him through his pants. God, he loved this woman, Aidan thought as she rubbed her palm over him, teasing his cock as he slid his hand over her breast with a groan. When he felt her nimble fingers working his pants open, he released her breast so that he could pick her up and carry her over to the washer. He devoured her mouth as he slid his hands over her smooth legs, hooked his fingers in her panties, and worked them off before shoving them in his back pocket as she finished working his fly open.

In seconds, Melanie had her hand wrapped around his cock and was stroking him as he pulled her closer to the edge. She continued stroking him, running the tip between her legs and making him groan when he felt just how wet she was until he couldn't take anymore.

He pulled her off the washing machine, turned her around, and ripped a moan from his wife when he shoved her skirt over her ass and ran the tip of his cock between her legs, slowly tracing her wet slit as he slid his other hand beneath her shirt, running his

hand over her back. For several minutes, Aidan was content to stand there, teasing them both, but his wife had other plans.

Moaning his name, Melanie slowly pushed back, taking him inside her as he stood there, watching as his cock disappeared inside her. Groaning, Aidan leaned over and pressed a kiss against the back of her neck as he closed his eyes. He'd never get used to this, Aidan thought as he ran his hand down the middle of her back and around to the slight swell of her stomach.

"Is this okay?" Aidan asked against her neck.

"Perfect," she moaned as she placed her hand over his.

"God, I love you," Aidan groaned, placing his other hand on the washing machine near hers while he continued to slowly fuck her, knowing that they were going to have to start confining their activities to a bed soon.

For now, they were going to enjoy doing this every chance they got.

His grip tightened on the edge of the washer as he quickened his thrusts, pressing his lips against the back of her neck with a groan when he felt her walls tighten around him and squeezed him dry.

God, she fucking wrecked him, Aidan thought, trying to catch his breath while he helped her stand up. Without a word, she turned her head back for a kiss as he reached down and pushed his softening cock back in his boxers. Once he was done, he reached back and grabbed her panties out of his back pocket and handed them to her.

With a teasing smile, Melanie pulled her panties back on while he headed to the large sink that he'd installed after they'd bought the house and quickly washed his hands



only to get pushed aside so that his wife could do the same. With a mocking glare, Aidan grabbed a hand towel off the shelf and dried his hands as he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“You still owe me five things,” he said as he took her hand in his and headed for the door.

“And you still owe me pie,” his wife reminded him as Aidan opened the door and-

“What are you doing here?” he found himself asking when he spotted his sister leaning back against the wall, eating a bowl of their mother’s homemade macaroni and cheese.

“You mean besides pretending that I don’t know what just happened in there?” Kenzie asked, looking thoughtful as she gestured towards the laundry room behind them with her fork.

“Yes, besides that,” Aidan drawled, curious why she was here since she’d been going out of her way to avoid them since the baby shower. He had a few questions, more than a few questions about what happened, but he knew his sister well enough to know that if he started pushing for answers before she was ready that it wouldn’t end well.

“Didn’t want to miss this,” Kenzie said, shaking her head as she took another bite.

“Miss what?” Aidan asked, unable to help but frown.

“Devin’s here,” Kenzie announced with an unholy gleam in her eye.

Unable to help but frown, he said, “And?”

“And our dear, sweet cousin who swore off women until the twins were eighteen has brought one home to meet the family.”

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“I think I’m going to have to rethink my decision to be best friends,” Charlie said with a slow nod as she folded her arms over her chest.

“And I think I’m going to have to rethink my decision not to spank your ass,” Devin explained as he moved to shift her on his lap only to stop when she released a pained gasp and grabbed hold of the arm stopping her from escaping.

“Please don’t do that,” Charlie said, releasing a shaky breath as she closed her eyes.

“Do what?”

“Move,” she whispered hoarsely only to add, “It hurts when you move,” making him bite back a curse as he glanced back towards the hallway, wondering where the hell his cousin was.

Maybe he should have brought her to the emergency room...

“What are you doing?” Devin asked the woman who had finally given up trying to crawl off his lap a moment later as she reached back so that she could grab her iPad out of her bag, careful not to move her foot in any way.

“You mean besides ignoring you?” Charlie asked, carefully shifting to get more comfortable on his lap before settling back against him with a resigned sigh as she opened the calendar app on her iPad.

“Yes, besides that,” he said, trying to ignore just how much he liked having her in his

arms.

“I’m looking into conventions on social media and online marketing that I want to attend next year,” Charlie said as she swiped to another page.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked, unable to help but frown as he watched her work.

“So that I can do my job better,” Charlie explained as she opened Safari.

“And you need to attend conventions to do that?” Devin asked, relaxing his arm around her.

“Yes,” she said, tilting her head back so that she could look at him, blinking innocently as she asked, “Do I still need to go through T.J. to get my time off approved?”

Eyes narrowing on the little brat that was going to drive him to drink, Devin said, “Just tell me what days you need off.”

“Are you sure? Because I don’t mind going through T.J. if it makes this easier on you?”

He knew that he shouldn’t ask, but...

“Make what easier on me?”

“Your feelings for me,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head as she returned her attention to the iPad in her hands while he sat there, closing his eyes as he dropped his head back against the couch, because she was fucking

killing him.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” she whispered as she shifted only to stop with a pained gasp that had him opening his eyes only to find his cousins sitting across from him, watching him with shit-eating grins on their faces, and-

“I am so glad that I didn’t miss this,” Kenzie said, dropping down on the couch between her brothers with a satisfied sigh.

## Chapter 17

“Thank you for drugging me,” Charlie said as the drugs that the incredibly handsome doctor had given her began working, enveloping her in a warm haze and making it so that she no longer had to struggle not to cry.

“You’re welcome,” Aidan said, chuckling as he passed the platter of meatloaf to his brother Lucifer, who looked torn between fawning over his pregnant wife and tormenting Devin along with the rest of his family.

Except for Devin’s Aunt Mary that is, since she was currently sitting at the other end of the table smiling down at the baby in her arms. She only acknowledged their existence when someone asked to hold the baby, which was met with a murderous glare until they gave up and left her alone so that she could cuddle her grandson.

“So, tell us about yourself, Charlie,” Jason, Devin’s cousin who’d walked into the dining room and joined them a few minutes ago with a huge smile on his face, said with a heartfelt sigh as he propped his chin on his fists.

“I mean, other than the five years I spent in prison, there’s really not that much to tell,” she said with a sad shake of her head.

“Fascinating,” Jason murmured with a dreamy sigh before following that up with, “and how long have you known our little Devin here?”

“I’m going to kill you,” Devin said from her right, pausing as he scooped mashed potatoes onto plates for the twins to glare at his cousins.

“Probably,” Jason murmured absently as the rest of his family sat there, watching Devin with a predatory look of anticipation in their eyes that made Charlie feel right at home.

God, she loved family meals.

She'd always wished that Grandma Bea had been able to take in more children, but she'd had her hands full with the two of them. So, Charlie had been forced to torment Ben, which sometimes late at night when she couldn't fall asleep, she felt bad about, but then she would remember how much fun it had been and would fall asleep with a smile on her face.

She planned on having a large family one day, four, maybe five children, a dog, and a husband that loved them as much as she did. She was in no rush to start her dream family yet, but every now and then, she found herself wondering what it would be like to finally belong to a family of her own. She'd loved growing up with Grandma Bea and Ben, but it was...different. It was hard to explain especially since Grandma Bea had treated them like they'd belonged with her, but she'd always felt like a part of her was missing.

"Five years," Charlie said, pulling out the chair next to her and helping Dustin, who'd disappeared to play with the baby along with his sister when they got here, climb onto it.

"Five years..." Trevor, Devin's other cousin who'd showed up to torment him, repeated, letting his words trail off with a curious glance aimed at Devin.

"And how do you know our little Devin?" Kenzie, Devin's cousin and a woman who looked like she could hold her own with her brothers and cousins, asked as she reached over and-

“Please don’t make me hurt you,” Trevor said with a glare when she helped herself to the buttered biscuit on his plate. Without a word, Kenzie gestured towards the end of the table. Frowning, Trevor looked to his right to find Aidan and Lucifer watching his every move and looked like they were seconds away from tearing him apart.

With a resigned sigh, Trevor grabbed the other biscuit off his plate and placed it on Kenzie’s plate with a mumbled, “Brat,” before focusing his attention back on Charlie.

“You were saying,” Kenzie said around a mouthful of biscuit and a hopeful look.

“How long have I known Devin?” Charlie said as a small tan hand reached over and placed a biscuit slathered in butter and jelly on her plate.

“Mmmhmmm, and don’t leave out any details,” Jason said, gesturing for her to get on with it.

“We need details,” Rebecca said, nodding solemnly.

“We really do,” Melanie said, matching her best friend’s nod.

“She works for Daddy,” Abbi said from where she sat on the other side of Devin.

“This is true,” Charlie said, nodding solemnly as she picked up the biscuit that Dustin prepared for her and took a small bite.

“She’s my lady,” Dustin said around a mouthful of meatloaf.

“This is also true.” Charlie admitted.

“She’s a pain in the ass,” Devin added, which had her sighing even as she murmured with a reluctant nod, “This is also true.”

“What else can you tell us?” Melanie asked, looking hopeful.

“She lives with us,” Dustin said, nodding as he reached for the bowl of homemade macaroni and cheese.

“Technically, we’re neighbors,” Charlie said, bringing the bowl closer for him.

“I see...” Jason said, looking thoughtful as he looked from her to Devin and back again as his lips slowly pulled up into a pleased smile.

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“We need to talk,” Abbi announced as she walked into the bathroom and climbed into the tub with her brother.

“I see and what do we need to talk about?” Devin asked, biting back a sigh as he finished getting his son’s hair wet.

“Everything,” Abbi said with a firm nod while her brother handed her a rubber ducky.

“And what does this ‘everything’ entail?” Devin asked with a mocking glare at his beautiful baby girl.

“Fluffiness, Daddy,” Abbi said, matching his glare with one of her own as she crossed her arms over her chest and waited for him to cave.

Narrowing his eyes on her, Devin leaned over and kissed her forehead with a mumbled, “No,” and a chuckle that had her slowly nodding as he pulled away.

“I will have my fluffiness, Daddy.”



“I’m sure you will,” Devin murmured absently as he squeezed shampoo in his hand and began washing her hair, wondering if she had any idea just how adorable she really was.

Probably, Devin thought, feeling his lips twitch as she continued glaring at him. Knowing that this could go on for a while, he turned his attention to Dustin to find his son staring down at the rubber ducky in his hands.

“What’s wrong, buddy?” Devin asked, squeezing more shampoo in his hands.

“I don’t like her,” Dustin said quietly.

“Like who?” he asked, gently working the shampoo through his son’s hair.

“That lady that hurt Charlie,” he said, shrugging.

“It was an accident,” Devin said with a reassuring smile that had his son worrying his bottom lip.

“She did it on purpose,” Abbi said, reaching for the rinsing cup only to sigh heavily when he beat her to it.

“Why do you say that?” Devin asked as he filled the cup with water and gestured for her to tilt her head back.

“Because she doesn’t like Charlie,” Dustin said, making him frown.

“What makes you think she doesn’t like Charlie?” he asked, curious because he’d asked Charlie about what happened again when he’d helped her inside. She’d told him that it was an accident, but he didn’t believe her.

He also couldn't prove that it wasn't, which meant that he couldn't fire Kelly.

"I just don't trust her, Daddy," Dustin said, shrugging as he selected another rubber ducky.

He didn't trust Kelly either and he wasn't particularly fond of her, but as long as she stayed out of his way and did her job, he didn't care. She was good at her job, which was the only reason that he hadn't fired her. He would have fired her today, but Charlie told him that it was no big deal and...

He couldn't fire someone just because he didn't like her. It wasn't right to fuck with someone's life like that. As long as she did her job and stayed away from Charlie, then he'd leave it alone, but if she ever made Charlie cry again, nothing would save her.

## Chapter 18

December

"I thought you were planning on moving back into your office," the man that really needed to learn how to focus, said as he moved to hang her Indiana Jones poster on the wall by the window only to sigh and climb back off the stepladder when she pointed at the other wall.

"I was, but then I decided that it would be in my best interest to stay here," Charlie said as she slowly turned her chair around, looking for the perfect spot to hang her television.

"Because Devin refused to let you leave and turned your office into a storage room so that you couldn't go back up there?"

Nodding, she said, “There is that, but I also realized that staying here made the most sense. I have a bigger office, two incredibly adorable part-time assistants, a shorter walk to my car, my mail is delivered right to my desk, and-”

“And you don’t have to worry about the woman that you pissed off pushing you down a flight of stairs?” Ben correctly guessed as he carried the stepladder to the other side of the room.

“That may have been a deciding factor,” Charlie murmured in agreement as she found herself watching Devin as he worked.

“Does she still glare when she sees you?” Ben asked, climbing on the ladder and carefully hung the framed poster of Indiana Jones on one of the nails that she’d managed to talk Devin into putting up for her.

“No, now she smiles,” she said, unable to help but notice just how good Devin looked in his Bradford Creations’ shirt today.

“Oh, that’s not so bad,” Ben said, climbing back down the ladder only to sigh and carry the ladder back across the room when she absently pointed at the Slytherin poster that wasn’t going to hang itself.

“It’s actually somehow more terrifying,” Charlie mumbled absently a

s she watched Devin work until she realized what she was doing and found herself sighing as she continued to turn around in her chair.

“Tell me something,” Ben said as he adjusted the framed poster on the wall.

“What’s that?” she asked, unable to help but notice that her television would go nicely on the wall to her right if she moved her computer monitor to the other side of

her desk.

“When are we going to finally have that talk?”

“And what talk is that?” Charlie asked as she debated switching her desk with Devin’s so that she wouldn’t have to move her monitor to the other side only to decide against it since she liked watching the kids play while she was working. It also made it easier to help Dustin with his sight words and go over the alphabet while she kept on Abbi to make sure that she wasn’t trying to lure squirrels through the window so that she could have finally have some fluffiness in her life.

“You have something that you want to tell me?” Ben said as he climbed off the ladder and grabbed her Iron Man poster.

“I love you?” Charlie said as she reached down and released the hidden latch on her desk.

“You worship me,” Ben said with a heartfelt sigh.

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself at night so that you can sleep,” Charlie said as she perused the selection of candy bars in her secret stash and-

What happened to her Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups?

“It really is,” Ben murmured in agreement as she selected a 3 Musketeers candy bar.

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?” Charlie asked as she gestured with her candy bar towards the signed poster of Snape.

Chuckling, Ben picked up her poster and hung it directly behind her desk. “No, I wanted to know if you had something to tell me.”

“And what exactly do you think I need to tell you” Charlie asked as she carefully nibbled on the candy bar that was going to have to hold her over until Ben was finished so that they could have lunch.

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“I was thinking that we could talk about what’s going on with Devin,” Ben said, throwing her a questioning look over his shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” Charlie asked, taking another bite as she found herself glancing towards the windows that could really use some blinds and at the man in question.

“I’ve seen the way that he looks at you,” Ben said, drawing her attention back to find him watching her with a curious look in his eye.

“And how exactly does he look at me?” she asked, spinning her chair around to face him.

“The same way that you look at him,” he said with a pointed look as he picked up her Goonies’ poster.

“There’s nothing going on with Devin,” Charlie said, sighing heavily as she gestured to the other side of the room where she’d promised the kids she’d put their favorite posters.

“But you want there to be,” Ben guessed as she found herself turning her chair around and watching Devin.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, spinning her chair right back around as she absently toyed with the candy bar wrapper.

“Why not?” Ben asked, hopping off the ladder.

“Because it’s complicated,” Charlie said, hoping that he’d leave it at that.

“Everything about you is complicated,” he said, chuckling as he grabbed her Hogwarts poster and brought it over to the kids’ side of the room.

“This is true,” she murmured absently as she found herself glancing back towards the window and wondering what was wrong with her.

She had a plan and it didn’t involve making her life more complicated on something that was definitely a bad idea, but sometimes, she wished it did. He was her boss, her landlord, father of her two favorite people in the world, one of her best friends, and the man that still had no idea that she was planning on leaving. She really wasn’t looking forward to that conversation, Charlie thought, tossing the rest of the candy bar on her desk.

When did her life get so complicated? Charlie couldn’t help but wonder as she watched the man that was supposed to be helping her decorate her new office grab his bag and head for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to work,” Ben said, shrugging.

“Wait. What about lunch?” Charlie asked, gesturing towards the mini-fridge where the delicious lunch that she’d packed for him was waiting.

“The fridge is empty,” Ben said, chuckling as he headed out the door, leaving her wondering what he was talking about as she walked over to her mini-fridge and-

“That little bastard,” she said with a sad shake of her head as she closed the door, grabbed Devin’s Bradford Creations’ hoodie, pulled it on, and headed to the shop

where she found the man that kept stealing her lunch working on a bookshelf.

“You’re buying me lunch,” was all Charlie said before she turned around and walked away.

Without bothering to look back, she walked over to the back stairs, stepped onto the second stair, turned around and waited. She didn’t have to wait long before Devin was pausing in front of the stairs. With a sigh, she reached over, grabbed onto his shoulders and jumped onto his back and said, “So, I’ve been thinking,” as she laid her chin on his shoulder while he grabbed hold of her legs and headed for the door.

“What’s that?” he asked as he headed for the door.

“I think I’m gonna have to put a lock on the mini-fridge,” Charlie said as he pushed the door open with his foot and carried her outside.

“Wouldn’t help,” Devin pointed out.

“I know,” she mumbled sadly. “I thought the decoy lunch would work.”

“You thought wrong,” he said, carefully navigating the walkway covered in rock salt and ice to his work truck.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked as he lowered her to the ground.

“Your choice,” Devin said as he opened the door for her.

“And you’re paying?” she asked with a calculating look that had him biting back a smile.

“Do I have to?” he asked, making sure to sound put-out.



“Yes, you do,” she said with a sniffle and a nod as she climbed inside.

“Then tell me where we’re going,” Devin said, climbing in after her.

“Dixon’s,” Charlie said with a satisfied sigh as she buckled in.

“Dixon’s it is,” he said, starting the truck and-

“Can I ask you something?” she found herself asking as he pulled out of the driveway and headed towards Dixon’s Bakery.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Do you ever?” Charlie asked with a pitying look that had him chuckling.

“What do you want to know, brat?” Devin asked, shooting her a questioning look.

“Many things,” she said, nodding solemnly.

“Anything in particular?” he asked, turning off the truck while she sat there, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she debated whether or not she should ask this and...

Maybe it was a bad idea, she thought as she said, “Forget it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” Charlie said, nodding even though she wasn’t really sure of anything right now.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re looking at me funny?” he asked, throwing her

another curious look.

“Not a chance in hell.”

## Chapter 19

“You know the rules,” his baby girl said, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared up at him, daring him to try to get past her.

“Are you going to let me in?” Devin asked, gesturing to the closed kitchen door that she was guarding.

“Will you finally give into my needs for fluffiness?” Abbi countered, cocking her head to the side as she considered him.

“Maybe...” he said, letting his words trail off.

“Maybe?” she repeated, narrowing her eyes on him.

“Well, it depends,” Devin said as he knelt down so that he could look his beautiful baby girl in the eye as they handled today?

??s negotiations.

“On what, Daddy?” Abbi asked, frowning adorably as Devin reached over and gave her braid a gentle tug.

“On whether or not you tell me what’s for dinner,” he said as the scent of fresh-baked bread teased him.

“It’s not lima bean casserole,” she said with a rebellious smile that had him once

again narrowing his eyes on the little traitor.

“My lima bean casserole was delicious,” he bit out.

“It really wasn’t, Daddy,” Abbi said with a sad shake of her head.

“You’re a traitor, did you know that?” Devin asked her as he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Yes,” she said, nodding with absolutely no shame.

“You’re lucky I love you,” he said, chuckling as he stood up, taking the little traitor with him.

“I know that too, Daddy,” Abbi said, nodding solemnly as he pushed the kitchen door open and damn near groaned at the sight that met him.

Goddamn, she was killing him, Devin thought as he watched Charlie bend over to pull something out of the oven and-

“He’s not supposed to be in here,” Dustin said as Charlie handed him a roll.

“I came to help,” Devin said, giving Abbi one last kiss before putting her down.

“It’s my turn to help,” Dustin said, taking a bite of his roll.

“And you’re doing a wonderful job,” Charlie said with a warm smile as she grabbed the platter of rolls off the counter.

Knowing that she wouldn’t let him help, mostly because the kids wanted to make sure that he didn’t try to make broccoli for them again, Devin pulled his phone out of

his pocket and sat down at the table, moving the books that Charlie had been working on with Dustin out of the way before checking to make sure that there weren't any problems with the orders that had been sent out today.

"Thank you," he said a moment later when a plate filled with spaghetti and meatballs was placed in front of him.

"You're welcome," Charlie said as Dustin placed a bowl of salad by his plate before he headed back to the kitchen counter to get the rest of the bowls while Devin watched Charlie and...

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He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

Over the past two months, she'd become part of their family, someone that they could count on, who made the kids smile and was slowly destroying his will to live for one simple reason...

She'd fucking friend-zoned him.

It really just made his life extra fucking special, Devin thought, biting back a sigh as he watched the woman who had no fucking clue what she did to him when she touched him, hugged him, dropped down on his lap, and curled up in his arms like it was no big deal as she sat down across from him.

He wanted her more with every passing day and there was nothing that he could do about it.

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"That's better," Charlie said with a satisfied sigh as she ignored the pained groan coming from behind her as she settled between his legs to get more comfortable.

"There's another couch over there," the man that made the best chair, said even as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer.

"I like this one," she said, shifting to get more comfortable as she reached over and grabbed one of the sugar cookies that she'd made earlier with the twins off the plate on the coffee table before she settled back against him with a satisfied sigh.

“You’re driving me crazy,” Devin said as he plucked the cookie out of her hand and finished it off.

“I tend to have that effect on people,” Charlie said, nodding in agreement as she reached over and selected another cookie, taking her time as she decided between a sugar cookie with green frosting and one with red frosting only to settle on a cookie with white frosting since it had green and red sugar sprinkles on it.

“Tell me something,” Devin drawled softly as the twins settled in to watch The Santa Clause on their sleeping bags with a plate of cookies and the stack of books that they’d been using to teach them how to read, between them.

“What’s that?” Charlie asked, nibbling on her cookie until that familiar large tan hand stole it.

“Why are we watching another Christmas movie?” Devin asked as she sat up and grabbed the large blanket that she kept draped over the back of the couch and pulled it over their legs before lying back against him.

“Tradition,” Dustin said around a bite of cookie, making her smile.

“And when does this tradition end?” Devin asked as he placed his arm back around her.

“The day after Christmas,” she informed him as she felt his hand slide over her stomach as he pulled her closer.

“Any other traditions that I should know about?” he asked as he gently caressed her stomach.

“Probably,” she murmured as she felt a trail of goosebumps race down her neck when

his lips brushed against her ear.

“Any chance that you’re going to tell me ahead of time so that I can prepare myself?”

“And ruin the surprise?” Charlie asked with a sad shake of her head. “I would never do that.”

“God, you’re evil,” he said, chuckling.

“I really am,” Charlie readily agreed as she laid there, struggling to watch the movie while the thumb gently caressing her stomach found a patch of bare skin.

The first swipe of his thumb had her breath catching, the second had her licking her lips, and the third...

The third had her wondering what the hell was wrong with her.

## Chapter 20

### Christmas Eve

“I thought you were trying to save money,” Devin said with a glare aimed at the small woman hogging the scissors.

“And I am,” Charlie said as she finished cutting a large piece of Christmas wrapping paper that didn’t look like it was going to be big enough for the large box that she was trying to wrap.

“Then explain all of this,” Devin said, absently gesturing to the shitload of new toys surrounding them.

Blinking, Charlie said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“We had a deal, woman,” Devin said, narrowing his eyes on the woman that was spoiling his children.

“You mean the one where you tried to limit my gift purchasing needs during the happiest time of the year?” she asked, blinking at him. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

Instead of answering her, mostly because she was too fucking adorable to stay mad at, he simply reached over and grabbed the box with the dinosaur that was almost as big as Dustin and started wrapping it to the little bully’s strict wrapping guidelines. She was a demanding little thing, Devin thought, unable to help but smile because she was just so fucking adorable.

“Can I ask you a question?” Charlie asked as she stole the tape from him.

“Yes, brat,” Devin said with a mocking glare at the familiar demand.

“It’s about the party,” she said with a curious look as she reached over and snagged the dinosaur from him so that she could take over.

“What about it?” Devin asked, sighing as he reached over and grabbed the large teddy bear.

“Why don’t you ever go?” she asked, sending him a questioning look.

“Why would I?” he countered as he tied a ribbon around the teddy bear that Abbi was going to love.

“Umm, because it’s your party?” the little control freak said as she reached over and



fixed the bow.

“It’s Bradford Creation’s party,” Devin corrected her as he grabbed the book set and the writing tablet that she’d picked out for Dustin.

“Which you own,” Charlie pointed out as she handed him the red wrapping paper with a smiling Santa Claus that Dustin was going to love.

“The party’s for the employees,” he said, tempted for the first time since he’d started doing this four years ago to go, but...

He wasn’t a fucking masochist.

If he went to the party nothing on earth was going to be able to stop him from pulling her into his arms and dancing with her and that was the problem because he knew that he would never be able to let her go. He also wasn’t sure how he’d handle being forced to watch as some other asshole pulled her into his arms. He’d rather stay home eating ice cream with the twins and watch another Disney movie marathon than to see that.

When Bradford Creations started taking off, he wanted to do something special for everyone that made that possible so he asked T.J.’s father if they could use his restaurant for a New Year’s Eve party. He’d handed the reins over to T.J.’s mother, asked T.J. to make sure that it didn’t get out of hand, spent the night with the twins, and pretended that he wasn’t thinking about the woman that had spent the last two days baking every Christmas themed dessert known to man.

“And you have a hot date that doesn’t want to mingle with the peasants?” Charlie asked, blinking at him.

“I don’t date, smartass,” Devin said dryly as he reached over and grabbed the tape.

“Why is that exactly?” Charlie asked, grabbing a sugar cookie off the plate and took a bite, looking thoughtful as she waited for an answer.

“I just don’t,” Devin said evenly as he reached over and plucked the cookie out of her hand and finished it off in one bite.

Nodding, she said, “That’s an interesting answer.”

“Why don’t you date?” he countered back.

“Who says I don’t?” Charlie asked, grabbing another cookie only to sigh heavily when he stole it.

“You haven’t been out on a date since you moved here,” he pointed out.

“Because it wouldn’t be right to all the men that are pining away for me,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head and a helpless shrug that had him narrowing his eyes on her.

“You really are a brat, aren’t you?” Devin asked, wondering if she had any fucking idea what she did to him.

## Page 21

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“I really am,” Charlie said, nodding solemnly as she dusted off her hands and got to her knees so that she could reach beneath her bed and pull out a box wrapped in silver paper with a large white bow on top.

“Here,” she said with a satisfied sigh as she handed the gift to him.

“What’s this?” he asked as he took the surprisingly heavy gift from her.

“Your Christmas Eve gift,” she said, only to add, “Tradition,” as she gestured for him to get on with it and open the gift.

“Shouldn’t we wait for the kids?” he asked, biting back a smile when she reached over and snatched the gift back from him with a mumbled, “You’re taking too long,” as she climbed onto his lap and sat back against him with a sigh.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re impatient?” Devin asked, wrapping an arm around her while he watched as she carefully opened his present.

“Someone might have mentioned it at some point,” she murmured absently as he watched her reveal a white box, raised the cover, and-

“Where did you get this?” Devin asked as he found himself reaching into the box so that he could run his fingertips over his great-grandfather Noah’s mark carved into the antique picture frame as he took in the picture of him holding Dustin and Abbi only hours after they were born.

“There’s more,” Charlie said as she carefully picked up the framed picture and

handed it to him so that he could set it aside as his attention went to the matching frame with a picture of the twins taking their first steps.

She picked that frame up and handed it to him to reveal a picture that he'd never seen before. "When did you take this?" Devin asked, tracing his great-grandfather's mark as he took in the picture of his children covered from head to toe in flour, hugging each other as they smiled for the camera.

"I took that when the kids were helping me make pies to take to your parents' house for Thanksgiving," Charlie said as she pulled the last picture out of the box before setting it aside.

"I know how you're always on the lookout for anything that your great-grandfather made, so I did a few searches, hoping to find something you'd like when I came across these online. They had some damage and the original glass was long gone, but the frames were still in good condition and more importantly..." she said, letting her words trail off as she ran her fingers along the bottom of the frame and pushed.

"This still works," Charlie explained as a small click sounded and a thin drawer slid free from the side, revealing a piece of paper with the words, "I love you, Daddy. Love, Dustin," written in crayon that had the air in his lungs leaving him in a rush. For the past few months they'd been struggling with Dustin, trying to teach him how to read and write, hoping that they could help him catch up with the rest of the kids in time.

Christ, he'd been terrified that he wouldn't be able to help Dustin. His son was insanely bright when it came to pretty much anything else, but when it came to reading and writing...

He'd struggled.

They'd been working with him every day, going over his sight words, practicing his letters, going over sounds, the alphabet, finding apps on the iPad that could help, playing every word game and alphabet that they could come up with to help him and it had been working. Dustin was definitely making progress. He was doing great with his sight words, could read the books his teacher assigned him, and now, he was apparently learning to write as well.

"You should have seen his face when he wrote it. He was so proud of himself. He wanted to surprise you," Charlie said as Devin felt his lips pull up into a smile.

"Thank you," he said as he wrapped his arms around the best Christmas present that he'd ever received.

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"Oh, that's gonna leave a mark," Charlie said, biting back a wince and a groan as she carefully rolled over onto her side and couldn't help but smile when she saw the reason why she found herself sleeping on the edge of the bed, again.

She'd never thought that it was possible to love someone this much, Charlie mused while she ran her fingers through Dustin's messy hair as the other person who she loved more than anything stretched out in her sleep with a sigh and ended up throwing her legs across her brother's. They were so damn cute, Charlie thought as she kissed Dustin's forehead and reached down to tickle Abbi's foot.

With a grumble, Abbi pulled her feet back, rolled over onto her stomach, and promptly threw her legs back over her brother's. Unable to help but smile, Charlie kissed Dustin's forehead one last time before she rolled over and found herself looking at Devin. God, he was so handsome, she thought as she watched him sleep in the chair that he'd dragged in here sometime before Halloween for those nights that the kids demanded they have movie night in here, taking in his short hair that looked

like he'd run his fingers through it, the light whiskers darkening his jaw, the way that his tan muscles shifted with each breath that he took, and the unsnapped jeans that made the pose incredibly sexy, and-

He scared the hell out of her.

No matter how many times she told herself that this wasn't a good idea, Charlie couldn't stop thinking about him and that was the problem. He was her boss, her landlord, one of her best friends, and...

He was a complication, which was something that she definitely didn't need right now, but as she laid there, watching him sleep, she couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she walked over there and kissed him. Probably nothing, Charlie thought, biting back a sigh as she climbed out of bed, careful not to wake the twins. Devin wasn't interested in more and-

"Oh, my god..." Charlie whispered hollowly when she spotted the large armoire with Celtic designs that she'd fallen in love with next to him with a large red bow taped to the door.

Unable to believe what she was seeing, Charlie walked over to the armoire that she'd found herself thinking about whenever she looked at this spot and ran her fingers down the intricately carved Celtic design. It was even more beautiful than she remembered.

"Do you like it?" Devin asked, drawing her attention to find him watching her.

"I love it," she said softly as she looked back at the armoire, watching her fingers as they traced the Celtic design that must have taken days to create and amazed that anyone could create something this beautiful by hand. "I don't understand. T.J. sent me an email telling me that it had sold so that I could take it off the featured page,"

Charlie said, not mentioning that she'd drowned her sorrows in jelly donuts after that.

"I canceled the order."

"Why?" she asked, throwing him a questioning look as she dropped her hand away from the armoire.

"Because I wanted you to have it," Devin murmured softly as he gestured towards the cabinet as he stood up. "I wasn't sure where you wanted it. If you want me to move it, I can-"

"It's perfect. Thank you!" she said, cutting him off with an excited squeal as she rushed over to him and threw herself into his arms, eliciting a grunt as he fell back into the chair, taking her with him.

"You're welcome," Devin said, chuckling as he reached up to push her hair back only to end up cupping her face in his hands. "Are you sure you like it?"

"I love it," she assured him as she found herself reaching up so that she could run her fingers along his jaw.

"What about the bureau?" he asked, making her frown as she looked around her small apartment only to find her bureau in its usual spot.

"What about it?" she asked only to feel her lips twitch when he said, "I hate it."

"What's wrong with my bureau," Charlie said with a mocking glare that he easily returned.

"Besides the fact that I hate it?" Devin asked as she settled more comfortably on his lap.

“Yes, besides that,” she murmured absently when she caught the faint hint of his aftershave and nearly groaned when she found herself moving closer.

“It doesn’t match the armoire,” Devin said as his gaze locked with hers.

“That’s probably because I bought it a couple of years ago,” Charlie said, unable to look away as she felt his thumbs gently caress her skin.

“You should have told me that you needed a new one,” he said softly as she found herself moving even closer u

ntil only a few inches separated them and asked the only thing that mattered, “Why?”

Instead of answering her, Devin slowly leaned forward and pressed his lips against her forehead as she closed her eyes and released a shaky breath. After a slight hesitation, she felt his fingers slide down her neck, sending a shiver through her body and-

Found herself moved off his lap with a murmured, “Happy Christmas, Charlie,” as she watched him walk away.

## Chapter 21

“I really can’t tell you how happy I am that you decided to come,” Jason, the large bastard that had somehow managed to track her down and drag her here, said with a satisfied sigh as he reached over and patted her on the top of her head as Kenzie struggled against the rope stopping her from beating him with the chair they’d tied her to.

“Me, too,” Trevor, the other bastard who’d helped drag her here, said, nodding in agreement as he reached over and pulled the duct tape they’d used to stop her from



screaming for help off her mouth.

“I’m going to kill y-” she calmly began explaining to her cousins before Jason shoved a brownie in her mouth.

“I honestly don’t know why you’ve been avoiding us, pookie,” Jason said with a sad shake of his head as Kenzie sat there, quickly chewing the brownie as she glanced around her brother Reese’s living room, noting that more than half of their family was here and couldn’t help but sigh with relief when she didn’t see her father.

“You know why,” she mumbled absently as she looked for something that she could use to get her out of here before it was too late.

“Is it because you thought we would be mad that you kept the fact that you were married to the asshole from us?” Jason asked, shoving the rest of the brownie in her mouth as he asked, “Was that it, pookie?”

“I haven’t been avoiding you,” she bit out evenly after she forced herself to swallow the brownie that was starting to make her thirsty.

“No?” her brother Garret, who’d been glaring at her this entire time, drawled as he watched her. “What do you call changing your phone number and moving out of that shithole that you were living in without telling any of us where you went? Or the fact that you show up out of the blue just long enough so that we know you’re alive before disappearing again?”

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“Did you really think that I was going to stay where I was so that I had to deal with my brothers and cousins dropping in at all hours of the night to interrogate me?” she shot back.

“I wouldn’t say that it was at all hours of the night,” Trevor murmured thoughtfully as she turned her glare on the large bastard that had made it a habit of showing up at her place at two in the morning to raid her fridge and bug the shit out of her.

“You shoved me in a closet and left me there so that you could finish watching the game,” she snapped.

Shrugging it off, Trevor said, “You wouldn’t answer my questions.”

“I don’t have to answer your questions,” Kenzie said, trying to yank her hands free but the damn rope wouldn’t budge.

“You do when you get married and don’t tell any of us about it,” Garrett said, drawing her attention back in time to watch as he got up and headed over to the Christmas tree to help Danny’s baby girl grab a candy cane off the tree.

“Don’t worry,” Jason said, reaching over to shove another bite of brownie in her mouth, “we still love you.”

“Are you going to untie me?” Kenzie demanded, narrowing her eyes on the bastard that looked really pleased with himself.

“Not a chance in hell,” Jason said, finishing off the rest of the brownie as he got up

and headed towards the kitchen.

That left...

“This is for your own good,” Trevor said, getting up with a sigh and left her sitting there, struggling to break free and-

“Mikey!” she said, sighing with relief when she spotted her brother’s stepdaughter coming down the stairs.

“Can’t,” Mikey said with a sad shake of her before Kenzie could say anything else.

“What do you mean you can’t? Untie me,” Kenzie said, watching as the small girl that had her brother wrapped around her little finger gave a helpless shrug as she rolled a baseball between her hands.

“Well, I would, but that man,” Mikey said, pausing mid-roll of her ball so that she could point at Reese, who was trying to pull his wife under the mistletoe so that he could steal a kiss, “told me that if I let you go that he would beat me senseless.”

Rolling her eyes, Kenzie said, “He’s not going to beat you.”

“True,” Mikey murmured, pursing her lips up thoughtfully as she added, “but he also won’t give me the twenty bucks that he’d promised me if I made sure that no one untied you.”

Narrowing her eyes on her niece, Kenzie said, “I’ll give you forty.”

“And so will Uncle Jared,” Mikey said, gesturing to her uncle who was currently glaring at his grandson as Cole made a show of finishing off what appeared to be the last cupcake.

“Fifty,” Kenzie bit out.

“Uncle Lucifer already offered that,” Mikey said, nodding towards Kenzie’s brother who was busy rearranging the ornaments on the Christmas tree.

“Fine. What do you want?” Kenzie asked, more than willing to do whatever it took to get out of here before-

“Play catch with me,” Mikey said with a huge smile while Kenzie sat there, unable to look away from the baseball in Mikey’s hands before shifting her attention back to Reese and that scar above his eye that he got the first time that he played catch with Mikey and-

“No, I’m good where I am,” Kenzie said, nodding because she really didn’t feel like spending the night in the hospital.

“Are you sure?” Mikey asked, looking really freaking hopeful.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Kenzie said, licking her lips nervously as she did her best not to wince as she glanced at her brother Darrin and spotted the scar on his temple that he got from Mikey’s curve ball.

“But-” Mikey started to say only to sigh when Sebastian, who’d been hiding in the corner with a book for the past hour, walked over and grabbed Mikey’s hand, pulling her away with a sad shake of his head and a muttered, “She’d never survive your hardball,” that had Mikey pouting as she allowed her best friend to drag her away.

Relieved, Kenzie shifted her attention to her Uncle Shane and Aunt Caylee to find them smiling as they watched their son Devin, who couldn’t seem to stop glaring at the woman that he’d been going out of his way to avoid since they arrived a few hours ago. She really didn’t understand the men in her family sometimes, Kenzie

thought as she looked away from Charlie, who was reading to the twins to glance back at her cousin and-

Found herself wondering why the bastard that ruined her life was here.

“I was hoping that I’d find you here,” Roger said, sighing heavily as he sat down next to her.

“Did you sign the divorce papers?” Kenzie asked, because that was the only thing she cared about.

“We’re not getting a divorce,” he said, shaking his head absently as he took in every Bradford in the room who had stopped what they were doing to glare at him.

“Yes, we are,” she bit out, because there was no way in hell that she was going to waste one more year of her life on the man that had nearly destroyed her.

Nodding, Roger absently began to toy with something on his left hand, drawing her attention and-

She felt her stomach drop when she spotted the black wedding band that she’d given him on their wedding day back on his finger. For several minutes, all she could do was sit there, watching as he slowly turned the ring around his finger, something that she used to find endearing. Now all it did was turn her stomach.

Once upon a time, they’d been happy. Truly, unbelievably happy, but that was another lifetime where everything was perfect, she was young, in love, and married to the man of her dreams with a baby on the way. They’d never planned on starting a family that soon, but when she found out that she was pregnant, oh, god, she’d never seen Roger happier. He’d just glowed. There was no other way to describe it.

He wanted to quit medical school and go work for her Uncle Jared, but she wouldn't let him. He'd worked too hard to get where he was, so they'd compromised. They were going to finally break the news to her family that they were married and move back to Massachusetts so that she wasn't alone when Roger was stuck in class or work, but...

Life didn't work out that way.

She still didn't remember the accident, but that probably was for the best. But she would never forget the look on his face when the doctor told him that she'd lost the baby. He'd shut down on her while her grief had swallowed her whole.

When her family came to get her from the hospital, Roger hadn't said a word. He'd simply stood there, looking out the window while her father thanked him for looking after her, while she'd laid there, silently pleading with him to say something.

But he didn't say anything.

Not when they helped her into the wheelchair that was going to take her away and not when she'd said his name. He just stood there. As they rolled her out of the hospital, she'd told herself that he just needed time, just needed to figure this out and that everything was going to be okay, but it wasn't.

Nothing was okay after that.

She had so many chances to tell her family about the baby and every time that she tried, her grief would swallow her whole. As far as her family knew, she was just depressed because the accident had forced her to drop out of school. They'd told her that everything was going to be okay, but she knew that it wouldn't.

For the first few months, she'd waited for him, waited for him to come for her, call

her, something, but he never did. While he'd buried himself in his studies, switching from plastic surgery to pediatrics and OBGYN, determined to make sure that this never happened to another parent, she'd been mourning the loss of their child alone.

She'd never had the chance to hold Brandon, never got a chance to tell him that she loved him, and she never had the chance to say goodbye and that...

She was never going to be able to get over that.

Forcing herself to go on without her baby or Roger by her side was the hardest thing that she ever had to do. She never

wanted to go through that much pain again and she sure as hell didn't want to be reminded of it and that's what he did. Every time she saw him, Kenzie remembered just how much it hurt to lose him and she couldn't go through it.

Not again.

"Sign the papers," she said hollowly, forcing herself to look away.

"No."

"Then why are you here?" Kenzie snapped, wondering why he wouldn't just let her go.

"I came to tell you something," he said, turning his head to look at her.

"What's that?" she asked, wondering when this nightmare would end.

"I'm done waiting."

## Chapter 22

### New Year's Eve

“We want to go to the party, Daddy,”

“We really do,” Dustin said, nodding absently as he paused to select a crayon from the large box that Charlie had given him for Christmas.

“And I really want you to get in your pajamas,” Devin said as he plucked Abbi out of her chair and hung her over his shoulder.

“Why aren’t you going to the party, Daddy?” Abbi asked, sighing heavily as she began to draw shapes on his back with her finger.

“Because I would rather spend New Year’s Eve with you,” he said, wrapping his arm around Abbi’s legs as he reached over and helped Dustin put his crayons away.

As tempted as he was to go to the party tonight, it wasn’t a choice. If he went there would be nothing on this earth that would be able to stop him from pulling Charlie into his arms and that...that was a bad idea.

Christ, just being around her was a bad idea.



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Over the past week, he'd kept his distance, hoping that it would be enough to stop him from doing something that he would regret and...

He loved her.

God, did he fucking love her, but the problem was that his children loved her too and he would never do anything to hurt them. Charlie was the closest thing that they'd ever had to a mother and he wasn't about to do anything to take that away from them.

Nothing else mattered, not the fact that he wanted her, couldn't fucking stop thinking about her, or that the idea of never being able to show her how much she meant to him was tearing him apart because his children came first.

"We'd rather go to the party," Abbi said with a forlorn sigh, bringing him back to reality.

"You're brutal," Devin said, chuckling as he took Dustin's hand in his.

"What do you think?" came the question that drew his attention to the woman that he had to remind himself was off limits at least a hundred times a day.

"You're pretty," Dustin said, making the woman that was so much more than pretty smile as Devin slowly ran his eyes over her, taking in the way that her blue eyes sparkled, the soft pink of her lips, the way that her curly hair teased her bare shoulders, her toenails painted white, and the soft white dress that took his breath away.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he found himself saying, unable to take his eyes off her.

She opened her mouth to say something only to frown when Abbi said, “I thought you were mad at Charlie, Daddy.”

“Why would you think I’m mad at Charlie, baby girl?” Devin asked, frowning as he pulled Abbi off his shoulder and placed her on the table even as he couldn’t help but wonder if they’d noticed that he’d been avoiding Charlie over the past week.

“Because you’re always yelling her name, Daddy,” Dustin said, shrugging it off as Devin shared a confused look with the woman in question.

“What are you talking about, sweetie?” Charlie asked as she absently reached over and ran her fingers through Dustin’s messy hair.

“He growls your name,” Abbi said, nodding.

“A lot,” Dustin added with a matching nod.

“When?” Devin asked, wondering what they were talking about since he’d never raised his voice around his children only to feel his stomach drop seconds later.

“When you’re in the shower, Daddy. You yell Charlie’s name,” Dustin said with a shrug.

Oh, god...

“He sounds mad.”

“He really does.”

“He does it almost every night,” Abbi said as Devin stood there as a burning sensation crawled up his neck and he found Charlie staring at him and-

“He’s been doing it for a long time,” Dustin said as he selected another crayon.

“For a very loooooooooong time,” Abbi said, only to open her mouth to say something else when Charlie reached over and placed her hand over his baby’s girls mouth with a, “Why don’t you guys show me what movie you picked out for tonight?” and a forced smile that had his stomach turning.

“That’s a good idea,” Devin murmured weakly, clearing his throat as he rubbed the back of his neck, unable to look Charlie in the eye as he glanced around the room, looking for something to do only to mumble an excuse and head back into the kitchen before they could say something else to make this worse.

“Fuck!” he bit out as he slammed the kitchen door shut behind him before he grabbed hold of the kitchen counter and released a humorless chuckle because this was beyond fucking perfect.

He’d been doing everything that he could think of to make sure that she didn’t know how badly he wanted her and now, because he didn’t add extra insulation to his bathroom walls when he bought the place, she knew just how fucking pathetic he really was.

“Are you going to the party?” came the softly spoken words that let him know that his humiliation wasn’t over yet.

“No,” Devin said evenly as his grip tightened around the counter.

There was a pause and then...

“Are you ever going to look at me again?”

“No,” he said, wondering how this night could possibly get any worse when her next words fucking destroyed him.

“How long?” Charlie asked after a slight hesitation.

“Five years,” Devin said, deciding that there was no point in pretending anymore.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” she asked, sounding hurt.

“Tell you what?” Devin demanded as his grip tightened around the counter to the point of pain. “What was I supposed to tell you? That I can’t stop thinking about you? That I’ve wanted you from the moment that I saw you? That I’m so fucking in love with you that it’s killing me? That it doesn’t matter because I can’t risk breaking my children’s hearts if this doesn’t work out? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

For a moment, she didn’t say anything and then...

“You really don’t know me if you think that I would ever do anything to hurt Dustin or Abbi. I love them and no matter what happens between you and me, that will never change,” she bit out evenly.

“I can’t risk it,” he said, feeling sick to his stomach as he forced the words out.

“And that’s why you’ve been avoiding me all week,” she said, sighing heavily.

“Yes,” he said, praying that she would just leave before he lost his fucking mind.

“I see,” she murmured, sounding thoughtful before adding, “I’m not playing this game with you, Devin.”

“It’s not a game,” he bit out angrily.

“What would you call it?”

“Keeping my promise,” he said evenly, wishing like hell that there was another way but he couldn’t risk it.

He couldn’t fucking risk it, Devin reminded himself as he squeezed his eyes shut and-

“Even if it means breaking my heart?” came the softly spoken words that had him opening his eyes and glancing over his shoulder in time to watch her walk away.

## Chapter 23

“I’m having a great time, how about you?” Ben asked dryly as he dropped down in the booth across from her with a heavy sigh.

“The best,” Charlie said, matching his sigh with one of her own as she sat there, trying to figure out what she was doing here.

“Move in with me,” he said, making her frown as she glanced away from the dance floor filled to cap-

city with Bradford Creation employees, their dates, vendors, and local customers that looked forward to this party all year and-

“Hey!” Ben snapped when she was forced to take his drink away, because clearly, he’d already had too much to drink if he thought that she was going to move in with him.

“You’re cut off,” Charlie said as she handed the bottle of beer to a passing waitress.

“I was still drinking that,” he grumbled as he watched the waitress walk away while Charlie sat there wondering if she should arrange for an intervention.

“And you’ve clearly had enough if you think I’m going to willingly move in with you again after what you put me through in college,” she said with a pitying shake of her head as she watched his eyes narrow dangerously on her.

“I thought we’d agreed never to speak of that,” he bit out.

“Then don’t ask me to move in with you knowing how it will end,” Charlie said, reaching for her drink only to have Ben get to it first.

“We were kids,” he pointed out.

“And we were both Googling the asking price for hitmen,” she reminded him, thankful for the distraction from her rather depressing thoughts.

“You want to talk about it?” Ben asked, sending her another one of those concerned looks that he’d been sending her since he picked her up a few hours ago.

“Not even a little bit,” she said, shaking her head as she found herself glancing at the clock above the bar, wishing that midnight would hurry up so that they could leave.

“Fair enough,” Ben said, finishing off her drink before he stood up and held his hand out. “Come dance with me.”

“I would rather wallow in self-pity,” Charlie said, only to groan when he reached over and took her hand, giving her no other choice but to leave the sanctuary of her booth.

“How about this?” he said, leading her towards the bar. “I’ll grab our coats while you

pay off our tab and we'll get the hell out of here, grab a shitload of alcohol and head back to my place where we'll get drunk, pass out on the floor, and wake up in the morning ninety percent sure that we're dying while we try to figure out whose asinine idea it was to drink in the first place."

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“Sounds perfect,” she said, accepting the money that he pulled out of his pocket and found an empty spot at the bar.

“I’ll be right with you, Charlie,” T.J.’s father promised her with a smile as he grabbed another bottle of champagne to prepare for the countdown.

“No rush,” Charlie said, forcing a smile as she stood there, wondering how everything had gone to hell so quickly.

A week ago, she’d realized how close she was to falling in love with Devin and today...today, all she wanted to do was cry. This wasn’t the right time, she told herself, giving herself the excuse that she needed to pretend that-

“There you are!” came the enthusiastic greeting from the woman that had been glaring at her all night.

Nodding, Charlie said, “Here I am,” with a forced smile.

“We’ve really missed you upstairs,” Kelly said with one of those over-the-top pouts that had Charlie signaling for another drink.

“I’m sure that you have,” Charlie said, glancing at the clock and noted that there was only fifteen more minutes until she could officially pretend that this year never happened.

“We really have. It must be difficult to get any work done downstairs,” Kelly said with a pitying look as she absently reached over and plucked a glass of champagne



off a passing tray.

“Why’s that?” Charlie asked, unable to help but wonder what was taking Ben so long.

Instead of answering her, Kelly asked, “How’s the foot?” with a smile that could only be described as smug as she took a sip of champagne while she took in the small crowd around them.

“Healed,” Charlie said, deciding to take that smirk as confirmation that she’d kicked her foot on purpose.

“That’s nice,” Kelly murmured before asking, “And where’s your date?”

Charlie would have told her that he’d probably gotten distracted by the old pinball game by the coatroom, but at the moment she was busy wondering what Devin was doing here.

Besides caging her in against the bar, she amended a few seconds later when the incredibly handsome man that had made it crystal clear that nothing was ever going to happen between them, placed his hands on the bar on either side of her and leaned in.

“What did you mean?” Devin demanded as he leaned in closer so that she could see that he’d shaved as the scent of his aftershave reached her over the scents of cheap perfume, beer, and the sweet scent of the mixed drinks that the bar had been making all night.

“Where are the kids?” Charlie asked even as she couldn’t help herself and reached up to run her fingertips over his jaw.

“My cousin’s watching them. Now tell me what you meant when you said that I was

breaking your heart,” he demanded as his eyes searched hers for an answer that she really wasn’t in the mood to give him right now.

“This isn’t the time or the place,” she said, shaking her head as she moved to push his arm away so that she could get out of here before she said something that she would regret.

“I told you that I’m in love with you and-”

“And then you immediately followed that up by telling me that nothing was ever going to happen, so drop it,” she said, only to remember too late that they had an audience.

Ignoring Kelly’s stunned expression because she honestly couldn’t deal with her right now, Charlie ducked beneath Devin’s arm and headed towards the door, deciding that she’d rather risk hypothermia than do this. She barely made it two feet before Devin was taking her hand in his and leading her to the dance floor.

“Devin, I-”

“Dance with me,” he said as he pulled her into his arms.

“I don’t want to dance with you,” Charlie said, moving to step away only to reluctantly stop and let him pull her into his arms when he said, “Please.”

“I’m sorry,” Devin said as she wrapped her arms around him.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Charlie said as she found herself pulled closer.

“And I don’t want to hurt you,” he said softly as he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“Too late,” she mumbled as she closed her eyes and-

God, she couldn’t do this.

If he hadn’t said anything, she could have kept pretending that everything was fine. She could have told herself that she didn’t have time for anything more, focused on getting her life together, and pretended that she didn’t want him, that she didn’t find herself thinking about him, and that-

“Ten!” came the loud cheer that had her realizing that they’d stopped moving as she opened her eyes to find Devin watching her.

“Nine!”

“Eight!”

“I love you, Charlie,” he whispered softly.

“Seven!”

“Then don’t do this,” she said as he cupped her face in his hands.

“Six!”

“God, you’re beautiful,” came the hoarsely whispered words as he moved closer.

“Five!”

“Devin,” she said, putting everything she had into that one word as she watched his expression soften.

“Four!”

“Three!” came the loud cheer as his gaze dropped to her lips.

“Two!”

He moved closer and-

“One!”

“Happy New Year, brat,” came the unexpected words as she found herself pulled away from Devin and into her best friend’s arms. As she wrapped her arms around Ben, she watched as Devin’s expression turned to regret as he turned around and walked away.

She was still thinking about that look on his face sometime later when she walked into her apartment. She should have taken Ben up on his offer, Charlie thought, only to smile when she spotted the reason that she wanted to come home sitting on her bed, reading a book.

“Did you miss me?” Dustin asked with a shy smile that was just too damn adorable for words.

“I really did,” she promised him as she pulled off her coat and dropped it on the chair by the door.

“We should have a sleepover,” he said with a firm nod, already climbing off her bed to go get his stuff.

“We really should. Why don’t you go grab a stuffed animal and a book and I’ll make us a special snack?” Charlie said as she headed towards the patio doors, needing a

minute to clear her head.

“Okay!” Dustin said, making her smile as he rushed to go do that.

Thankful for the small reprieve, Charlie stepped outside and slowly exhaled as the crisp winter air enveloped her as she closed the door behind her. She walked over to the railing and wondered how she was supposed to handle this. As much as she wanted to leave right now and start over somewhere else, she wasn’t ready yet. She also couldn’t do that to Abbi and Dustin. She loved them and there was no way in hell that she would ever be able to walk out on them.

“I should have kissed you,” came the softly spoken words letting her know that she wasn’t alone, drawing her attention to her right to find Devin sitting on the other deck, staring out into the backyard.

For a moment, Charlie simply stood there watching him until she’d decided that she’d had enough for one night. She paused by the patio door and said, “Yes, you should have,” before she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

Closing her eyes, she stood there for a moment, slowly exhaling and-

“Oh, god, what now?” she muttered pathetically when a knock came from her front door.

Really hoping that wasn’t Ben checking up on her to make sure that she was okay, Charlie walked over to her front door, opened it, and found herself pulled into Devin’s arms as his mouth closed over hers. She felt her eyes close as he moved his lips against hers, brushing them in teasing strokes, coaxing her to kiss him back as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer so that every inch of her body was pressed against his and she had no idea where he started and she ended.

He cupped her face in his hands as he took his time kissing her, brushing his lips against hers, teasing her lips

to move against his as he slowly deepened the kiss. As his tongue slid against hers a slow groan was torn from him and-

“Charlie?”

-she found herself back inside, trying to catch her breath as the door closed quietly behind her and she...and she...

“Are you okay?” Dustin asked, hugging the stuffed dinosaur that she gave him for Christmas against his chest as he stared up at her.

“I think so?” Charlie said, not really sure why that came out as a question.

## Chapter 24

“Good morning, Daddy,” came the sweetly spoken words that met Devin when he opened his bedroom door.

“Good morning, baby. Where’s your brother?” he asked absently as he glanced at Dustin’s closed bedroom door, hoping that his son was in Charlie’s room so that he had the excuse that he needed to see her, which was probably why he missed the devious smile that would have normally terrified him.

*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 6:35 am*

“I made you breakfast, Daddy,” Abbi said as she reached over and took his hand in hers.

“You did?” Devin asked, unable to help but smile as she led him downstairs.

“Uh-huh,” she said, nodding as they made their way through the living room towards their play table where a plate and what appeared to be a homemade menu waited.

“What’s this?” he asked, picking up the menu that appeared to have all his favorites listed.

“Your menu so that you can order what you want for breakfast,” Abbi said as she picked up a small notebook and a red crayon.

“I see,” he said, feeling his lips twitch as he sat down, more than willing to spend some time with his baby girl playing restaurant this morning. “Is Dustin and Charlie joining us?” Devin asked as he glanced back at Charlie’s door.

He’d been tempted, more than fucking tempted, to visit Charlie in the middle of the night and lure her away so that they could finish that kiss. He’d made it halfway down the stairs before he’d realized that he was already fucking this up.

In his defense, he didn’t have much experience when it came to women. Besides the obvious, that was. He’d never had to put much effort into dating because he honestly hadn’t fucking cared if a woman said yes. He’d never been interested in anything more than just sex simply because he hadn’t been looking for anything more. Even Heather had been nothing more than a fuck buddy. Neither one of them had been

interested in anything more than sex and even after two years, he never saw her as anything more than just a good friend, but Charlie...

He wanted so much more with her.

He couldn't rush this, not if he wanted to make this work, and he was damn well going to make this work. That meant doing this right, he reminded himself when his baby girl cleared her throat, reminding him that she was waiting.

"What would you like?" Abbi said with her crayon pressed against the notepad, ready to take his order.

"I'll start with coffee," he said, only to frown when she winced.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have coffee this morning."

"How about orange juice?" he asked, moving onto the next item on the menu.

"Yeah, no, umm, I'm afraid we ran out of orange juice an hour ago," she murmured with an apologetic smile.

"Apple juice?"

"We're out of that, too."

"Chocolate milk?"

"I can get an ice-cold glass of water for you," she offered with a hopeful smile.

"Perfect," he said, moving onto the breakfast menu. "How are the pancakes?"



“They’re delicious,” Abbi said with an approving nod as she started writing down his order.

“Great. I’ll take an order of pancakes and-”

“We’re out,” she said with a sympathetic wince that had his eyes narrowing.

“You’re out of pancakes?”

“I’m afraid so,” Abbi said with a sad shake of her head.

“French toast?”

“Nope.”

“Eggs?”

“Yeah, umm, it might be better if we discussed the cereal menu,” she said, gesturing to the bottom of the page.

“Fine. I’ll have-”

“We’re out of that, too,” she said, cutting him off before he could finish.

“Then what do you have?” Devin asked only to get ignored when the worst waitress that he’d ever had mumbled, “I’ll be right back,” as she walked over to greet Charlie and Dustin as they walked into the living room.

“Welcome to Abbi’s Diner,” she said with a warm smile that he couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t get. “How many are in your party?”

“Two,” Charlie said with a warm smile for Abbi as Devin sat there, waiting for her to look at him and-

God, he was fucking pathetic.

“Right this way. I have a table with a lovely view of the garden that I think you’ll enjoy,” Abbi said as she gestured towards the woman that barely spared him a glance to follow her to the kitchen.

With a mumbled, “I’ll be right back,” to him, Abbi headed into the kitchen to show them to their seats, leaving him sitting there, debating his next move.

Maybe he should run out and get her flowers, Devin thought as he absently drummed his fingertips against the table as he waited for Abbi to come back. He should see if his mother could babysit, Devin decided. He pulled out his phone and started to text his mother only to rethink the move since his mother would only end up wondering why he needed a babysitter on a Friday night.

Hoping that Jane was available, Devin texted the college kid that lived down the street to see if she was available this Friday. A few minutes later, Devin was trying to decide where he should bring Charlie when he realized that his baby girl hadn’t come back yet. Wondering if she’d grown bored playing restaurant, Devin headed for the kitchen and-

“Oh, my god...” he choked out when he opened the kitchen door.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t be in here. This is a private event,” Abbi said with a pitying look as she dropped the muffin that she’d been nibbling on back on her plate and walked over to usher Devin out of the kitchen.

“You said there were no pancakes,” he bit out as he took in the platter of pancakes,

French toast, eggs, hash browns, bacon, and all the other shit the little traitor said they were out of.

“I’m really sorry about this,” Abbi said, sending an apologetic smile to Charlie and Dustin as they helped themselves to all the delicious food that he’d been denied.

“No need to apologize,” Charlie said, waving it off as he stood there, watching as his son took the last piece of bacon and-

“That’s it,” Devin said, shaking his head in disgust as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I’m leaving a bad review for this place.”

“Would you like to speak with the manager?” Abbi asked with a put-out sigh that he did not appreciate, not one fucking bit!

“Yes, yes, I would like to speak with the manager,” he said, opening up Facebook only to end up glaring at the little traitor when she said, “I’m sorry, but he’s not here right now. I can take a message if you’d like to speak with him later.”

Feeling his right eye twitch, Devin narrowed his eyes on his baby girl one last time before focusing on Facebook and-

“What the hell?” he demanded, shaking his head in disbelief as he clicked on the post that Charlie tagged him in.

She’d fucking review-blocked his ass!

“You gave her a five-star review?” Devin demanded as he leveled an accusing glare at the woman that should have taken his side on this.

“Of course,” Charlie said as she took a sip of chocolate milk, the same fucking

chocolate milk that he'd been told that they were out of.

Another chime drew his attention back down to his phone and-

"You put in your review to ignore my review because I'm too damn demanding?" he snapped.

"I mean, you really didn't leave me with much of a choice," Charlie said with a sad shake of her head as she helped herself t

o another pancake.

Narrowing his eyes on the woman that he loved more than anything, Devin shoved his phone back in his pocket, stormed over to the table, snatched the muffin that Abbi abandoned before he stole Charlie's plate and the bacon off Dustin's plate before he turned around and stormed off as he bit out, "This is the worst service I have ever had!"

## Chapter 25

"Why is Daddy glaring at you?"

"Because he wishes he was as cool as we are," Charlie said with a sad shake of her head, not bothering to look up from the marketing book that she was reading on her phone.

"That does make sense," Dustin said as he selected another book off the coffee table before settling back next to her.

"Doesn't it, though?" she murmured absently as she tapped the screen so that she could see what time it was.

She should really get to bed early, but she wanted to give the man that had been glaring at her all day a chance to ask her out. It was the considerate thing to do after all, Charlie thought as she risked a glance towards the other end of the couch to find Devin sitting there, seething with rage. Not that she could blame him...

“Can we do a movie day tomorrow?” Abbi asked as she grabbed a book off the large stack that Charlie kept on the coffee table and climbed onto the couch next to her brother.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I can’t tomorrow. I have to get up early and go to a convention,” Charlie said, wishing that she’d splurged for a hotel room since she really wasn’t looking forward to the two-hour drive in the morning.

“What about tomorrow night? We could camp out in the living room and watch movies,” Dustin said.

“I’m sorry, sweetie, but I have plans tomorrow night,” she said, only to add, “We could have a movie day this weekend and maybe play outside?”

*Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 6:35 am*

“Can we build a snowman?” Abbi asked, looking hopeful.

“Are you going to make us sing the Frozen song?” Charlie asked, unable to help but smile when she saw the devious little smile that Abbi was trying to hold back.

“Yes, I am,” Abbi said, nodding as she tossed her book on the couch and jumped off with a sigh and a, “Bath time?”

“Your Daddy is going to have to give you a bath tonight, sweetie. I have to get some stuff done before tomorrow,” Charlie said, sighing sadly because she looked forward to bath time every night.

“But...” Abbi began as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she threw her father, who looked really pissed right now, a worried look. “Daddy doesn’t know how I like my bubbles.”

“And he doesn’t give me double-kisses when he tucks me in,” Dustin mumbled sadly.

“I know, guys, but you’re just going to have to try to get through it for tonight,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head that she knew would annoy the man that had been trying to get her alone all day.

She could have made it easy on him, but...

Where would the fun in that be?

“Do we have to?” Abbi asked, making sure to look appropriately pitiful as she

glanced back at her father, but Charlie didn't miss that devious look in her eye when she did it.

Biting back a smile, Charlie murmured, "I'm afraid so."

Glare aimed at her, Devin bit out, "Bedtime," only to narrow his eyes when the kids made sure to sigh sadly as they reluctantly made their way over to her for their goodnight kisses.

Once they were done, they sighed heavily and slowly made their way upstairs, pouting the entire way as Devin leveled one last glare at her before following them upstairs. Deciding to get some work done while she waited, Charlie headed into her apartment as she mentally calculated how long it would take Devin to give the kids baths, get them dressed, tucked in, and read them a bedtime story before he came down here to make her pay for tormenting him all day.

Not that she did it on purpose...

Okay, so maybe she'd tormented him a tiny bit on purpose, but that was only because she was nervous. She'd spent most of the night driving herself crazy thinking about that kiss until she couldn't take it anymore. She found herself heading for her apartment door, wondering if that kiss was really as good as she remembered only to find herself cooking everything that she could get her hands on around seven this morning when the reminder of why they couldn't rush this came walking into the kitchen wearing tighty-whities and an adorable smile.

Hoping to distract herself, Charlie walked into her office, unable to help but smile when she spotted all the drawings covering the walls that the kids had made for her, sat down at her desk, and turned on her computer only to stare at the letterhead that she'd created with the blank spot where the name of her business should go.

She really needed to come up with something soon, Charlie thought, sighing heavily as she leaned back in her chair and slowly spun around, looking for inspiration. Without a name, she couldn't get a domain for her website, create her Facebook page, Twitter, incorporate, or do more than half the things that she needed to...

Dustin and Abbi, she thought as she took in all the drawings surrounding her and found herself smiling as she turned back around in her chair and started playing around with their names until she came up with Dabbi Digital Marketing and-

"That's perfect," Charlie said, smiling as she sat back in her chair and stared at the name of her new business.

Absolutely perfect, Charlie thought as she glanced at the time and realized how late it was. Deciding to call it a night, she clicked Save and turned off her computer before heading to her bathroom for a shower. A thousand ideas ran through her head as she stepped into the shower. She had to finish the incorporation paperwork, buy a domain, sign up for-

"Cold!" she gasped when the hot water suddenly turned ice-cold and-

"What are your plans for tomorrow night?" came the drawled words as her attention shot towards the faucet where the large tan hand was slowly turning the hot water back on.

"I'm not really sure yet," she admitted as she sighed with relief when the hot water hit her.

"I see," he murmured, sounding thoughtful from the other side of the dark curtain as she tried to remember if she'd hung her towel outside the shower or not.

"Is there something that I can help you with?" Charlie asked, hoping to keep him



distracted as she reached through the opening at the other end only to wince when her hand found the metal hook empty.

“Go out with me tomorrow night,” he said, making her lips pull up into a smile.

“Well, I’d have to check my calendar to see if-Cold!” she ended up gasping when the devious man turned off the hot water.

“Are you going out with me, Charlie?” he asked, sounding bored as he slowly turned the hot water back on.

“I mean, that’s kind of short notice and everything,” Charlie said, only to end up pressing herself back against the shower wall when that large hand slowly turned the hot water off again.

“Go out with me,” he said, turning the hot water back on a few seconds later.

“Shouldn’t I consider my options?” she asked only to gasp when the evil man once again turned the hot water off.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes! That’s a yes!” Charlie gasped as she backed up as far as the shower would allow her, which unfortunately for her, wasn’t very far.

“You could have just said that,” he murmured, sounding thoughtful as the large hand slowly turned the hot water back on.

“Well, I mean, I didn’t want you to think that I was easy or anything,” Charlie said, only to yell, “Oh, my god! Stop doing that!” seconds later.

“Then stop driving me crazy,” Devin said, once again turning the hot water only to stop mid-turn and shut it back off when she said, “Do I really have to?”

“Alright, I’ll stop!” she gasped, laughing when he turned the hot water back on. “Are you going to leave so I can get out?”

There was a pause and then...

“Well, that depends...” came the murmured response that had her eyes narrowing on the large tan hand still holding the hot water faucet.

“On what?”

“On whether or not you give me a kiss goodnight,” he said, making her lips twitch.

Sighing heavily, she asked, “Do I have to?” only to yell, “Okay!” when the devious man that she’d underestimated shut off the hot water again.

When he turned the water off a few seconds later, Charlie glared as she watched his hand disappear only to reappear a moment later with a towel.

Taking the towel, Charlie continued to glare as she wrapped it around herself before she reached over and yanked open the shower curtain to find the incredibly handsome man that would pay for coming between her and her hot water leaning back against the sink counter looking a little too pleased for her liking.

“You went too far, sir,” she said, stepping out of the shower.

“Did I, though?” Devin asked as he pushed away from the counter.

“You really did,” Charlie said, nodding as she headed for the bathroom door.

“And what do you call tormenting me all day?” he asked, following her.

“Using my free time effectively,” she said, grabbing a pair of panties and the Bradford Creations’ tee-shirt that she’d helped herself to.

“Isn’t that my shirt?” he asked, reaching over to take it from her only to sigh when she pulled it back out of his reach and gestured with her other hand for him to turn around.

“Mine now,” she said, waiting until he was turned around before she quickly dried off and pulled on her underwear and the shirt that she felt was rightfully hers now.

“First you steal my children,” Devin said as he slowly turned around with a sad shake of his head and a heavy sigh, “then you steal my office and now you’re stealing my shirts.”

“I mean, can you really say that I stole them when they came willingly?” Charlie asked, unable to help but smile as she took a step back towards her apartment door.

“True,” he murmured, looking thoughtful as he followed her.

“And since you made it impossible for me to go back to my office, you really left me with no other choice but to try to make the best of it,” Charlie said as she reached back and opened the door.

“Is that what you call taking over my office?” he asked softly as he reached over and grabbed hold of the front of her shirt and used the light hold to pull her closer.

“Yes,” she said, reaching up to wrap her arms around him.

“And my shirt?” Devin asked, releasing his hold on her shirt so that he could wrap his arms around her.

“It looks better on me,” Charlie pointed out, nodding solemnly as she ran her hand over the back of his neck.

“Yes, it does,” he murmured as he leaned down and brushed his lips teasingly against hers once, twice and then...

“You have no idea how badly I want you,” he said, breaking off the kiss that had her struggling not to pull him back down for more.

## Page 27

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“But we need to take this slowly,” Charlie managed to get out as she forced herself to let him go.

“Yes, we do,” Devin said as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

“Because I need to be worshipped,” she said solemnly, feeling his lips twitch against hers.

“Do you now?” he asked softly.

“I really do,” Charlie said, placing her hands against his chest and gave him a gentle push.

“I think I can handle that,” Devin said with an incredibly sexy grin as he allowed her to push him back.

“We’ll see,” she murmured, noting the glimmer of anticipation in his eye as he said, “Yes, we will.”

## Chapter 26

“You look handsome, Daddy,” Abbi said as she held out the navy-blue tie to him.

“Thank you, baby girl,” Devin murmured, leaning down and kissed her forehead as she handed him a tie.

“Very handsome,” she stressed with a firm nod that had him narrowing his eyes on

her.

“What do you want?” he asked as he pulled the tie on.

“What makes you think I want something, Daddy,” Abbi asked, blinking innocently up at him.

“So, you don’t want anything?” Devin asked, throwing her a questioning look as he fixed his tie.

“Well, I mean, I wouldn’t say no to some fluffiness,” she said, shrugging it off.

“That’s very generous of you,” Devin drawled as he grabbed his aftershave off the bathroom counter.

“I know,” Abbi said, nodding solemnly.

“Did Uncle Aidan get married again?” Dustin asked from where he sat on the bathroom counter, watching him curiously.

Chuckling, Devin said, “No, Uncle Aidan didn’t get married again. I’m taking Charlie to dinner and I wanted to look nice.”

“Oh,” Dustin murmured, worrying his bottom lip as he glanced at Devin only to sigh heavily while he carefully climbed off the counter with a mumbled, “I’ll be right back,” before he quickly made his way out of the bathroom.

“Me, too,” Abbi said

Chuckling, Devin double-checked his hair and couldn’t help but smile when a chime drew his attention to find a text from Charlie and-

“Shit!” he said, sighing heavily as he glanced at his watch.

“What’s wrong, Daddy?” Dustin asked as Devin debated calling the restaurant to move their reservation back.

“Charlie’s stuck in traffic,” he said, glancing at his son and...felt his lips twitch as he watched his son pull on his dress trousers.

“Is she okay?” Dustin asked, pausing mid-yank to worry his bottom lip between his teeth.

“She’s fine. I just need to see if I can push our dinner reservations back an hour,” Devin explained as he gestured towards the clothes that Dustin had placed on the counter. “What’s all this?”

“I’ve gotta get handsome for my lady,” Dustin said as he finished pulling his pants up and reached for the black shirt that he’d picked out for the party his family had thrown for Aidan and Melanie after they got married.

“Ah, I see,” Devin murmured absently as he tried to figure out a way to explain this to his son. “Do you remember Jane?”

“Yeah,” Dustin said as he struggled to button his shirt.

“Well, she’s going to come over and watch you guys for a bit while I take Charlie out for dinner,” Devin explained as he knelt down so that he could help his son.

“I don’t wanna stay with Jane. I wanna go have dinner with Charlie,” Dustin mumbled sadly as Devin reached for the small tie that matched his and placed it around Dustin’s neck.

“I know you do, buddy. But I’d really like to take Charlie out to dinner alone tonight. We can have a special dinner tomorrow night. How does that sound?” Devin said, giving his son a reassuring smile as he fixed his tie and worked on helping him tuck his shirt in.

After a slight hesitation, Dustin reluctantly nodded with a murmured, “Okay,” that had Devin sighing with relief. That is, until he looked up to find his baby girl wearing the Disney princess dress that he’d given her for Christmas along with the tiara and the pink plastic shoes that came with it.

“I’m ready,” Abbi said with a regal nod as Devin reached past his son and swept his baby girl off her feet with a growl.

“You’re ready, huh?” he asked, covering her face in kisses as he carried his giggling baby girl and headed for the door, deciding to go see if the sitter was here so that he could focus on making the rest of the night absolutely perfect.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

“Maybe she forgot,” Dustin said as Devin ran his hands roughly down his face, telling himself that this wasn’t happening.

Not now.

Everything had been beyond fucking perfect. He’d had a sitter lined up, reservations for two at the best restaurant in town, managed to get his hands on a bouquet of white roses, had a bottle of white wine chilling in the fridge, and played with the kids all day, ensuring that they would be too exhausted to torment the babysitter tonight, and then...

Everything went to hell.



His sitter canceled a half hour after she was supposed to show up, which led to him trying to find a sitter at the last minute on a Friday night and begging the restaurant to push his reservation back an hour only to end up calling them back an hour later to ask them if there was any chance that he could turn that reservation for two into a reservation for four when he gave up trying to find a babysitter.

That had led to the restaurant hanging up on him and realizing that he was going to have to come up with something else to salvage this date. It had taken twenty minutes of searching his kitchen and a quick trip to the grocery store, but he had everything that he needed to make this night memorable except for Charlie.

Two hours ago, she'd been an hour late and now...

Now he refused to send her one more fucking text. He had more self-respect than that, he told himself as he glanced down at his phone only to toss it on the couch with a sigh of disgust when he found himself looking to see if she texted him, again.

"We still love you, Daddy," Abbi said with a pitying smile that appeased him...somewhat.

"And I really love Charlie," Dustin said with a wistful sigh that had his eyes narrowing on the little traitor.

"Traitor," Devin grumbled as he once again found himself reaching for his phone, resigned to call Ben to make sure that nothing bad had happened to the woman who'd stood him up just as the woman in question came walking through her door, carrying a stack of pizza boxes.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, guys," Charlie said, sighing heavily as she placed the stack of Blackjacks pizza boxes on the coffee table. "For some reason, someone thought it would be a good idea to start construction on 95 during rush hour on a Friday night,

which wouldn't have been too

bad but then an eighteen-wheeler tried to pass everyone on the shoulder and ended up blocking the only open lane. I tried to call, but my charging wire stopped working.”

“You got us Blackjack pizza?” Abbi asked in an awed whisper.

“I did,” Charlie said, smiling warmly as she leaned over and kissed Abbi’s cheek. “And I also missed you.”

“Did you miss me?” Dustin asked with an adorable smile.

“Of course, I did, sweetheart,” Charlie said, barely getting a chance to open her arms before Dustin ran into them, wrapping his small arms around her so that Charlie could give him a big kiss on the cheek that had his son giggling while Devin sat there...seething.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said, sending him an apologetic smile that did nothing, absolutely fucking nothing, to quell his anger as he sat there, forced to watch as she gave all the kisses that should rightfully be his to his children.

She should be kissing him and telling him how much she missed him, Devin thought, narrowing his eyes on the heartless woman as he reached over and stole a slice of pizza, too angry to enjoy the deliciousness that was Blackjack’s pizza. For the next two hours, he was forced to sit there, watching as she snuggled with his children, watching a Disney movie that they’d probably watched a hundred times by now until it was finally bedtime and he found himself abandoned with barely a word.

He would not forget this, Devin decided, kicking off his shoes and pulling his tie loose as he laid back on the couch with a heavy sigh, beyond fucking exhausted. It had been a long fucking day, he thought, only to open his eyes sometime later to find

the inconsiderate woman that had abandoned him kneeling next to the couch.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said, reaching over to run her fingertips down his jaw as he pointedly looked away from her as he bit out, “You’re just using me for my children.”

“I mean, can you really blame me? Have you seen how cute they are?” she asked, sounding amused as she leaned over and kissed his cheek, somewhat appeasing him.

Somewhat.

“We are no longer speaking,” Devin said, folding his arms over his chest as he continued glaring at the wall.

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“Aw, did you miss me?” she asked in a syrupy sweet voice.

“No, I’m mad at you,” he said with a snuffle.

“Would it make you feel better if I said that I was sorry again?”

“No.”

“What if I told you that I missed you?” she said, which had him turning his head so that he could glare at her.

“Don’t lie to me, woman,” he bit out with a glare that told her how he felt about her trying to patronize him.

“Or that I thought about you all day?” Charlie offered with the sweetest fucking smile.

“I don’t need your pity,” Devin said, once again turning his head away from the cruel woman that was playing with his emotions.

There was a pause and then a long-drawn-out sigh that had him turning his head and...

“What are you doing?” he found himself asking as he watched her slowly unsnap her pants as she toed off her shoes.

“Relaxing after a long day,” Charlie said, wiggling out of her jeans as he laid there,

forced to bite back a groan as he watched her slowly reveal a pair of soft white cotton panties and short golden legs.

He watched as she grabbed the large blanket that she liked to keep on the couch for snuggling, pulled it around her shoulders seconds before she fucking destroyed him by climbing onto the couch and laying on top of him with a satisfied sigh as she grabbed the television remote off the coffee table and-

Promptly ignored him.

## Chapter 27

“Do you not care that I’m no longer speaking to you?” the man that she was using as a mattress demanded as he wrapped his arms around her and pressed a kiss against the top of her head as she debated between starting another Harry Potter marathon or watching something that would probably give her nightmares.

“I do. I really do, but watching movies helps dull the pain,” she murmured absently as she scrolled through the horror movie options on Amazon only to end up turning her head so that she could glare at the man that had plucked the remote out of her hand.

“I demand a do-over,” Devin said, making her frown as he tossed the remote aside.

“What are you talking about?” Charlie asked, unable to help but notice just how good he felt as she shifted to get more comfortable.

“I want another chance to make this right,” he said, pushing a loose strand of her hair back behind her ear.

“You’ve lost me,” she said, frowning at the incredibly handsome man that she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about all day.

“Our first date,” he said softly as he wrapped his arm back around her.

“What about it?”

“I want a do-over.”

“But we’ve already moved onto the second date?” Charlie pointed out.

“We have?” he asked, looking adorably confused.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Five minutes ago,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head and a mumbled, “I’m really going to need you to keep up here.”

“Isn’t it a little too soon for a second date?”

“It’s never too soon for a second date,” she said, only to ask, “How long has it been since you went on a date?”

“A little over seven years,” Devin admitted with a rueful smile.

“That explains it,” she said with a sympathetic wince.

“That explains what?”

Sighing sadly, she said, “Things have changed.”

“Have they?” he murmured as he ran his hands over her back.

“They really have,” she promised him.

“Then I guess you’re going to have to catch me up,” Devin said as one his hands snaked beneath her shirt and ran over her back.

“I suppose I could do that,” Charlie said, placing her hands on the armrest so that she was leaning over him.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he asked, looking up at her as his other hand found its way beneath her shirt.

“You’re supposed to kiss me.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to do?” he murmured as his gaze moved to her mouth.

“According to the new guidelines,” she said, leaning down closer as the blanket slid down her back to pool around her waist.

“And we don’t want to ignore the new guidelines,” Devin said as he ran his hands higher so that he could pull her closer.

“We really don’t,” she whispered as her lips brushed against his.

He took his time kissing her, brushing his lips against hers as his hands continued to run over her back, encouraging her to move even closer. This was what she’d thought about all day. It was the way that he made her feel when she was in his arms that had her struggling to focus. When she should have been paying attention and trying to figure out how she was going to get Dabbi up and running within the year, she’d been thinking about Devin. She thought about how much she missed him, how much she liked the way that he touched her, the way that he kissed her, and just how badly she wanted to be back in his arms.

That was the problem.

She loved her job and could happily work for Bradford Creations for the rest of her life, but she wanted more. She wanted another challenge. When Devin hired her, Bradford Creations had been gaining attention through his Uncle's website, but that was it. The Facebook page had been created a year earlier and abandoned almost immediately. The website had been nothing more than a notice that the site was under construction and that had been pretty much it.

At that point Bradford Creations had relied heavily on word of mouth around town and with Bradford Furniture customers. He'd been able to sell enough furniture to pay the bills and hire a few part-time employees, but that had been it. The night before her interview, she'd done her research, scoped out the competition, checked out Bradford Creations' reviews online, and made a plan. She'd stayed up all night creating a marketing plan, excited to see if she could pull it off and when he told her the job was hers, she'd set to work.

It had taken her a year to really get Bradford Creations established, but it had been worth it and now...

Now she wanted to do it again.

She loved the excitement that came from building something out of nothing and the challenge of making another company go viral. She wanted to do more and the problem was that there really wasn't a lot more that she could do for Bradford Creations. All it required now was to stay relevant, post eye catching pictures, create irresistible products, provide fresh blog content, and continue interacting with Bradford Creations followers.

She needed more, but...



She also needed this, Charlie thought, realizing that she was going to have to figure out a way to make this work. Definitely going to have to figure out a way to make this work, she decided as she settled more comfortably on top of him only to moan when the move caused the large bulge between his legs to rub against her.

“How slow do you want to go?” Devin whispered against her lips as his hands slowly slid down her back and over her bottom.

“Did I not mention that I like to be worshipped?” she whispered back as she slid back, rubbing against the bulge that felt so damn good.

“I believe that was mentioned,” Devin murmured as his hands gently grabbed hold of her bottom and encouraged her to keep moving. “Is this okay?”

“More than okay,” Charlie said, moaning softly as she took her time moving on him, savoring every hard inch pressed against her.

“Why don’t we take this to your bedroom?” Devin asked, already moving to sit up.

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“Will you carry me?” she asked, loving the way that his lips twitched against hers as he wrapped his arms around her.

“Do I have a choice?” he asked as he stood up slowly, giving her a chance to wrap her legs around him.

“Do you ever?” she asked as she found her eyes closing as her head dropped back on a moan when he pressed a kiss against her throat.

“No,” Devin groaned, not really sounding all that upset about it as one of his

hands found her bottom again and gave it another squeeze as he pulled her tightly against him so that she could feel just how badly he wanted her.

When he carried her into her bedroom, she expected him to lay her down on her bed. Instead, he tightened his hold around her as he took his time kissing his way back up to her mouth as the hand on her bottom slid down between her legs and-

“Oh, god,” Charlie whimpered on a moan when she felt his fingers move over her.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve imagined touching you,” Devin said on a groan before he took her mouth in a kiss that turned hungry as soon as their lips touched.

This kiss was different. It had her shifting in his arms, struggling to get closer to him, needing to get closer to him. His name was ripped from her lips in a desperate plea as he pressed harder until his fingers were sliding between her slit, pressing the soft

cotton against her clit as she felt herself getting wet.

“That’s it,” Devin said approvingly, groaning against her mouth as his fingers moved over the thin, damp material, forcing her to break off the kiss so that she could bury her face against his neck, gasping as he worked his fingers over her, making her squirm as her fingers dug into his shoulders until she couldn’t fight it any longer.

“Devin, please,” Charlie moaned against his neck as she felt him move, carrying her further into the room as tension slowly began building deep inside her.

Before she could wonder what he was doing, she found herself straddling his lap in the oversized chair that he kept in here. As soon as her knees touched the soft leather seat, she was moving on him. She wasn’t sure if it was because he’d grabbed hold of her bottom and was encouraging her to move and she didn’t care, not when it felt this good.

God, she’d never been this turned on before, Charlie thought as she pressed a kiss against his neck before she leaned back only to moan when Devin took her mouth in a hard kiss that had her wrapping her arms around him. Using her hold on him, she continued moving, rolling her hips back and forth, sliding over the hard ridge of his erection as it pressed tightly against his fly.

She hadn’t realized just how much she’d missed sex until that moment. Had it really been since college? Charlie absently wondered on a moan when she felt Devin’s hands slide down the back of her panties and gave her bottom a squeeze. Probably, she thought as Devin used his hold on her to move her against him. She’d dated over the years, but she’d never been tempted for more.

With Devin...

Charlie had a bad feeling that she was never going to be able to get enough of him.

She wanted him. God, did she want him. He was incredibly sexy, kind, sweet, and so much fun to torment, she thought, only to whimper when he suckled on her tongue in a move that had her pressing down harder against him, desperate for more.

They had to take this slowly, Charlie reminded herself, repeating it over and over again in her head to stop herself from begging him for more, but god, she was tempted. More than tempted to beg him to bend her over and-

Found herself moaning his name when the next roll of her hips caused the hard ridge of his erection to push between her lips, causing her clit to rub against him with every roll of her hips only to gasp with every roll back when the move teased her, leaving her feeling empty and desperate for more. The incredibly sexy groans that he was making when she did it wasn't helping.

It was making her desperate for more, made her roll her hips harder, faster until-

"Oh, god!" she moaned as her head dropped back when Devin tightened his hold on her as he spread his legs further apart and-

"Fuck!" Devin groaned, burying his face against her neck as he brought his hips up, grinding against her as the tension finally exploded, sending wave after wave of pleasure throughout her body, forcing her to bite her lip to stop herself from screaming his name as Devin moaned hers.

## Chapter 28

He should probably be embarrassed that she'd had him coming in his pants like a kid, but god, the way she'd moved on him...

He wanted more.

His cock jerked in anticipation as he thought about the way it felt to have her rubbing against him, grinding on him as she released the sexiest little moans that he'd ever heard. When she'd gasped his name, Devin had fucking lost it. He'd come harder than he had in years and it was all because of the adorable woman curled up, fast asleep in her bed.

She was so fucking beautiful, Devin thought as he sat down on the bed next to her. He'd meant to come down earlier, but after last night and spending all day with the kids, he really needed to get some work done. He'd been contracted to design a large-scale bookshelf meant for an architect in Germany that he needed to finish. He'd barely had a chance to tell the kids that he couldn't watch a movie with them this afternoon when Charlie was telling him not to worry about it.

Deciding that he'd make it up to her later, Devin headed upstairs to his office and spent the next eight hours trying to figure out the best way to create a secret passageway that would lead to a reading nook in an eighteenth century manor that blended in with the architecture without giving anything away. It wasn't the first design that he'd been commissioned to create over the years, but it was definitely one of the most challenging.

Before he knew it, it was after midnight and he'd realized that he'd worked through dinner and the kids' bedtime. He'd finished saving his work and went to check on the kids to find them tucked in bed, fast asleep. A quick stop in the kitchen let him know that Charlie had saved him dinner before he headed to her apartment, hoping that she was still awake only find her curled up with her iPad, fast asleep.

As much as he wanted her, and god, did he fucking want her, he should let her sleep, Devin decided as he leaned over and kissed her cheek. Definitely let her sleep, he thought, resigning himself to a cold shower as he moved to stand up only to feel his lips twitch as he watched her small hand grab hold of his shirt.

“Are you here to worship me?” came the sleepily mumbled question that had him smiling as she used her hold on his shirt to pull him closer.

“Do you want me to be?” Devin asked, obediently leaning down to brush his lips against hers.

“Always,” Charlie murmured, reaching up to cup his jaw as she brushed her lips teasingly against his.

“I want to do this right this time,” he said, brushing his lips against hers one last time before pulling away.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked as she released the hold on his shirt to reach up and run her fingertips over his jaw.

“I thought we’d grab that bottle of wine that I still have chilling in the fridge, grab a blanket and go outside, and put the firepit to good use. What do you think?” Devin asked, turning his head so that he could press a kiss against her palm.

“I suppose we could do that,” Charlie said, smiling as she sat up so that she could kiss him.

“I just have to go check on the twins first to make sure that they’re still sleeping, but I’ll be right back in a few minutes,” Devin said, kissing her one last time as he moved to stand up only to pause to add, “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I think I can handle that,” she said, nodding solemnly.

“Give me five minutes,” Devin said, giving her one last kiss before heading for the door and quickly made his way upstairs.

As he walked into Abbi's room, he tried to remember if he had any wine glasses only to wonder if Charlie had any when he realized that the closest thing that he had to wine glasses was Abbi's Disney princess cups. He should pick some up, Devin decided as he made his way into his son's room. Once he made sure that his children were asleep, he quietly stepped into the hallway and found himself wondering why his bedroom door was open.

Curious, Devin walked into his bedroom. When he spotted his bathroom light on, he carefully closed his bedroom door and walked into his bathroom just as Charlie finished wrapping one of his towels around herself.

"I thought you were going to wait for me,"

Devin said as he closed the bathroom door behind him.

"I was, but then, I thought that I would make this easier for you," Charlie said, shooting him a smile as she reached inside the shower and turned it on.

"That's very considerate of you," he murmured, slowly exhaling as he took in the beautiful woman standing before him.

"I try my best," Charlie murmured as she adjusted the temperature while he stood there, watching her even as he couldn't help but wonder if he'd ever been this fucking nervous before.

"So, I was thinking," she said as she dried her hands on the towel hanging by the shower.

"What about?" he asked absently as he watched her.

"I want to try something different with the website and Facebook. I was thinking of

adding some pictures of you with the kids to give it a more personal touch,” she explained as she returned her attention to the shower.

“Do whatever you want,” he said, slowly exhaling as he watched her pick up his bottle of body wash and examined it.

“Are you sure?” Charlie asked, sending him a questioning look over her shoulder.

“Yes,” he said, admittedly distracted at the moment as he ran his eyes over her, taking in every detail from her curly dark brown hair pulled into a messy bun, down to her slender neck, her shoulders, and-

“Are you going to join me?” Charlie asked as she reached up and pulled her towel off, dropping it to the floor as he stood there trying to make sense out of what she’d said and once he did...

“Shit!” he bit out, struggling to pull his belt loose but his hands wouldn’t fucking cooperate.

“Here,” Charlie said softly, gently pushing his hands away so that she could pull his belt loose for him.

When he went to take over, she shook her head as she unsnapped his pants. She slowly worked his zipper down as he watched her. She was so fucking beautiful, Devin thought as she reached for his shirt. Keeping her eyes locked with his, she took her time unbuttoning his shirt until the last button was released.



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Devin released a shaky breath as he felt her small hands slide over his chest only to groan when she leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his chest.

“Seven years, huh?” she said, shooting him a teasing smile as she pushed his shirt off him.

“I only care about the last five,” Devin said, cupping her face in his hands as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

When he felt her small hands work his pants down, Devin groaned as he toed off his shoes only to moan when she ran one small hand lightly over his cock, teasing it through his underwear. As she took her time driving him out of his fucking mind, he reached down, careful not to disturb her and finished pulling his pants off. Before his pants hit the floor, she was pushing his underwear down and wrapping one small hand around his cock.

The first stroke had him groaning, the second had him stumbling after her as she used her hold to lead him into the shower, and the third...the third had him losing his fucking mind as he wrapped his arms around her so that he could run his hands down her back and over that generous ass that he'd become obsessed with over the years.

She felt so fucking good, Devin thought as he gave her ass a squeeze while she continued working her hand over his cock, giving the base a squeeze before sliding her hand up to run her palm over the sensitive head, tearing a groan from him before doing it again.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked, using the familiar phrase that had his lips

twitching.

“Do I have a choice?” he asked, giving her ass one last squeeze before he pulled his hand back so that he could wrap his hand around the large breast tipped with a soft pink nipple and gave it a squeeze that had them both groaning.

“Maybe...”

“What do you want to know, brat?” he asked, trying to decide what felt better in his hands, her ass or her breasts only to decide that he should check out the third option before making a decision.

Definitely this, Devin decided on a groan as he slid his hand between her legs and-

“Did...did you forget to shut the television off?”

## Chapter 29

“Oh, my god that would look so good in the kitchen,” Charlie whispered softly as she glanced at the closed bathroom door, wondering if the coast was clear yet.

Maybe she should check? Charlie thought as she sat there, staring at the door for another minute before reluctantly placing the magazine that she’d read three times already down on the floor next to the tub only to pick it up again and dog-ear the page since she felt that Devin should build her a new kitchen cart to make up for this. Not that she was actually mad at him, because she wasn’t. No, what she wanted was a new kitchen cart to keep the mixing bowls and baking items within reach to make it easier for the kids to help her cook.

As quietly as she could, Charlie slowly climbed out of the tub and tiptoed her way to the bathroom door, wincing and cringing every inch of the way until she was standing

in front of the door, listening for any signs of life coming from the other side. When they'd realized that they had company, Devin had mouthed, "I'll be right back," pulled his clothes on, and disappeared while she'd finished getting dressed as she debated her options only to realize that she really didn't have any.

For a while, she stood there, staring at the door, waiting for him to come back and tell her that the coast was clear only to end up testing out various spots in the bathroom, searching for the most comfortable spot to wait. That had ended with her searching for something to do to combat boredom when it became obvious that he wasn't coming back.

When she didn't hear anything, Charlie slowly, ever so slowly, opened the bathroom door and peeked out the door to find all three Bradfords passed out on the bed. Lightweights, she thought, shaking her head in disgust as she quickly, yet quietly, made her way to the bedroom door and once she was there...

She moved her ass.

She was downstairs and in her apartment less than a minute later. Deciding to call it a night, she headed to the bathroom and got ready for bed a second time that night before shutting the lights off and crawling into her bed, thankful that she could sleep in today. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she closed her eyes, pulled her blankets up to her shoulders and wondered if she should be concerned that someone was crawling into her bed.

Probably, Charlie thought as she felt that large arm wrap around her and pull her back against the man that she was no longer speaking to.

"I'm sorry," came the apology that had her pointedly looking at the wall.

"Are you mad?" Devin asked the question that he should already know the answer to

so she folded her arms over her chest and continued to glare straight ahead.

There was a heavy sigh and then...

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for them to find out about us yet, Charlie.”

“I’m not mad about that,” she said with a snort of disgust.

There was a pause and then...

“Is this about the snacks?” Devin asked and she swore that she could actually feel his wince in the dark.

“You’re damn right I’m pissed about the snacks,” she snapped, deciding that this didn’t count as talking to him.

“I can explain,” he rushed to say, but it was too late and they both knew it.

“You made root beer floats and s’mores and you didn’t think that you should sneak some of it into me?” Charlie demanded as she commenced with the glaring.

“Charlie, I-”

“Don’t. Just don’t,” she said with a sniffle even as she made a mental note to run to the store in the morning and pick up stuff for root beer floats and s’mores.

“Baby, I really tried,” Devin said as the arm wrapped around her pulled her over onto her back.

“No, you didn’t,” she said, pointedly looking away as he placed his hand on her stomach.

“What if I promised to make it up to you?” he suggested in an incredibly sexy whisper that had her licking her lips.

“I’m not talking to you,” Charlie said, ensuring that he understood exactly how mad she was with him.

“I see,” he murmured as that hand on her stomach began heading south, pausing only long enough to slide beneath her panties as she spread her legs to make it easier for him.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you that it killed me to leave you like that?” Devin asked groaning as he cupped her.

“I mean, it probably wouldn’t hurt,” Charlie admitted only to gasp when she felt his fingers slide through her slit and brush against her clit.

“After finally knowing just how soft your pussy was and how fucking good it felt in my hand,” he said on a groan before adding, “Only to have to leave when all I wanted to do was find out how good it felt to slide inside you. That damn near killed me.”

Licking her lips, Charlie struggled not to moan as his words rolled over her. They should be taking this slowly, taking their time to make sure that this wasn’t a mistake but as his mouth found her neck and his fingers continued moving, teasing her, she found herself asking, “Do you still want to find out?”

Instead of answering her, she felt him shift so that he was kneeling by her side as he pulled his hand free. Seconds later, she felt his fingers hook in her panties and felt them pulled down as she laid there, licking her lips as she raised her hips to make it easier for him. Once her panties were gone, Charlie sat up quickly so that she could pull off her shirt and once she had it off, she tossed it aside and laid back down just as Devin moved to settle himself between her legs.

She'd never felt this desperate before, never needed a man this badly, never felt this empty and thought that she would scream if she had to wait another second. Before he finished settling between her legs, she was reaching down and pushing his underwear down, uncaring that she'd never done something like this before and-

"Oh, fuck!" Devin groaned as she felt him start to push inside her.

Her breath caught when she felt the tip slide inside her, re

minding her that it had been a long time since she'd had sex. He was bigger than she was used to and so thick that she began to worry that he wasn't going to fit. Just before it became too much, Devin pulled back as his mouth found hers.

As he slowly worked the tip inside her, sliding in a little more each time as he moved his mouth over hers, brushing his lips against hers one second only to slide his tongue against hers the next, driving her crazy until it wasn't enough and found herself spreading her legs more, desperate for more. With a groan, he gave it to her, sliding his cock the rest of the way inside her until she felt his balls pressed against her bottom and then-

He was moving.

He rolled his hips, grinding inside her to get her used to his size, teasing her as tension once again started to build, the pressure building low in her stomach.

"So fucking good..." Devin growled as he began pulling back farther so that he could push back inside her slowly, savoring the move with a groan. Her breath caught with every thrust only to escape her on a moan when he pulled back as her hips arched, desperate for more.

He felt so good, Charlie thought as she ran her hands over him, enjoying the play of

muscles working in his back as he slowly fucked her, the sounds of the bed creaking with every thrust filling the large room along with the sounds of their moans. The tension continued to build until it was too much and-

“Charlie,” Devin groaned as he moved faster, harder, until she couldn’t take anymore.

Wrapping her arms around him, she buried her face against his neck and bit her lip to stop herself from moaning his name, afraid that she was going to end up screaming his name if she opened her mouth as he rolled his hips one last time with a groaned, “God, I fucking love you,” as she lay there, tempted to say it back, but...

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She wasn't ready to say it, not yet.

### Chapter 30

"I can't do this, Daddy. I just can't," Abbi whispered with a sad shake of her head as she looked down with a barely-there sniffle as she wrapped her small arms around her backpack.

"Why is that?" Devin asked, biting back a yawn as he reached over and unbuckled Dustin.

God, he was fucking exhausted, he thought unable to help but smile as he thought of the reason why he'd barely managed more than a few hours of sleep over the past two days.

Charlie.

He hadn't been able to get enough of her and thank god, she didn't seem to mind. He'd lived out several of his fantasies over the past few days and a few that he was ashamed that he'd never thought of before and...

He couldn't wait until he could pull her back in his arms, but he was going to have to because he had other things to take care of. During the day, he'd focus on his children and work and then at night, he'd be able to focus all of his attention doing all of those things with Charlie that he couldn't seem to get enough of.

"It's against my religion," the little smart ass said, reminding him that it was time to



focus on his children, the same ones that had their teacher sending him an email last night, asking him to come in early for another meeting.

“It’s against your religion to have a meeting with your teacher?” he asked, handing Dustin his backpack as he climbed out of the car.

“I’m afraid it is, Daddy,” Abbi said with a heartfelt sigh and a sad shake of her head.

“I see,” Devin murmured as he closed Dustin’s door and made his way around the car to find his daughter frantically trying to lock the car. This was just fucking sad, Devin thought as he pulled his keys out of his pocket and hit the unlock button as he reached over and opened her door.

“You want to tell me what you’re afraid your teacher is going to tell me?” Devin asked as he unbuckled her seatbelt and grabbed her before she could dive into the front seat.

“But what if she doesn’t mention them? Then I’d be tattling on myself and you told me that tattling was wrong,” Abbi mumbled sadly, making him bite back a smile as he threw her over his shoulder. God, she was a fucking handful, Devin thought as he grabbed her backpack, closed the door and headed towards the school with Dustin by his side.

“Then you should definitely tell me,” he told her as they made their way to the front door.

“That just sounds wrong, Daddy,” Abbi said as Devin shifted his attention to Dustin.

“You’re being quiet this morning. Is everything okay?”

Shrugging, Dustin didn’t say anything as he reached over and pushed the doorbell.

Before he got a chance to ask his son what was wrong, the door was opening and their principal was there, ushering them inside.

“Good morning, Mr. Bradford, how are you?” she said with a warm smile as they walked inside.

“We’re good,” Devin said although he wasn’t so sure about Dustin at the moment.

“Why don’t we go talk in my office?” Mrs. Haskins said before shifting her attention to Dustin. “Dustin, why don’t you and your sister go upstairs and see if you can help your teacher set up for morning crafts?”

“We’d rather stay with Daddy,” Abbi said as Devin placed her on her feet.

“And I’d rather find out why your principal needs to talk to me,” he said, handing Abbi’s backpack to her.

“Me, too, Daddy,” Abbi said, nodding solemnly, “Me, too.”

Narrowing his eyes on his baby girl, he said, “Go.”

“Fine,” Abbi sighed heavily as she reached over and took her brother’s hand and started heading towards their classroom.

“Right this way,” Mrs. Haskins said, gesturing for him to follow her.

“What did my children do now?” he asked, throwing her a sympathetic wince that had her lips twitching.

“Many things, Mr. Bradford,” she said, smiling as they walked into her office. “But I actually called you in for a different reason.”

“And what’s that?” Devin asked as he took a seat.

“Well, I’m not sure if you remember, but in the beginning of October we suggested getting Dustin tested so that we knew what his strengths and weaknesses were so that we had a better idea of how we could help him,” she began as Devin sat there, trying to prepare himself for what was coming.

Dustin had always been quiet even as a baby. While Abbi would cry over damn near everything, his son...hadn’t. He’d simply smile, content to enjoy his bottle or watch Devin as he worked. At the time, Devin had been relieved that his son was taking it easy on him, but as Dustin got older Devin began to worry. He was more reserved than his sister, could happily sit for hours playing by himself, and didn’t seem to be interested in playing with children his own age. He-

“Before we get to the results, I’m curious about something. Does Dustin spend a lot of time with his cousins, Sebastian and Jonathan?” Mrs. Haskins asked, making Devin wince because he’d heard about the hell that the twins had raised when they’d attended this school.

Clearing his throat, Devin said, “We’re a close family.”

Nodding, she murmured, “That makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” Devin found himself asking as he watched her pull out a stack of paper.

“Did you know that your son has plans for world domination?” Mrs. Haskins asked, clearing her throat as she visibly struggled not to smile as she handed what he now realized was a collection of papers that had been stapled together to create a book.

“I see,” Devin murmured, not really sure how he was supposed to respond as he

opened the first page and took in the surprisingly neat and well-organized drawings depicting his son's plans to take over the world.

"He plans to set you up in a mansion on a tropical island," she said, making his lips pull up into a pleased smile before adding, "because he doesn't think that you're going to be able to handle the pressure that comes with running the world," making him glare.

"He feels that it would be better for everyone concerned if you weren't involved in things," she said, sounding really fucking amused as Devin sat there...seething.

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"What were the test results?" Devin asked evenly as he tossed the booklet back on her desk, refusing to waste another minute talking about his son's world domination plans since they were clearly faulty.

Chuckling, she picked up a piece of paper off her desk and handed it to him. "Now, normally we would have a group meeting to discuss these results and we can still do that if you want, but I felt that it was important to meet sooner rather than later so that we can discuss options."

"We actually have a few. Your son scored very high," she said, pointing to a number at the top of the page. "That's his I.Q."

"One hundred and thirty-two?" he asked, sending her a questioning look.

"I believe it would have actually been higher if Dustin hadn't become bored with the test and decided to take the opportunity to discuss the limited lunch selections in the cafeteria," she explained, making his lips twitch. "The test is timed. I'd actually be curious to see how he does in a few years when he's able to focus better."

“What does this mean for him?” Devin asked as he sat there, trying to process everything.

He came here expecting a problem, but instead they were discussing his son’s I.Q. and plans for world domination, which they were going to discuss because they both fucking knew that he would make a wonderful asset.

“The concern was his reading, but his teacher has told me that he’s made a great deal of improvement since October so whatever you’re doing, keep doing it. He’s quickly catching up with his class, doing his classwork, and from what his teacher tells me, most days he finishes his work early and likes to read. We’d like to see him socialize with more children his own age, but I don’t think that’s going to happen,” she said with a helpless shrug.

At his questioning look, she said, “They annoy him.”

“Of course, they do,” Devin said, rubbing his hands roughly down his face.

“If he can continue making progress and he is willing to work with us over the summer, we have a few options that we’d like to discuss next year. We’re debating having him skip a grade or have him enroll in our gifted program, possibly both.”

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“What about Abbi?” he asked, slowly exhaling as he tried to figure out how they were going to-

“Will be in charge of the military,” Mrs. Haskins said with a pointed look at his son’s plans for world domination.

“He put his sister in charge of the military?” he demanded.

“Mmmhmm, and his grandparents in charge of the treasury,” she said, clearly fucking amused at his expense.

“And did he mention someone named Charlie?” he asked, because he had to know.

“Yes, I believe he set Charlie up in a mansion as well,” Mrs. Haskins said, somewhat appeasing him because at least he wasn’t the only one that his son found lacking. They’d have to share a mansion to save money, of course, Devin mused only to end up once again glaring when she added, “He gave her the mansion next to his so that she could run the communications department in comfort.”

“Anything else?” he bit out evenly.

“Your children terrify their teacher?” she added, sounding really fucking amused.

“They terrify everyone,” Devin said, getting to his feet, deciding that he’d had his emotions played with enough for one day and headed for the door, but not before adding, “I would have been an invaluable resource to have!”

“He put me in charge of education,” she said, looking really fucking smug.

With one last glare, Devin left, deciding that he would get his revenge later by eating all the snacks in the playroom so that his son was left with nothing but fruit and-

“What the hell?” he muttered as he glanced down at his phone and saw the text message that T.J. sent him earlier.

Charlie called in sick.

Shit!

Maybe he shouldn’t have kept her up so late, Devin thought as he climbed into his car and headed to work only...

He had to go check on her and make sure she was okay.

After a quick stop at Dixon’s Bakery and twenty minutes of being stuck behind a school bus, Devin quietly let himself into her apartment and sighed. She was lying on her stomach, asleep. He should probably just go, he thought, moving to do just that when...did her ass just wiggle?

Shaking his head, Devin pulled his phone out of his pocket to let T.J. know that he was on his way when movement drew his attention back to the bed to find the sheet pooled at her waist, revealing her bare back and-

Another wiggle.

Chuckling, Devin deleted his text and sent a new one, letting T.J. know that he was in charge today before he tossed his phone on the chair, reached down and pulled his boots off as he made his way to the bed, pulling his shirt off and tossing it aside as he

went. He had his belt pulled loose, his pants undone, and his cock pulled out by the time that he crawled onto the bed behind her. He managed to stroke his hard cock one time before Charlie moved back, placing her beautiful ass in the air and-

Tore a groan from him as he slid home.

## Chapter 31

“Do you want to go to Fire & Brimstone for lunch?” Devin asked as he opened the backdoor for her.

“Can’t. Gotta catch up with work since someone decided to call in sick yesterday,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head.

“Someone, huh?” Devin said, chuckling as he took her hand in his and headed towards their office.

“I felt that you could use some cheering up after your meeting with the twins’ teacher yesterday,” she said, deciding not to mention that she’d been exhausted since he’d probably figured that out when she’d convinced the kids that a nap party was fun after they came home from school yesterday.

“That’s very considerate of you,” he said, sounding amused.

“I’m a very considerate girlfriend,” she mumbled absently as a chime drew her attention to her phone.

“Something wrong?”

“Someone tried to hack into the Facebook account, again,” Charlie said, sighing heavily because this was the fourth, no, the fifth time in a week.



“Any idea who’s doing it?” Devin asked as another chime alerted her to the fact that someone had just tried to hack into the Twitter account.

“No, but they’re determined,” she said, making a note to change the passwords just in case as well as update the security on the website.

“Is this something that I should be worried about?” Devin asked as she bit back a groan when she realized that she was going to have to unlock the Instagram account as well.

“Not unless the hacker can correctly guess my twenty-character password,” Charlie said, already deciding that it was time to change the login information since whoever was trying to break in knew her Bradford Creations’ email.

For now, she would start using the Dabbi Digital Marketing email that she’d set up since it would make it harder for whoever was doing this to keep screwing with the accounts because she was honestly sick of getting locked out of the accounts every day. She would also set the accounts up with a secondary login in Devin’s name since he would need it when it was time for her to quit, which was something that she was trying not to think about at the moment.

“What if I picked up lunch from Dixon’s? Would you have lunch with me then?” Devin asked as she slid her phone back in her pocket.

“I brought lunch,” she said, giving her backpack a pointed jostle only to frown when she realized that her bag was suspiciously light this morning.

“I got bored waiting for you,” Devin said, shrugging it off.

“When?” she demanded, racking her brain trying to figure out when he had a chance to eat the lunch that she’d packed this morning.

“When you ran back inside to grab your iPad,” he said around a yawn, sounding bored while she stood there unable to stop staring at him in horror.

“I was only inside for thirty seconds, if that,” Charlie pointed out hollowly.

“I was hungry,” Devin said as she narrowed her eyes on him.

“There had better be jelly donuts with that lunch,” she said, turning to walk into their office only to turn around and playfully slap him on his arm. “And stop stealing my food.”

“If I did, then you wouldn’t have lunch with me,” Devin said, pulling his bag off so that he could reach in and drop it on the office floor.

“You could just eat lunch with me at my desk,” she pointed out.

“I could do that,” he admitted before adding, “but I’d rather steal your lunch to hold me over.”

Narrowing her eyes on him, she said, “I’m filing a complaint with the manager.”

“Oh, yeah, and who’s that?” Devin asked, looking a little too cocky for her liking.

“Dustin,” she said, taking an insane amount of pleasure in wiping that smile off his face.

“I would have made a great fucking asset!” he snapped as he turned around to storm off, but she couldn’t let him leave like that, now could she?

“I don’t get a goodbye kiss?” Charlie asked with the saddest sigh that she could manage.

“No, you don’t,” Devin said in a huff as he folded his arms over his chest and pointedly looked away.

“Are you sure?” she asked, worrying her bottom lip.

“Very sure,” he said as she pulled her bag off her shoulder and dropped it on the floor next to his.

“I’ll give you a goodbye kiss,” T.J. offered with a wink as he walked over and-

“I was kidding!” T.J. said, chuckling as he held up his hands in surrender and backed away before Devin could make another grab for him.

With one last glare shot at T.J., Devin leaned and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before he turned around and-

Stopped when she released a long-suffering sigh that had him slowly turning around and cocking a brow in question.

“It’s just that,” Charlie said, pausing so that she could release another sigh, this one softer, “it just doesn’t feel like that kiss properly conveyed your undying love for me, that’s all.”

“That’s all, huh?” Devin murmured as his lips pulled up into a pleased smile

.

“I’m afraid so,” she said, unable to help but smile when he reached for her.

When he leaned down and took her mouth in a slow, deep kiss, Charlie found herself reaching up to wrap her arms around him and-

Blinking when he suddenly stopped and she found herself turned around and gasping, “Hey!” when he gave her bottom a soft swat.

“Get to work,” he said, chuckling as he turned around to walk off only to make her frown when he threw over his shoulder, “Don’t forget to see Patrick to get reimbursed for that convention.”

“I’m sorry. What’s this now?” she couldn’t help but wonder.

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“Go upstairs and put in for the convention. You shouldn’t have to pay for something that helps you do your job,” Devin said firmly as he gestured for her to move her ass.

She opened her mouth to argue only to close it with a sigh when he said, “Go,” with a look that told her that she better move her ass.

Grumbling, Charlie reluctantly headed upstairs and made her way into the break-room, deciding that she’d kill some time in here before she headed back downstairs since she had absolutely no intention of trying to get reimbursed for this. She needed to tell Devin and she needed to tell him soon, Charlie realized as she tried to figure out how she was going to do that without making this awkward. Then again, maybe she should be more concerned with how pissed he was going to be when he found out that she was quitting. Maybe if she-

“There are better ways to do your job, you know,” Kelly said with a pitying look as she walked past her and helped herself to the pot of coffee that Charlie was sure had been there since she started working here five years ago.

“What’s that?” Charlie asked even as she couldn’t help but wonder if she would be better off leaving her lunch in here from now on to throw Devin off.

“Sleeping with the boss,” Kelly said with a pointed look just as T.J. strolled into the room along with Scott and about half the upstairs staff, who were probably looking for their morning donut fix.

When Kelly’s words sank in, there was an awkward silence and then...

“There are?” Charlie asked, slowly blinking.

“Mmmhmm,” Kelly said around a sip of the acidic coffee that she was using as an excuse to try to humiliate Charlie only to add in a conspiratorial whisper, “It’s kind of pathetic.”

“Dating the hottest guy in town is pathetic?” Charlie said, earning a few chuckles and an outraged, “Hey!” from T.J.

“No, thinking that he’s interested in more than a free babysitter is,” Kelly said with a pointed look at Charlie as she went to take another sip of coffee only to choke on it when Charlie said, “Whores don’t work for free.”

“W-what?”

“I mean, not that I’ve really put much thought into it or anything, but I’d like to think that if I was a whore that I’d be a high-classed one,” Charlie mumbled thoughtfully.

“Wait. I didn’t say-”

“I’d like to think so at least,” Charlie said, nodding solemnly as she struggled to remember that bizarre conversation that she’d had with Ben on her twenty-first birthday when they’d argued over who would make more money as a whore. She didn’t care what he said, she’d definitely make more money than him.

“But I didn’t say-”

“That I was a whore?” Charlie said, beating her to it with a sad shake of her head.

“No, it’s okay. I need to learn to accept my new station in life. It will make things easier so that I don’t get my hopes up when Devin grows tired of me and it’s time for me to find someone else willing to pay for my services.”

“This is so painful to watch,” T.J. mumbled as everyone nodded in agreement, watching as Kelly’s face turned an interesting shade of red.

“You’ve given me a lot to think about, Kelly,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head as she headed towards the door only to pause long enough to grab T.J.’s arm and drag him behind her as she threw over her shoulder, “He’s my ten o’clock.”

## Chapter 32

“She called Charlie a whore?” Devin demanded, dropping his hammer as he turned around to-

“No,” T.J. said around a bite of coffee roll as he stopped him with his free hand, “she tried to get into a battle of wits with Charlie and lost. What I really need you to focus on is the fact that your girlfriend dragged me to Dixon’s afterwards and made me buy her a dozen jelly donuts.”

“Why didn’t you come get me?” Devin snapped, rubbing the back of his neck as he glanced back at his office to find Charlie working at her desk as she nibbled on a donut.

“Did you not just hear me? She dragged me downstairs and then tightened her hold on my arm when I tried to escape and dragged me all the way down the street to Dixon’s. I feared for my life every step of the way!”

“What’s everyone saying about me dating Charlie?” Devin asked as he struggled against the urge to put his fist through something.

He should have thought about this and kept their relationship a secret for Charlie’s sake so that-

“Not much other than they’re pissed that Scott won the pool,” T.J. said, shrugging it off as he finished off the last bite of coffee roll before reaching for the white bakery bag that Devin decided was rightfully his.

“What pool?” Devin snapped, snatching the bag off the table before T.J. could grab it.

“The pool we’ve had going since Charlie started five years ago,” T.J. said with a “duh” look as he gestured for Devin to hand the bag back over. When Devin only glared, T.J. dropped his hand with a sigh and walked over to his locker and grabbed an identical bakery bag and helped himself to another coffee roll. Narrowing his eyes on the move, Devin grabbed the last coffee roll out of the bag he’d stolen even as he couldn’t help but stare at the other bag, wondering what else was in there.

“Why would you have a pool on Charlie?” Devin asked, taking another bite as he found himself glancing back in time to watch Charlie grab her camera off her desk and head for the office door.

“Because we all have a set of working eyes,” T.J. said with a pointed look as Charlie walked into the shop, ignoring the red line marking the floor, plucked the coffee roll out of Devin’s hands and gestured for him to get back to work as she said, “I need pictures.”

When Devin continued to stand there, she locked eyes with him and finished off his coffee roll, making yummy sounds while she did it as he narrowed his eyes on her. “That was so good.”

Nodding slowly, Devin said, “I want to see other people.”

“And you can do that just as soon as I get my pictures,” Charlie said, gesturing for him to get on with it.



“No,” Devin said evenly as he glared down at the evil woman who’d stolen his precious baked good.

“You promised,” she pointed out, once again gesturing for him to get on with it.

“Looks like I’m breaking my promise.”

“Are you sure that you really want to do that?” she asked with a pitying look that had him grinding his teeth.

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Devin said, glaring down at the small woman as he waited for her to tell him what happened with Kelly.

“Fine. I’ll get them later when the kids are here,” Charlie said, shrugging it off as she turned around and headed back to the office only to stop with a heavy sigh when he said, “Do you have something that you want to tell me?”

“My ten o’clock has a big mouth?” Charlie offered as she turned around to face him.

“You manhandled me, woman!” T.J. snapped in outrage.

Blinking, she said, “And you should be thankful that I didn’t charge extra for that.”

Sighing heavily, Devin ran his hands roughly down his face as he muttered, “You’re not a whore.”

“Please don’t try to limit me,” the woman that was driving him crazy, said.

“Don’t make me spank you,” he said, dropping his hands away.

“That’ll cost extra,” Charlie pointed out with a nod, making hi

s lips twitch.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he asked, reaching over and cupped her face in his hands.

“And ruin my street cred? I don’t think so,” Charlie said, sighing heavily as she stood up on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss before once again heading back to their office.

Devin watched her walk away as he asked, “Should I fire her?”

“Who?” T.J. asked, walking over to check out the designs for the kitchen cart that Devin had been working on since he saw that she’d bookmarked a page on kitchen carts in one of his magazines.

He was building this one for Charlie, but it had given him an idea. He was curious to see what he could do with kitchen furniture, something that he’d been toying with doing for a few years now. His cousin Reese was coming in next week to show him a few of his designs so that Devin could see what he could do with them. It should be interesting, he thought as he said, “Kelly.”

“I wouldn’t. Charlie handled herself and she doesn’t really seem all that upset about it,” T.J. pointed out.

True, but...

He really wasn’t sure that it was a good idea to let this go.

\*\_\*\_\*\_\*

“Your father’s going to kill me,” Charlie said hollowly, wondering if it had always

been this difficult to breathe.

“We’ll miss you,” Abbi said with the biggest smile that Charlie had ever seen as she carefully cuddled the rabbit that Devin was going to kill her for.

She still wasn’t sure how it happened.

One minute, she was telling the kids that she had to stop by the post office to drop something off and the next...

“Your father’s going to kill me,” Charlie mumbled again, hoping that one of the kids would tell her that she was worrying over nothing.

They didn’t.

No, what they did was continue snuggling and pet the bunny that was going to get her killed. This was bad. This was very bad, Charlie thought even as she glanced around her apartment, looking for somewhere to hide the large cage that the pet store owner had managed to talk her into buying and-

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This wasn't going to work.

She opened her mouth to suggest that they bring the bunny back only to end up closing it with a groan when Abbi said, "I love my bunny," damning Charlie to hell.

"We should keep her in the living room," Dustin said, reaching over to run his hand over the bunny's white back while she nudged her light grey face against Abbi's hand, demanding more carrots while Charlie couldn't help but wonder if the kids were trying to get her killed.

"I shall call her Applesauce," Abbi said with a firm nod.

"That's nice," Charlie mumbled absently as she wondered if she should update her will.

"She's so fluffy!" Abbi, who hadn't stopped smiling since the store owner placed the bunny in her arms, said as she obediently grabbed another baby carrot and held it for the bunny.

"She's pretty," Dustin said, shifting on the bed to move closer to his sister.

They were so damn adorable, Charlie thought, feeling her shoulders slump in defeat as she reached over to the pet Applesauce. "She is cute," she found herself admitting only to wince when she looked back and found Devin, who looked really pissed, standing in front of her bed, glaring...at her, which she didn't find very reassuring at the moment.

“Why don’t you guys go take the bunny and watch television while I talk to Charlie?” Devin said, never taking his eyes off her as the kids, who knew better than to argue right now, climbed off her bed and made their way to the door as Charlie sat there, debating joining them when Devin added, “Close the door behind you.”

“Wait! You don’t have to leave!” Charlie said, only to groan when she heard the door close behind them.

“Explain,” Devin bit out evenly.

Charlie opened her mouth to do just that, only close it and take a deep breath as she was forced to grab hold of the comforter when a wave of dizziness hit her. “Sorry, my life just flashed before my eyes,” she said, taking that slight twitch of his lips as encouragement.

“I’m going to spank your ass,” Devin said, nodding to himself as he moved to grab her.

“That costs extra!” Charlie said, turning to dive off the bed only to end up desperately trying to grab onto the comforter when the man that was a lot faster than he looked grabbed her.

“Let’s have a talk, shall we?” he said calmly as he dragged her off the bed and threw her over his shoulder.

“I mean, it’s your money. If you want to spend it on talking, I guess that’s fine,” Charlie said, shrugging it off even as she couldn’t help but notice that he was carrying her into the bathroom.

“I honestly don’t know how Ben put up with you,” Devin said as he placed her on the bathroom counter before closing the bathroom door and throwing the lock while she

sat there wondering if this counted as a secondary location.

“With the help of alcohol and a lot of denial,” Charlie mumbled absently as Devin came back.

“That’s not really going to help me, now is it?” Devin drawled as he stepped between her legs. “Start talking.”

“About my rates?” she asked with a hopeful smile.

“I suppose we could talk about that, but I thought we’d talk about the fact that you gave my children a rabbit instead,” he murmured as she felt herself being pulled closer.

“I’d rather talk about my rates. They’re very competitive,” Charlie said, nodding solemnly.

“So, I’ve heard,” he murmured as she found herself pulled even closer until she was sitting on the edge and a soft groan was torn from her when she felt his hand settle between her legs. “Do you remember when I told the kids that they couldn’t have any pets until they were older?”

“Vaguely?” she said, admittedly having a problem paying attention at the moment.

“Vaguely?” he murmured back her answer, looking thoughtful as he stopped rubbing his hand between her legs to pull her off the counter and-

“I remember!” Charlie found herself admitting as she suddenly found herself facing the mirror with her hands grabbing hold of the counter.

“Good. Now we’re getting somewhere,” Devin said as he reached around and

unsnapped her jeans.

“Umm, the kids are downstairs,” she reminded him, afraid that he might actually give into temptation and spank her ass, which she was almost ninety percent sure that she wouldn’t enjoy.

“They have SpongeBob on and a bunny. They’re good for at least an hour,” he said as she felt him push her pants down along with her panties.

“I’m probably going to need those to escape,” she pointed out.

“Probably,” Devin said, not really sounding all that concerned as she once again found herself picked up and placed on the counter.

“Would it help if I apologized?” Charlie offered as she watched him pull her sneakers off, one at a time before he finished pulling her pants off and tossed them aside.

“Why did you get the bunny, Charlie?” Devin asked as he knelt down in front of her.

“I’m weak?” she mumbled absently as she watched Devin lean forward and-

“Definitely weak,” Charlie freely admitted when she felt his tongue slide between her slit.

“Try again,” Devin said with another slow swipe of his tongue.

“Ummm, I’m still not really sure what happened. We were heading to the post office and then there was talk of fluffiness and I was finding out just how expensive hay was,” she mumbled somewhat incoherently as one hand found the edge of the counter and held on tightly as the other started running her fingers through his hair, encouraging him to keep doing that thing with his tongue that was making it really

difficult to focus.

“And you’re not going to do it again, are you?” Devin said, tearing a “No!” from her seconds later when he slid his tongue inside her as she shook her head because she’d definitely learned her lesson.

## Chapter 33

Four Months Later...

“This isn’t happening,” Devin said, taking a moment to close his eyes and slowly exhale, hoping, praying really, that when he opened his eyes that this would all end up being a bad dream.

It wasn’t.

“I had to feed Bradford,” Abbi, who was covered from head to toe in pancake batter said with a helpless shrug as the large German Shepard covered in pancake batter that failed the police academy because of his love of snuggles and who had managed to break Charlie in less than two minutes with a whimper, leaned over and swiped his tongue over Abbi’s face, cleaning a small section of her skin.

“What was wrong with the breakfast I made him?” Devin demanded with a glare, daring her to even suggest that he didn’t take good care of the dog that he’d decided was his.

“He deserves deliciousness,” Abbi said, folding her batter-covered arms over her chest so that she could glare up at him.

“And that’s exactly what I gave him,” Devin said, matching the move with a pointed look at the large metal bowl that Bradford was currently licking clean.



“He’s only trying to spare your feelings,” Abbi said with a disappointed glare at the dog that was going to need a bath, too.

“I’m an excellent cook,” Devin bit out.

“Then explain last night’s dinner,” she said, looking really fucking smug for someone wearing Doc McStuffins pajamas.

“It was delicious,” Devin said with a look that dared her to argue.

“Really? Then explain why Bradford refused to eat any,” Abbi said, cocking a brow in question.

Nodding, Devin said, “We are no longer speaking.”

“I miss Charlie,” Dustin mumbled sadly from where Devin placed him in an attempt to keep him clean so that he wouldn’t have to give him a bath as well.

“I know you do, buddy,” Devin said, only to bite back a sigh when Biscuits, the asshole kitten that the kids had conned Charlie into getting last week, decided to climb up his leg.

“When is Charlie coming home?” Dustin asked as Devin leaned over and carefully extracted the kitten f

rom hell off his leg and put him down. No sooner had the psychotic little kitten’s paw touched the floor when Bradford’s ears perked up and he decided to try to inspect the kitten again, earning a hiss and a swipe before Biscuits raced beneath the cart that he’d built for Charlie, to hide.

“Bradford, you’re being naughty,” Abbi said.

“Friday night,” Devin said as he found himself glancing at the clock again and bit back a sigh.

God, he fucking missed her.

For the past couple of months, she’d been hitting lectures, going to conventions, and taking online courses every week and he...

Couldn’t complain since whatever she was doing was helping Bradford Creations. Over the past few months, Charlie had managed to double Bradford Creations’ following on social media and they now had more orders than they could keep up with. He’d hired five more full-time employees, had enough orders to keep Bradford Creations busy for a very long time, and that didn’t seem to be enough for Charlie.

She was determined to learn everything there was to know about online marketing. While she helped the kids with their homework, she was reading articles. When she made dinner, she listened to podcasts and audio books. After the kids went to bed, she spent a few hours in her office working while he did the same upstairs. But once they were done...

She was all his.

They'd learned pretty early on that this wasn't going to be easy because of the kids, but they'd figured out a way to make it work. They were usually able to get a sitter at least once a week and when they couldn't, they turned it into a family date night. They ended their nights together, making love late into the night until it was time for him to leave.

He hated that part.

Just once, he wanted to know what it was like to wake up with her in his arms, but that wasn't a choice. At least, not yet. While he was ready to spend the rest of his life with Charlie, she...wasn't. They'd been dating for a little over four months now and she still hadn't told him that she loved him yet.

He didn't want to rush her, but god, it was fucking killing him. She told his children at least a hundred times a day that she loved them. She'd also told her best friend, the bunny, the kitten, the dog, and on a few occasions, a fucking jelly donut, but she'd never said it to him. He knew that she cared about him, but he wanted more.

He wanted Charlie.

"Daddy, I have to go to the bathroom," Dustin said, reminding him that they needed to move their asses if they had any hope of getting to school on time.

"Sorry, buddy," Devin said as he helped his son off the counter.

“Thanks, Daddy!” Dustin said, carefully stepping over a puddle of batter before quickly making his way to the kitchen door.

“We’ll be up in a minute,” Devin said, trying to figure out how he was going to get a six-year-old and a hundred-and-fifteen-pound dog covered in batter upstairs without making a mess.

Maybe he should try the sink, he thought, glancing at the sink in question. It worked for Charlie, he thought, only to frown as he watched his son who should be upstairs getting ready for school, carefully make his way back into the kitchen and head to the refrigerator where he helped himself to a stick of butter. Once he had what he needed, Dustin turned around and walked back out, leaving Devin to follow him, really fucking hoping that his son wasn’t going to do something to make this worse.

“Dustin, what are you doing, buddy?” Devin said, quickly making his way into the living room in time to see his son walk into Charlie’s apartment.

Shit!

Whenever Charlie was away, Dustin liked to go in Charlie’s apartment and watch television so that he could snuggle on her side of the bed. He missed Charlie. Not that Devin could blame him.

“Summer vacation is coming soon,” he heard his son explain as he walked into the apartment and-

“I know. I’m very excited about spending the summer with you,” Charlie said, smiling warmly as she handed Dustin a plate stacked with pancakes, home fries, and sausages, a Charlie special as the kids liked to call it, to Dustin who happily took it and placed it on the breakfast tray that Charlie bought for him.

“What are you doing here?” Devin asked, unable to take his eyes off her as he walked around the bed.

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” Charlie asked, blinking up at him as she speared a breakfast sausage on her fork.

“Because you’re supposed to be in Boston at a convention,” Devin said, sitting down on the bed so that he could kiss her.

“I am at the convention. They had to move a few things around because one of the presenters had a family emergency. So, I thought I’d get a few things done today,” she said when he forced himself to pull away as she held up the sausage for him to steal.

“It looks like you’re sitting in bed eating breakfast with my son,” he said as he stole the sausage off her plate, not bothering to point out that it was a three-hour drive back to Boston since he’d missed her.

“Well, I mean technically he’s my baby boy,” Charlie said with a pitying look that had him narrowing his eyes on her as he finished off her sausage.

“I really am,” the little traitor happily agreed around a forkful of pancake.

“And Abbi?” Devin asked, narrowing his eyes on the beautiful woman that enjoyed tormenting him.

“Is also mine,” Charlie said as she pointed towards the bathroom just as Abbi walked in with Bradford by her side. “Go take a shower. Your food’s waiting for you in the oven.”

Without a word, Abbi obediently walked into the bathroom as Bradford walked over

to the bed to inspect their breakfast. “You, too,” Charlie said, tossing the dog a sausage. Tail wagging, he happily followed Abbi into the bathroom.

“Your food’s waiting in the oven, too,” Charlie said, gesturing for him to move his ass.

“It’s your turn,” Devin said, helping himself to a piece of potato.

“I cleaned up the lime Jell-O mess last week,” she pointed out as she dug into the pancakes that looked really good.

“That was two weeks ago. Last week was Elmer’s glue,” he reminded her as he leaned down and stole the pancake off her fork.

“And I cleaned that up, too. This is all you, big guy,” Charlie said, gesturing with her fork for him to move his ass.

Sighing, Devin stole another bite before reluctantly heading into the bathroom, telling himself that she’d be back in a couple of days and then they could-

“Daddy, what’s this?” Abbi asked, drawing his attention to a small round pink plastic box.

“Those are Charlie’s, sweetheart,” Devin said, plucking Charlie’s birth control pills out of his daughter’s hands and closing it before placing it back in the medicine cabinet.

“What are they for, Daddy?” Abbi asked as she pulled her batter-splattered nightgown off and tossed it on the dog, who seemed more than happy to have something to play with.

“Nothing,” Devin said, sighing as he turned on the shower, still wondering how he was going to tell Charlie that she didn’t need them.

## Chapter 34

Boston, MA

“Oh, come on! Just five more minutes,” Charlie said, making sure to look appropriately pathetic as she looked down at her iPad.

“No,” came the grumbled response from the man that had propped his phone against his headboard so that he could curl up with his pillow and ignore her.

“But I miss you,” she mumbled sadly, making sure to add a sniffle at the end there.

When Ben cracked one eye open so that he could glare at her, she allowed her bottom lip to tremble ever so slightly. “No, you don’t. You’re just using me because Devin’s busy.”

“How could you say that?” Charlie asked even as she couldn’t help but notice that Devin hadn’t called her back yet.

“Did you tell him yet?”

“Not yet, but I have a plan,” Charlie promised him as she reached over and grabbed her drink off the nightstand, careful not to disturb th

e stack of brochures, pamphlets, and business cards that she’d collected from information booths, lectures, and her attempts to network over the past couple of days.

“I sure hope so since you’re supposed to be quitting in six months,” he said, earning a glare.

“I’ve still got time,” she reminded him only to continue when he opened his mouth to argue. “But I won’t need it because I have a plan.”

“Are you going to tell me about this wonderful plan of yours or just keep telling me that you have one?” the smartass grumbled.

“It’s very simple,” she started only to glare down at her phone when he said, “It sounds it.”

“This right here is why I don’t like you,” Charlie said absently as she grabbed her phone off the bed and realized that it was after ten o’clock. The kids were probably already in bed, she thought, debating calling Devin only to dismiss the idea since he was probably trying to work.

“I’m still waiting,” came the grumpily muttered reply that dragged her attention back to the problem at hand.

Telling Devin that she was quitting without things ending badly.

“I’m going to set up Bradford Creations social media accounts so that Devin can handle it on his own,” Charlie said with a firm nod because this was actually a really good plan.

Thanks to all the changes that she’d made over the past few months, mostly adding pictures of the kids helping Devin and quite a few that showcased how incredibly hot the men working at Bradford Creations were, Bradford Creations had a very large following eager for Devin to interact with them. They loved hearing from him, seeing the videos that she’d talked him into doing and all he had to do at this point was to



keep it up.

It was simple.

“And what if he can’t?”

“Then I’ll still be there to help him,” Charlie said, shrugging because she honestly didn’t see what the big deal was.

“And the reason that you haven’t told him yet...”

“I want to keep him in suspense?” Charlie said, only to drop onto her side with a groan because she was pathetic, she decided, following up that personal revelation with a nod.

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Maybe she was overreacting and this wasn't even a big deal.

"Do you think he's going to be upset?" she asked, sending a hopeful look towards the iPad in her hands to find Ben giving her a "Are you fucking kidding me?" look.

"Just tell him already," the man that Grandma Bea should have forbidden her to play with when they were little, said with a sigh that she really didn't appreciate at the moment as he rolled over onto his back.

"I'm going to," she said, but...

She didn't want to lose him and she knew that compared to a lot of things that this wasn't a big deal, but even knowing that wasn't stopping her from worrying that she was going to do something to wreck this. She'd never been this happy before and she was terrified that it could be taken away from her. She knew how much it hurt to have the one person that you loved more than anything ripped out of your life and she...

She didn't want to go through that again.

"Then do it already. I'm not sure why you're making a big deal out of this. Just tell him that you're starting your own company and that you're not going to leave him hanging. He's not going to be pissed because you want to start your own business, but he is going to be pissed if he finds out that you kept something from him. For some reason the man's in love with you."

"That's because I'm loveable," Charlie said, nodding only to glare when Ben followed that up with, "But are you though?"

“I hate you,” she said even as she decided that she was being an idiot about this. As soon as she got home, she was going to tell him.

“Then stop calling me so I can get some damn sleep, woman!” Ben muttered as he rolled back over onto his stomach.

“Fine. I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” Charlie said, sighing heavily as she ended the call and tossed the phone aside, already bored out of her mind.

She could get some work done, but...

She didn’t feel like it.

She also didn’t feel like watching another movie, staring at the ceiling, or taking another bath. What she wanted to do was to tuck Abbi and Dustin in and kiss them goodnight before ending the night in Devin’s arms, but that wasn’t an option tonight, which meant that she was probably going to end up taking another bath, order room service, and stare at the ceiling until she fell asleep.

Deciding that there was no point putting it off, Charlie reached for the room phone and-

Found herself smiling when a chime alerted her to a text from Devin. Charlie picked up her phone only to frown when she read the text waiting for her.

Are you going to let me in?

Feeling her lips pull up into an excited smile, Charlie climbed off the bed and raced across the room, throwing the door open and-

“God, I missed you,” Devin said, chuckling when Charlie jumped into his arms.

“Where are the kids?” Charlie asked, wrapping her arms around him as she kissed him.

“Being spoiled by their grandparents,” he said, carrying her back into the room and closed the door behind them as she showered his face with kisses.

“What are you doing here?” she asked as she found herself placed on top of the dresser.

“What do you think?” Devin asked, reaching for her shirt.

“That you realized that you couldn’t live without me?” Charlie asked, raising her arms so that he could pull the shirt off the rest of the way.

“I already figured that out a long time ago,” Devin promised her as he reached for her panties as Charlie pulled his belt loose.

“And that you adore me?” she asked, working his pants open as she shifted so that he could pull her panties off.

“God, yes,” he said as he reached back and grabbed hold of his shirt as she leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his chest.

“And you love me?” Charlie asked, needing to hear it as she pressed another kiss against his chest as she slid her hands beneath the back of his pants.

“Yes,” Devin said with absolutely no hesitation.

Worrying her bottom lip, Charlie looked up at him and asked, “Are you sure?”

The expression on his face softened as he reached up and cupped her face and said,

“Yes,” as he leaned down and brushed his lips tenderly against hers, letting her know just how much he loved her.

## Chapter 35

“Baby, I have to go,” Devin said, unable to help but moan as that small hand that had been rubbing his cock through his pants gave it a gentle squeeze.

“You really do,” the little fucking tease said as he felt that small hand work his fly open.

He never should have woken her up so that he could say goodbye and he sure as hell should have known better than to watch as the sheet fell when she sat up. He should have left her a note, kissed her cheek, and moved his ass. Instead, he was standing here, struggling not to fucking lose it as Charlie wrapped her hand around his cock and pulled him free.

He should definitely go, Devin told himself as he watched her work her hand over him, slowly stroking his cock as she leaned forward and licked the tip, making his hips buck. He’d never met a woman that knew how to drive him out of his fucking mind with a few simple moves, but that probably had something to do with the fact that they’d never cared enough to find out what he liked.

They did what he wanted so that they could get what they needed. They had no idea that he liked it when a woman teased his cock, taking her time to drive him out of his fucking mind with her hand, lips, tongue, and teeth, making him think that he’d lose his fucking mind if she didn’t put him out of his misery and take him into her mouth, but Charlie did.

She knew that he’d end up fucking her harder if she teased his cock because she’d paid attention, noting what he liked, what he hated, and what would make him groan

her name louder. She loved having this kind of control over him, loved knowing that she could drive him out of his fucking mind to the point that he mindlessly fucked her. But she hadn't been the only one paying attention in the last few months...

He watched her take the tip into her mouth as her hand stroked him one last time before he pulled away. When she tried to pull him back, he chuckled as he leaned down and kissed her. "Get on your back," Devin said even as he reached down and cupped the back of her knees and pulled up, giving her no other choice but to lay down.

Using his hold, he spread her legs further apart as he knelt down and found himself groaning when the move caused the prettiest pussy that he'd ever seen to spread open, revealing the swollen little clit, glistening with excitement. Unable to help but smile, he leaned forward and exhaled, knowing the move would tease her. When she shifted anxiously, he turned his head and pressed a kiss against her thigh as he released his hold so that he could reach between her legs and-

"Mmmmm," Charlie moaned softly as he ran his fingertip slowly down her slit.

She was so fucking wet, Devin thought as he placed his hand on her thigh so that he could brush his thumb over her slit, teasing that swollen little clit that loved attention. He continued caressing her slit with his thumb as he stood up and placed his other hand on the bed next to her so that he could lean down and take her nipple between his lips.

As he gently sucked on her nipple, he moved his hand between her legs and slowly slid his finger inside her, groaning when he found her wet. He could fuck her now and make her come quickly, but he wanted to make this last. Last night had been fucking amazing, being able to take his time as he'd touched, licked, and fucked her without having to worry about his children waking up in the middle of the night or that someone at work was going to barge in on them.

There had been a few times over the past few months when they'd been able to fuck at their leisure, but it hadn't been enough. Thank god his kids were getting older. In a couple of years, they wouldn't have to worry about the kids waking up in the middle of the night asking for water or demanding that they make sure there weren't any monsters under their bed and he couldn't fucking wait. Until

then, they were going to have to savor moments like this, Devin decided as he slid a second finger inside her, slowly fucking her as he released her nipple only to take the other one between his lips and flick it with his tongue.

Charlie's moans became louder as she ran her fingers through his hair, encouraging him to keep going as she rolled her hips, riding his fingers until even that wasn't enough.

"Devin?" she said, moaning his name just right.

"Yes?" he said, releasing her nipple so that he could lean over and kiss her.

"I need to be fucked, Devin," she whispered seductively, knowing exactly what that would do to him.

"Do you?" he drawled, pulling back just enough so that he could look at her as he continued slowly fingering her.

“I really do.”

“How badly?” Devin asked as his thumb found that swollen little clit between her legs and pressed.

“Very badly,” Charlie said, nodding solemnly.

“Are you wet for me?” he asked, already knowing just how fucking wet she was.

“Very wet,” she promised him, licking her lips hungrily.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, feeling his cock jerk in anticipation.

Moaning, she pulled him back down and slowly kissed him as she ran her tongue over his with teasing caresses that had him groaning. When he felt her hand wrap around his cock, his breath caught. She stroked him for several minutes, making sure to rub the underside of his cock with her thumb until he couldn’t take it any longer.

When he broke off the kiss, she gave his cock one last squeeze before releasing him so that she could turn around and get on her hands and knees. Grabbing hold of her hips, Devin leaned down and pressed a kiss between her shoulder blades before he stood up. Releasing his hold on her hips, he placed one hand on the small of her back as he wrapped his hand around his cock and-

“Oh, god...” Charlie moaned as he traced her wet slit with the tip of his cock.

Unable to wait any longer, he slowly pushed inside her with a groan. She was so



fucking tight and wet, Devin thought as he watched her generous ass that he loved so much press back against him. As he pulled back, watching as his cock slowly appeared, glistening with her arousal, he found his attention shifting back to her beautiful ass. He'd never been this obsessed with a woman's ass before. Christ, he loved her ass.

Then again, he loved everything about her, Devin thought as he watched her pull away. By the time she rolled over onto her back, he was already there, pushing back inside her. She had her legs wrapped around him before he finished the first stroke. He took his time fucking her, uncaring that he was going to get stuck in traffic as he savored the feel of her wet pussy wrapped around him, squeezing him with every thrust inside her until he felt her clamp down around him and-

She moaned his name, whispering all those things that she knew that he wanted to hear in his ear as her hands slid over his ass. Her hips rolled harder and faster beneath him, desperate to meet every thrust as her back bowed off the bed and his name was torn from her lips as she milked him, clamping down around him. He felt his balls pull up tight seconds before intense pleasure moved up his cock only to shoot up his spine as his cock jerked inside her in time with the pleasure tearing through him.

For several minutes, he lay there, struggling to catch his breath until he forced himself to let her go, knowing that he couldn't stay. When he pulled back, he felt his lips twitch when he found the little traitor closing her eyes on a sleepy murmur. By the time that he stood up, Charlie was curled up on her side with the comforter pulled over her, fast asleep. Somehow, he resisted the urge to lean over and kiss her and forced himself to move. After a quick stop by the bathroom to clean up, he headed for the door, careful to close it quietly behind him. Ten minutes later, he was walking up to the front desk.

"Good morning. How can I help you?" came the warm response as Devin pulled out his credit card.

“I’d like to pay for my room,” Devin said, handing his credit card over as he took in the deserted hotel lobby. Last night when he’d arrived, it had been filled with convention attendees, guests looking to check in late, and a few guests trying to figure out where their rooms were as they stumbled towards the elevators.

“What room would that be, sir?”

“Room 735. It should be under Bradford Creations,” Devin said, glancing towards the glass patio doors overlooking the pool, wondering if the kids would like to-

“That room is under Dabbi Digital Marketing. Are you sure that you have the right room?”

“I guess not,” Devin said, frowning as he picked up his card. “Thanks anyway.”

For a moment, he was tempted to go back upstairs and double-check the room number, but he was already late. Deciding that he’d grab the bill from Charlie when she got home so that he could reimburse her, he headed for the door.

He was still thinking about it several hours later when he finally made it in to work. He got stuck in traffic on the way home and didn’t get a chance to grab breakfast after picking up the kids and dropping them off at school, but it had been worth it, Devin thought, unable to help but smile as he walked in the back door of Bradford Creations with Bradford by his side and-

“I’m sorry to bother you, Devin, but I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you before you made your decision,” Kelly said, drawing his attention to find her standing by the backstairs, hugging a small stack of mail against her chest. When she saw Bradford, she cleared her throat and took a step back while the dog that demanded love from everyone, stood at his side, glaring in her direction.

“What decision?” Devin asked, absently reaching down to scratch Bradford behind his ears.

“I know you’re probably busy and a lot of people are going to be applying, but I thought with Charlie quitting and everything that it wouldn’t hurt to throw my hat in the ring,” Kelly said with a hopeful smile as she pulled one of the envelopes from the pile in her arms and handed it to him.

“What are you talking about? Charlie’s not quitting,” he said, opening the envelope to find a neatly organized resume for Charlie’s job.

“Umm, I’m sorry, but I thought you already knew with Charlie having the mail for her new business sent here and all,” Kelly explained with a shrug as she handed over the rest of the mail and-

Devin felt like he’d been sucker punched when he saw Dabbi Digital Marketing written across the first envelope.

## Chapter 36

Two Days Later...

“Crap, crap, crap, crap!” Charlie muttered as she let herself into her apartment because it was either that or scream.

When she found out who was screwing with Bradford Creations’ social media accounts, she was going to kill them. She was beyond pissed right now. She was also starving, exhausted, and furious that someone was doing this.

Thanks to whoever was screwing with Bradford Creations, Charlie had been forced to spend the entire night trying to fix this mess. Oh, she was going to kill someone,

Charlie thought, forcing herself to take a deep breath as she dropped her bags near the door only to curse when she saw what time it was.

She was hoping to grab an hour of sleep before going to work, but between traffic and trying to convince the web hosting company that she went through for Bradford Creations that she hadn't canceled her account, she was running late. For a moment, a very brief moment, Charlie considered calling in sick so that she could pass out, but she didn't trust the jerk making her life a living hell not to take advantage and try something else.

She just needed a shower, an unhealthy amount of caffeine, and a jelly donut and she would be fine. More than fine, Charlie told herself with a firm nod as she headed towards her bathroom, tripping over her bag along the way while she did her best to calm down when all she wanted to do was to throttle someone.

At least being pissed was better than wanting to cry, Charlie decided as she pulled off her clothes and angrily threw them at the hamper. For the past

two days, Devin had been blowing her off and she had no idea why. Every time she tried to call him or text him, he would tell her that he was busy and would call her back later, but he never did and now, she was home, pissed and trying to convince herself that everything was okay.

Once she figured out who was screwing with her, everything would be fine, Charlie decided as she stepped in the shower, pausing to adjust the temperature before stepping beneath the hot water and-

"Cold!" she found herself gasping when she opened her eyes and stumbled back as the shower curtain was slowly pushed open.

"What's Dabbi Digital Marketing?" Devin asked casually as he reached over and

turned the hot water back on while Charlie stood there, unable to help but notice that he looked pissed.

Really freaking pissed.

“I can explain,” Charlie said, licking her lips nervously as she struggled to figure out where to start only to gasp and blurt out, “It’s my company!” when he turned off the hot water.

Nodding, Devin turned the hot water back on. “Why did you move in here?”

“Because you glared at me until I signed the lease?” she reminded him only to gasp when he rewarded her with another blast of cold water.

“Why did you move in here?” he repeated.

She opened her mouth to give him another smart-ass answer to buy herself a little more time, but the expression on his face...

God, he looked so hurt.

“I gave myself a year to start an online marketing company. It’s been something that I’ve wanted to do for a long time. I kept putting it off, making excuses until Ben finally gave me the push that I needed. So, I set a goal for myself to finally make it happen. I gave myself a deadline, but in order to do it I needed to cut back on my expenses and save money. So, I-”

“Found a cheaper apartment,” he finished for her.

“Yes,” she said weakly, not really sure what else she was supposed to say.

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“Why didn’t you tell me?” Devin asked as he leaned back against the wall, watching her.

“At first, there was no reason to tell you anything. You were my boss and I wasn’t even sure that I was going to be able to get this thing off the ground. It wouldn’t have made sense to tell you that I might be quitting in a year if it didn’t work out. I wanted to make sure that I did this right, but I was going to tell you, Devin. I wasn’t just going to abandon Bradford Creations,” she promised him.

He glanced away for a moment as she stood there, trying to think of something else to tell him that would make this okay when he took her by surprise and asked, “Do you love me, Charlie?”

“Why would you ask me that?” she asked, frowning as she moved closer to him.

“Because you’ve never said it,” Devin said, shaking his head with a sigh as he looked back at her. When she didn’t say anything, he said, “Forget it,” as he pushed away from the wall and-

“You make me nervous.”

“What?” he asked as he slowly turned around.

“You make me nervous,” Charlie said, nodding solemnly as she reached over and grabbed hold of his shirt.

“I make you nervous?” he asked, throwing her a questioning look as he allowed her

to pull him closer.

“Mmmhmm, very nervous,” Charlie said as she reached up and wrapped her arms around him.

“Is that good or bad?” Devin asked, wrapping his arms around her.

“Oh, it’s definitely good,” she promised him, nodding as she took a step back, pulling him into the shower.

“So, you’re saying that you love me?” Devin asked, reaching back to pull his phone out of his pocket so that it wouldn’t get wet and tossed it onto the bathmat on the floor behind him.

“Maybe,” she said, leaning up so that she could kiss his chin as she felt his hands slide down her back.

“Maybe?” he murmured, his lips pulling up into one of those devastating smiles that she loved as she reached for his belt.

“Well, it depends,” Charlie said, pulling his belt loose before she set to work on his jeans.

“On what?” Devin asked, ducking his head so that he could kiss the side of her neck as she reached inside his pants and wrapped her hand around him.

“On just how thoroughly you worship me in the next thirty minutes,” she said, deciding that everything else could wait so that she could give the man that she loved a chance to work for the three little words that didn’t come close to explaining just how much he meant to her.

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“Charlie, we’re here,” Devin said, reaching over to wake her up and-

“I love you!” she shouted, instantly coming awake as she pushed back until her back was pressed up against the truck door, shooting him a panicked look.

“Aw, thank you, baby,” Devin said, smiling which earned a whimper from the woman hugging the bakery bag filled with jelly donuts against her chest as she sat there, staring at him in horror while he sat there, unable to help but smile.

She fucking loved him.

Granted, he would have preferred to hear her profess her undying love for him over a romantic dinner, but she’d set down a challenge that he’d been unable to ignore. It had taken him ten minutes to get her to scream those three magical words and that should have been enough, but...

He’d wanted to hear it again.

So, he’d done what was required of him to hear those words again and again until the woman currently cowering against the door, watching his every move pointed out somewhat hysterically that they really needed to go to work. He considered talking her into skipping work and spending the rest of the day in bed with him, but...

He wanted her to see the surprise that he’d been busting his ass setting up for her. The twins were going to be pissed that he didn’t wait for them, but he wanted to ensure that he got the first hug and he knew damn well that if the twins were here for this that the woman watching his every move would shower them with kisses and hugs that were rightfully his.



“You ready?” Devin asked, reaching over to touch her only to re-think that decision when she mumbled, “My poor vagina,” making his lips twitch.

Chuckling, he jumped out of his truck and turned around, gesturing for her to come closer. Licking her lips nervously, Charlie shook her head as she pressed herself more firmly against the door.

Sighing, he said, “I have to show you something.”

Shaking her head, she whispered, “I’ve already seen your penis,” making him chuckle as he reached over and-

“I love you! Oh, my god! I love you!” Charlie mumbled, somewhat hysterically as he grabbed her by her ankles and pulled her closer.

“Aw, I love you too, baby,” Devin said, sighing with satisfaction as he pulled her out of the truck, set her on her feet and promptly dragged her around the side of the old firehouse.

“Why exactly are you dragging me?” the woman that was really starting to ruin this for him, asked.

“I’m showing you something,” he said, pulling her around the front and-

“Oh, my god...” Charlie whispered hollowly as she stood there taking in the large sign beneath Bradford Creations.

“You did this?” Charlie asked with a watery smile as she glanced back at him.

“Of course, I did,” Devin said, moving closer so that he could wrap his arms around her as she looked back up at Dabbi Digital Marketing’s sign.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you,” she said, unable to take her eyes away from the sign that he’d called in a few favors to make while the question that had been nagging him for the past two days had him asking, “What does Dabbi mean?”

“Dustin and Abbi,” Charlie said, confirming his suspicions and giving his kids another fucking reason to gloat.

For the past two days they’d been bragging that she loved them more because she’d named her company after them and now, he’d never hear the fucking end of it. Unless...

“You know, Bradford Marketing has a pretty nice ring to it, too,” he mentioned casually as he leaned down so that he could kiss her cheek.

“There’s something that I still don’t understand. How did you find out about this?” Charlie asked, glancing back at him.

“I went to pay for your hotel room, but the front desk said that the room was registered under Dabbi Digital Marketing. I didn’t think much of it until I went into work and your favorite customer service representative presented me with her resume, hoping that I’d give her the job.”

There was a heavy sigh and then, “I’m an idiot.”

## Chapter 37

“What’s going on?” Devin asked as Charlie quickly made her way into their office, telling herself that she was wrong, but...

“Remember a couple of months ago when someone was trying to hack into Bradford Creations’ social media accounts? Well, before that, someone was creating fake

accounts and trashing Bradford Creations. I wasn't too worried about it because that kind of thing happens, but then I started to get locked out of Bradford Creations' accounts after too many failed attempts to break into the accounts. It kept happening every day, sometimes a few times a day until I got sick of it," Charlie explained as she stepped over Bradford, who was happily curled up with one of the kids' teddy bears and headed for her desk.

"So, I changed the login information from my Bradford Creations' email to the one I created for Dabbi Digital Marketing to make it impossible for whoever was doing it since no one knew about that email. I also created a new Gmail account for you so that you had access to the account for the same reason. For the past couple of months, I haven't had any problems, but then last night everything went to hell."

"What happened last night?" Devin asked as Charlie reached for her keyboard, only to frown when a stack of mail on her desk caught her attention.

"All the social media accounts were locked after too many failed attempts, which meant that they'd figured out that I'd used my Dabbi Digit

al Marketing email to secure the accounts. They also managed to get hold of Bradford Creations' web hosting information and got me locked out, changed the password, and tried to get the site deleted. It took me over an hour this morning to convince them that I was who I said I was. Thankfully, whoever did it had no clue what they were doing, so I was able to get Bradford Creations' website back up and running," she absently explained as she frowned down at the envelopes addressed to Dabbi Digital Marketing. "Where did you get these?"

"They were sent here," Devin explained as Charlie shook her head.

"I didn't use this address for anything. There's no reason why any of this junk mail was sent here, Devin," she explained as she focused her attention back on her

computer and pulled up Dabbi Digital Marketing's website and-

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“Damn it,” Charlie said when she saw that her email was on the bottom of the homepage, answering one of her questions about how Kelly got her email address.

The question was, how did she find out about Dabbi Digital Marketing in the first place.

Deciding to find out, Charlie headed for the door and-

“I’m going to kill her,” she said as her phone alerted her to the fact that she’d been locked out of Bradford Creations’ Facebook page again after too many failed attempts to login.

“Wait. What the hell is going on?” Devin asked as Charlie stepped back over Bradford, who’d rolled over onto his back in the last few minutes and headed towards the backstairs.

Instead of answering him, because she honestly didn’t think that she could do it without screaming, Charlie headed upstairs and straight for the office in front of her. When she saw Kelly sitting at her desk, talking on her phone, she headed straight for her.

“Hey!” Kelly snapped in outrage when Charlie shoved her chair out of the way and grabbed the mouse, clicking open the webpage that Kelly had minimized and-

“Wait!”

Charlie slowly exhaled as she stood up and looked at the woman that had been

working really hard to screw her over. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she asked, shaking her head in disgust. “Do you have any idea what you could have done? The kind of damage you could have done?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kelly said with a defiant tilt of her head that had Charlie shaking her head in disgust again because she really just couldn’t deal with this woman.

“What’s going on?” Devin asked as he glanced at Kelly’s computer screen and-

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Charlie heard Devin snap as she headed for the door, having had more than enough for one day.

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“I don’t want to talk about it,” the small woman curled up on the beanbag with a bag of donuts, said when Devin walked into the office two hours later.

“I fired her,” Devin said as he sat down on the floor next to her.

“I heard,” Charlie muttered as she absently nibbled on a donut, making him wince because he was pretty sure the whole fucking town heard him screaming his fucking head off.

He should have fired Kelly the first time that she pissed him off.

At least now he knew why she wanted Charlie’s job so badly. Apparently, Kelly started noticing how many orders were coming in. That had made her curious, so she’d checked out the website and saw how much Bradford Creations was charging for its work and decided that some of that money should find its way into her bank account.

That's what led to the morning donut routine, because it gave her an excuse to walk around the upstairs offices, trying to find out as much as she could about Bradford Creations' handled payments as she tried to work out a way to gain access to his accounts. It had also led to her interest in taking over Charlie's job. She wanted access to the website because she thought it would give her access to the payments processed through the website. It wouldn't have because they used a third-party system to process payments and he was the only one that had that password, but she didn't know that.

"I changed all the main passwords for Bradford Creations, deleted her access to email, called the security company, and I highly recommend canceling Bradford Creations' credit cards as well as alerting the bank just in case. I would also change the locks and the codes for the alarm panel considering her fondness for breaking into things," Charlie mumbled sadly as she finished off her donut and reached for another one before adding, "And I found the camera."

"That's a good idea," Devin mumbled in agreement as he reached over and pushed a strand of hair out of her face.

He didn't mention that he already knew that she found the camera that Kelly hid in here since he'd watched upstairs on Kelly's computer as Charlie tore their office apart, looking for the camera and once she found it...

He'd watched as a play of emotions had crossed her beautiful features from disbelief to the realization that someone had been watching them. He knew the moment she'd realized that all those private moments they'd shared had been stolen. Her eyes had closed as she slowly exhaled, struggling against the urge to smash the camera. Somehow, she'd managed to pull it together and carried the camera out to the shop and placed it on his workbench for the police to grab.

When he saw the live video feed of their office on Kelly's computer screen, he'd

wanted to fucking kill her.

She'd crossed so many fucking lines by placing that camera in his office and she'd apparently been doing it for a long time. He found folders containing video files for Charlie's old office, the break-room, his shop, and the backstairs, taking away every last doubt that he had that she hadn't known that Charlie had been hurt back in October. She'd fucking watched him carry Charlie inside with a white bandage wrapped around her foot and hadn't been able to resist the urge to come downstairs and do a little damage.

Fucking bitch.

That's when he'd started really yelling.

He had to give her credit, though. While he'd yelled at her, Kelly continued standing there, looking pathetic, crying softly as she told him that she didn't know what he was talking about. That all changed when the police showed up. She'd taken one look at the officer coming to arrest her and tried to make a run for it.

That's when Bradford reminded all of them that at one point, he'd been the top K-9 cadet in the academy until his love of snuggles got him bounced from the program. He'd blocked Kelly's escape and fucking growled, baring his teeth while she was arrested. Bradford had more than earned a steak, Devin thought, deciding that he was going to buy him the biggest fucking steak that he could get his hands on.

"I wanna go home," Charlie said, looking exhausted.

"I know you do, baby. I guess we could do that. I'll have to make a few calls and cancel the appointments that I'd made for you," he said, sighing heavily as he moved to stand up only to end up biting back a smile when Charlie said, "What appointments?"



“Well, I thought that Dabbi Digital Marketing could use a few more clients, so I made a few calls and I set some appointments up for you today, but since you’d rather go home...” Devin said, letting his words trail off.

“Appointments?” Charlie said, instantly alert as she sat up. “For Dabbi Digital Marketing?”

“Mmmhmmm, in fact, your first appointment should be here in a few minutes,” he said, chuckling when she quickly got to her feet and rushed to the other side of the office to tidy it up.

“Really? Who’s coming?” Charlie asked, looking really fucking adorable right now.

“Oh, just a few people...”

## Chapter 38

1:00 P.M.

“This just isn’t going to work for me,” Lucifer, the very large man that owned Fire & Brimstone, an incredibly popular restaurant that was set to reopen in a month, said with a heavy sigh and a firm shake of his head.

“What’s not going to work?” Charlie couldn’t help but wonder, mostly because they hadn’t even started yet.

Instead of answering her, he simply pu

shed his chair back with another sigh, walked around her desk, and-

Had her jumping out of her chair and stumbling back when he gestured for her to

move. With another sigh and a muttered, “This is going to require a trip to The Container Store,” he took over her freshly vacated chair and began...organizing?

Not really sure how to react, Charlie glanced over at his wife to find Rebecca shrugging as she took her time selecting a Hershey Kiss from the large Ziplock bag resting on her lap with a mumbled, “He’s disturbed.”

“Okay,” Charlie said, not really sure how to react as she watched Lucifer pause in reorganizing the pencil holder that Dustin made for her in art class to glare at his wife.

That somehow led him to sighing heavily as he took in the kids play area and muttered, “Definitely going to need a trip to The Container Store,” before returning his attention to organizing her pens.

Charlie shifted her attention back to his wife only to frown when she spotted Devin standing in the shop next to T.J., laughing his ass off. She felt herself relax as she watched him, relieved that he no longer looked like he wanted to kill something with his bare hands.

Thank god Kelly didn’t have a clue what she was doing, otherwise...

Charlie didn’t even want to think about the kind of damage that she could have done.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “Please tell me that you really didn’t mix black and blue pens together,” came the complaint that had Charlie looking back over her shoulder to find Lucifer shaking his head in disgust as he gave up trying to sort her pens and dumped them on the desk.

That led her to glancing back at Devin to find the bastard laughing harder.

Normally, she wouldn't do this sort of thing, but...

“If you think my desk is bad, you should see Devin's workbench. I honestly don't know how he gets anything done in that mess,” Charlie said with a sad shake of her head as she watched Lucifer frown as he glanced towards Devin's shop.

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She followed his gaze and watched as Devin realized that Lucifer was looking his way. A moment later that smile was gone as he watched Lucifer head for the office door. She watched as Devin mouthed, “Oh, shit,” as Lucifer headed towards the shop, shaking his head in disgust as he went.

With that done, Charlie headed back to her desk and sat down with a satisfied sigh as she looked up to find Rebecca watching her as she popped another Hershey Kiss in her mouth. Clearing her throat, Charlie said, “He had it coming.”

“He really did,” Rebecca murmured in agreement as Charlie pulled up Fire & Brimstone’s website and decided to get to work.

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2:00 P.M.

“Where the hell did I go wrong with you?” Jared, or rather Uncle Jared as she was told to call him, asked, slowly shaking his head in disgust as he looked at the man who’d decided to join them a few minutes ago.

Ignoring his father, Jason said, “So, where were we?”

“You were trying to interrogate me?” Charlie absently reminded him as she focused on Bradford Construction’s website.

“Was I doing a good job?” he asked, making her lips twitch as she made another note.

“Not really,” she said, chuckling as she focused her attention back on Uncle Jared and-

“I’m going to need another shelf,” Lucifer said, drawing their attention to find him looking down at the stack of children’s books that he’d placed on the floor.

“So, let’s get back to you telling us your deepest and darkest secrets,” Jason said, drawing her attention back to find him smiling hugely as he waited.

“Did we already talk about the time that I spent in prison?” Charlie asked, pursing her lips up thoughtfully.

“We did and it was fascinating,” Jason murmured, nodding his head even as he gestured for her to continue.

“How about my aspirations to be a high-class escort?” she asked, watching as his lips twitched.

“You have to live your dream,” Jason said, nodding solemnly.

“You really do,” Charlie murmured in agreement even as she glanced back at Bradford Construction’s website and made another note.

“I’ve dreamed of smothering you in your sleep,” his father said, narrowing his eyes on his son.

With a long-suffering sigh, Jason reached over and absently patted his father’s head with a murmured, “Your dream makes me sad,” before shifting his attention back to her. “What else?”

“I’m going to beat you,” his father said, slapping his hand away.

“I’m telling Haley you said that,” Jason said as Jared’s eyes narrowed on him.

“Who handles your social media accounts?” Charlie asked, hoping to get the men glaring at each other to focus.

“You do,” Uncle Jared bit out as he glared at his son.

“I see,” Charlie murmured as she opened Facebook and googled Bradford Construction only to find a link for the website and realized that she had her work cut out for her.

Nodding, Charlie made a few more notes before reaching for her phone and opening her calendar, trying to figure out the best day to go out and get some pictures of Bradford Construction’s latest project when an unsettling quiet had her frowning as she looked up and-

“Now, back to your deep dark secrets,” Jason said, making her sigh.

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3:00 P.M.

“Do you have any more Slytherin figures?” the large man that had moved onto organizing her Harry Potter memorabilia asked as Charlie sat there, slowly exhaling as she rubbed her temples, trying to will away the headache that had started ten minutes ago when her three o’clock appointment showed up.

“I’m not going to hurt her. I promise,” Matt said, only to follow that up with, “I just want to spank her ass until my hand falls off,” as his brother was forced to take him down with a headlock while the reason that the owners of Bradford Furniture were currently beating the shit out of each other calmly continued to swipe through the

website themes that Charlie had suggested.

“I like these,” Jenn, the teenager that had driven a Bradford to violence with a few absently murmured words, said as Charlie’s attention shifted to Reed’s wife Joey, who was quietly sitting on the beanbag in the back, reading on her Kindle as she absently ran her hand over the large swell of her belly.

“I don’t know how you were able to get anything done with your paperclips and notepads in the same drawer,” came the heavily sighed words to her left that let her know that Lucifer had moved on and was now organizing the cabinet that he’d helped himself to from storage.

Nodding, because she honestly wasn’t sure what else she was supposed to do, Charlie reached into her bottom drawer to grab the Advil only to remember that Lucifer had moved it into the bathroom where he’d decided it belonged. Sighing, she pushed her chair back, walked over to the mini-fridge, grabbed a Coke, took a sip and found herself once again glancing to her left to find Devin standing there, watching her with the sexiest grin that she’d ever seen.

That alone was going to get him killed, Charlie decided as she stepped out of the way when Reed was forced to take his brother down with a tackle that had his younger brother muttering, “I’m dying,” and Charlie heading to the bathroom to get the Advil.

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4:00 P.M.

“God, that’s so good,” Mr. Dixon whispered, unable to help but groan as he took a big bite out of one of the large cupcakes that his heavily pregnant granddaughter had brought for their meeting while she slept in the chair next to him.

She looked exhausted, Charlie thought as she took a bite of the delicious chocolate cupcake with buttercream frosting that she'd helped herself to and couldn't help but nod in agreement because these were really good. As she savored the perfect combination of chocolate and buttercream frosting, Charlie found herself glancing at Necie's large belly and-

No, she wasn't going there.

At least, not right now.

She was going to worry about that tomorrow, Charlie told herself firmly as she shifted her attention back to Dixon's Bakery website and-

"You need coasters," came the heavily sighed complaint as she found her cupcake plucked out of her hand by the man that she thought left an hour ago. Blinking, she watched as Lucifer devoured her cupcake in one bite before heading back to the kids' play area to organize their Legos.

Forcing her mind back on the topic at hand, Charlie cleared her throat and-

"That better not be a cupcake in your hand," came the coldly spoken words from the doorway that had Mr. Dixon going still as Duncan, who looked really pissed, walked into the room and-

Firefighters were definitely hot, Charlie couldn't help but notice even as she found herself wondering what Devin looked like in his uniform when he was a police officer.

Probably hotter.

"This isn't what it looks like," Mr. Dixon said, swallowing nervously as he hastily



placed the cupcake down on her desk and then followed that up by pushing it towards her.

“No? Because it looks like someone is going back on a bland diet,” Duncan said as he walked over to his wife and placed his hand on her belly as he glared at his grandfather-in-law.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Mr. Dixon bit out, visibly seething while Charlie found herself once again rubbing her temples.

“Oh, but I fucking would,” Duncan said evenly as Mr. Dixon nodded slowly as he said, “I never should have let my granddaughter lower her standards,” which was followed by a gasp of outrage that had Charlie wondering if it was too late to reschedule the rest of her appointments.

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5:00

“I want a divorce,” Trevor bit out as he glared at his wife while Charlie sat there, debating who she should start with first.

Zoe ran a small accounting business that focused on bookkeeping, which was pretty straight forward while Trevor flipped houses and wouldn’t stop glaring at his wife, who really didn’t seem all that concerned while she swip

ed through the marketing packages that Charlie had created.

When Trevor realized that his wife was still ignoring him, he shifted his glare to her and-

“I’m going to kill your friend,” he said, making Charlie frown until he sent a pointed look at Ben, who’d stopped by a few minutes ago to check on her, to find him running an appreciative eye over Zoe, taking in every generous curve as he ate a cupcake.

Biting back a sigh, Charlie pushed her chair back, stood up, and walked over to her best friend who was apparently oblivious to how close he was to getting his ass kicked. She grabbed Ben by the arm and dragged him towards the door.

“Wait. What are you doing?” Ben asked as he shoved the rest of the cupcake in his mouth as he glanced past her to throw Zoe one last appreciative look and-

“Oh, shit...”

-let her know that he’d finally realized that he had a very large Bradford glaring at him. Sighing, she shoved Ben out of her office and found herself quickly moving out of the way when Trevor decided that he should help Ben find his way back to his car.

For a moment, Charlie stood there, contemplating helping her best friend, but...

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He'd be fine, she told herself as she headed back to her desk, deciding to use this opportunity to get back to work only to sigh when she spotted Lucifer sitting at her desk, muttering, "This just isn't going to work for me."

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6:00

"Why is he here?" Ethan, Devin's uncle and the incredibly handsome doctor that wanted to hire her to handle his practice's online marketing, asked as he watched his son reorganize the file cabinet that he'd helped himself to from one of the upstairs offices.

Charlie raised her hands and let them drop with a muttered, "I honestly don't know."

"I see," Ethan said, sighing heavily as he walked over to his son and-

"Wait! I wasn't done yet!" Lucifer said as his father dragged him towards her office door only to throw over his shoulder, "I'll be right back," as he shoved his son out the door.

"Okay," Charlie said, sighing as she went back to rubbing her temples, wondering when this nightmare would end.

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7:00

“Why didn’t my father fill this out?” Aidan asked, glancing up from the iPad in his hands to send her a questioning look.

“Because he was forced to drag Lucifer out of my office,” Charlie said, continuing to rub her temples as she watched Aidan frown as he glanced towards her right to find Lucifer taking down her Slytherin poster so that he could switch it with her Indiana Jones poster.

At Aidan’s questioning look, she said, “He came back after your father left.”

Nodding, Aidan said, “I see,” as the reason why all the Bradfords has insanely awesome websites continued to watch her as she nibbled on a cupcake.

“You’ve done a great job with Bradford Creations,” Melanie said, nodding absently as she glanced back down at her phone to check out the rest of Bradford Creations posts.

“Thank you,” Charlie said, wondering why the Advil wasn’t kicking in yet.

“Do you think you can do the same thing for us?” Aidan asked, placing the iPad on the desk so that he could reach down and pick his son up from his car seat only to sigh when Lucifer walked over and plucked the baby out of his hands.

“I think I can help you...” Charlie started to say only to let her words trail off when Aidan got out of his chair and went after his brother, demanding that he give him back his baby.

That led to Charlie reaching for more Advil when Melanie shot her a pitying look as she said, “It gets worse.”

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8:00

“Are you okay?” Charlie couldn’t help but wonder as she watched Kasey drop her head between her legs.

“Fine. It’s just a little morning sickness,” Kasey said, nodding but something, mostly the fact that she was now getting up and slowly made her way towards the beanbag in the back of the room with a weakly mumbled, “I need to lay down,” told her that she wasn’t.

“Maybe we should call your father?” Charlie said, shifting her attention to the cute little girl with pigtails who was absently rolling a baseball between her hands.

“I’m fine,” came the mumbled reply that Charlie chose to ignore.

“Already texted him,” Sebastian, the boy who had taken over for Kasey when she’d started turning an interesting shade of white, said as he continued swiping through the packages that she offered.

“This is going to end badly,” Mikey said with a pitying shake of her head.

“What’s going to end badly?” Charlie asked as her attention was drawn to her left to find Lucifer standing at her office door, glaring as he muttered, “I wasn’t done,” but it was the arrival of her nine o’clock appointment that had her wincing as Kenzie, who’d been called in to help with Lucifer, glared at Roger, a pediatrician and if rumor was correct, Kenzie’s estranged husband, and-

“M-maybe we should reschedule,” Charlie found herself mumbling as she watched Kenzie grab a fire extinguisher and-

“Oh, come the fuck on!” Roger shouted when he found himself sprayed with foam

and Charlie decided that it was definitely time to call it a night.

## Chapter 39

He should probably be concerned that she was trying to smother him with a pillow, but as she settled her weight on top of him, Devin decided that she could do whatever she wanted to him.

God, she felt good, Devin thought as he ran his hands over her bare thighs.

“Stop that! I’m trying to smother you,” Charlie said, sounding adorably pissed as she shifted so that the towel that she’d wrapped around herself brushed over his thighs and-

“Are you kidding me?” she demanded as she tossed the pillow aside so that she could cross her arms over her chest as she gave her ass a pointed wiggle that felt really fucking good.

“Is something wrong, baby?” Devin somehow managed to ask with a straight face.

Eyes narrowing dangerously on him, she bit out, “I hate you.”

“Aw, what’s wrong?” he asked, pretending that he didn’t know that his family had spent the day testing her sanity.

“I’m not talking to you,” Charlie said as she continued to glare down at him.

Not that he could blame her, Devin thought as he ran his hands over her smooth thighs and slid them beneath her towel.

“What are you doing?” she asked, following the move with a curious look in her eye.

“I’m making it up to you,” he said, running his hands back down her thighs.

“I don’t think that’s humanly possible,” the woman that he’d watched stomp inside her apartment a little while ago, muttering all kinds of threats to his ass as she’d made her way to the bathroom where she’d continued to vocalize her desire to wring his neck, said.

“Are you sure?” Devin asked, folding one arm behind his head as the other one continued sliding up her thigh and-

Had him watching her as his thumb found her slit, drawing a soft moan from the beautiful woman that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. She was so fucking beautiful, Devin thought, watching her as his thumb slowly ran between her legs, lightly brushing over her clit as she licked her lips.

“Are you still mad?” Devin asked, feeling his lips twitch when she mumbled something incoherently as she shifted on him, causing her wet pussy to slide across his cock, making the tip ache for contact.

“Furious,” she promised him on a moan and a solemn nod as she reached up and pulled her towel loose, dropping it so that it pooled around them.

“Would it help if I told you that I missed you?” he asked as he slowly ran his eyes down her body, taking in the gentle slope of her throat, her large tear-drop shaped breasts tipped with light pink nipples hardening with every gentle roll of her hips.

God, she fucking destroyed him, Devin thought running his eyes over the soft swell of her belly until he found himself watching his thumb teasi

ng her clit as the plump pink lips between her legs spread open over his cock, enveloping it in a wet embrace as she moved over him. A small gasp drew his

attention back up as Charlie leaned down so that her breasts pressed against him, causing her hard nipples to move against him with every slow roll of her hips as he pulled his hands free.

He reached between them and found one large breast as his other hand moved to her ass and encouraged her to keep moving as he leaned up and kissed her. He'd spent so many nights thinking about her, thinking about what it would feel like to touch her and hold her and now that he could...

He was never going to let her go.

"You feel so good," Charlie whispered softly as she moved on him.

"Are you still mad at me?" Devin asked, brushing his lips against hers as he wrapped his arms around her and slowly rolled her onto her back.

"Absolutely," she said, making him chuckle as he settled between her legs.

"Would it help if I told you that I loved you?" he asked, rolling his hips so that he was moving against her.

"No," she said, making him smile only to make him groan when she spread her legs wider and-

Made him groan again when the move caused him to slowly slide inside her with the next roll of his hips. God, she felt incredible, Devin thought as he kissed her. He wished that he could go back in time to the day that she walked into Bradford Creations. He would have done so many things differently and once he had her, he never would have let her go.

"What if I told you that I adored you?" Devin asked as he raised himself up so that he



could watch her as he moved.

“I’d rather have it in writing,” Charlie said, making him chuckle as she reached up, cupping his face in her hands and pulled him down for a kiss.

“I think I can manage that,” he assured her before he kissed her, taking his time to move inside her, savoring the way it felt to slide inside her only to groan when her walls tightened around him, squeezing him as she grabbed onto his shoulders and moaned his name as her back arched off the bed while pleasure spread through his cock, pulling his balls up tight before spreading up his spine as her name was ripped out of him on a groan.

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For several minutes, he was content just to lay there, looking into her beautiful blue eyes.

“I love you,” Charlie said, having absolutely no idea what hearing those words did to him until she added, “But if you ever screw me over for your own entertainment again, I’ll be forced to kill you in your sleep,” making him wince.

“Duly noted,” he said, chuckling as he kissed her one last time before he reluctantly moved off her. Without a word, he took her hand in his and gave it a gentle tug that had her climbing off the bed and heading to the bathroom. They spent the next half-hour in the shower where he took his time worshipping her until the hot water ran out and it was time to call it a night.

That’s when he pulled on his clothes as he watched Charlie curl onto her side and-

He couldn’t do it.

He couldn’t force himself to walk out that door one more time and spend the rest of the night in his bed, alone.

At least, not yet.

Telling himself that he would make sure that he was gone before the kids woke up, Devin climbed onto the bed behind her and pulled the woman that had stolen another one of his shirts into his arms. He pressed his lips against the back of her neck as he closed his eyes and felt himself relax only to open his eyes sometime later when he felt something push against his back.

Frowning, Devin looked over his shoulder and-

“You’re in our spot,” Abbi said, narrowing her eyes on him.

Before he could open his mouth, Dustin spoke, “She was ours first.”

That was followed by them crawling onto the bed and pushing him over, ignoring his pained grunt as they stretched out with satisfied sighs that had him glaring at the little bullies.

“They’re brutal,” Charlie mumbled sleepily, sounding amused as a small knee was lodged against his back and-

“They really are,” Devin muttered as he found himself once again shoved over with a pained grunt when the dog jumped on the bed and another small knee was pressed against his back.

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“I’m very disappointed in you, young lady,” Ben said with a long-suffering sigh that was going to get him killed.

“Please don’t make me kill you right now,” Charlie said, dropping her head in her hands only to find herself standing up and pacing the bathroom when sitting still became impossible.

“Sex before marriage,” Ben said, shaking his head with a disappointed sigh that was quickly cut off with a pained grunt when her foot somehow connected with his ankle.

“God, you’re mean,” he muttered, absently rubbing his ankle as he looked down at the pregnancy test that she’d convinced him to pick up for her and sighed. “Still

counting down.”

Nodding absently, Charlie continued pacing the bathroom until even that wasn't enough and she found herself pulling out her phone and double-checking that she'd counted right and-

She was definitely late, she realized, unable to help but smile as she finally allowed herself to think about what this could mean. She hadn't planned for this to happen, but now that it was, Charlie realized just how badly she wanted this. It didn't matter that she wasn't married or that she was finally getting Dabbi Digital Marketing off the ground because she wanted this more.

She wanted another baby, one that she would be able to be there for from the beginning, to watch grow up and be there for all the things that she'd missed out on with Abbi and Dustin. She wanted another baby boy who loved hanging out in his tighty-whities and a little girl who had her father wrapped around her little finger.

“Shouldn't Devin be here for this?” Ben asked, taking a sip of his coffee as he glanced back down at the test.

“He doesn't even know that I'm late,” Charlie said, shaking her head as she released a shaky breath and-

“You want this,” Ben murmured thoughtfully as he considered her.

“Would that be so bad?” Charlie asked, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she sent him a questioning look to find him shaking his head.

“No, I don't think it would be a bad thing, not when it makes you this happy,” he said, shooting her a wink that had her biting her lip to stop herself from crying.

“Thank you,” she said, glancing at the test that was taking forever, praying that-

“What’s going on?” came the question that had Charlie glancing back to find Devin standing in the doorway, staring at the pregnancy test with a look that she couldn’t quite figure out.

“What are you doing here?” Charlie asked, shifting nervously as she sent Ben a questioning look.

“Well, it looks like my work here is done,” Ben said as he stood up and headed for the door only to pause so that he could kiss the top of her head as he said, “Call me when you find out,” before heading out the door.

“You said that you were working from home today, so I thought I’d surprise you with donuts,” Devin said, holding up the small white bakery bag that she hadn’t noticed before. “What the hell is going on here, Charlie?” he asked hollowly as he stared helplessly at the pregnancy test that should be finished by now.

Licking her lips, Charlie said, “I might be pregnant,” as she forced her legs to take her across the small distance so that she could look down at the pregnancy test and-

“No, you’re not,” he said firmly, making her frown as she glanced back at him to find him watching her with something close to dread as he added, “I can’t have children.”

## Chapter 40

“What are you talking about?” Charlie asked as she glanced back down at the pregnancy test as he was forced to stand there and watch as the last glimmer of hope slowly died in her eyes.

“I can’t have any more children, Charlie. I had a vasectomy,” he said, forcing the

words out of his mouth as he tossed the bag on the counter.

For several minutes, she didn't say anything. She just stood there, staring down at the pregnancy test that confirmed everything until he couldn't take it anymore.

"Say something," he snapped.

"When?" came the softly spoken word that had him slowly exhaling.

"Right after the twins were born," Devin said, watching as she slowly nodded, never taking her eyes off that fucking test.

"Were you ever going to tell me?" she asked, finally looking at him.

"I don't know," he said hollowly as he watched the tears run down her face.

"You don't know," Charlie said, nodding absently only to shake her head in disgust as she frantically wiped at the tears that he would give anything to stop as she added, "Well, that's perfect."

"Charlie, I made a promise to my children that-"

"I don't want to hear about your stupid promise, Devin. Okay? I just don't!" she snapped as she pushed past him and headed into her bedroom.

"It wasn't stupid!" he snapped back as he followed her.

"No, you're right," Charlie admitted with a firm nod as she turned around and faced him. "It wasn't stupid. It was cruel."

"How? How was it fucking cruel to make sure that my children were taken care of

and never once, not fucking once, had to question how much I wanted them? I made sure they knew that they were loved and that they would always come first and-”

“And you really don’t think that you could have done that without giving up everything? Do you really think that Abbi and Dustin wanted to see their father miserable? Do you really think that they needed their father to punish himself because their mother didn’t want them?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he bit out, deciding that they’d finish this conversation later after she had a chance to calm down and headed for the door only to find himself cut off by the small woman that he’d never seen get angry before.

“You don’t think I know what it’s like to have a mother that doesn’t want you? Are you serious? That’s all I know, Devin!”

When he went to reach for her, she shoved his hands away as sh

e continued. “But your kids don’t! They have no idea what it feels like not to be wanted by their mother and that’s because of you! She never got a chance to hurt them because you never gave her a chance to. You never reminded them that their mother didn’t want them. Instead, you made sure to tell them just how badly you wanted them and that made the difference. You gave them more love than they could have ever hoped for and you didn’t need a promise to do that, Devin. The only thing that promise did was cause pain.”

For a moment, he couldn’t say anything as he watched her shake her head in disgust as she turned around to leave and-

“Why aren’t Abbi and Dustin enough?” he asked, watching as she slowly turned back around to face him.

“Are you kidding me?” Charlie asked, shaking her head slowly in disbelief. “It’s because of them that I want children. Do you have any idea how much I love those kids? How much it kills me that I wasn’t there for them? I missed so much with those kids. I missed holding them when they were born, seeing their first smiles, the first time they crawled, walked, and a hundred other things that I will never experience with them and it kills me!”

“And I don’t want to go through that again! I don’t want to have to be scared out of my fucking mind every time one of my children gets a fever. I don’t want to have to sit by their cribs at night when they’re sick because I’m fucking terrified that they’ll get worse if I’m not there! I don’t want to have to worry about what will happen if I take my eyes off my children for even one fucking second because they keep getting into fucking everything! I don’t want to lay in my bed at night, fucking terrified to close my eyes because my kids might need me and I won’t be there for them! I don’t want to have to worry that I’m not doing enough for them or that I’m not giving them something that they need! I don’t want to have to worry about what will happen to my children if something happens to me. I don’t want to have to go through that alone again, Charlie.”

“You wouldn’t be alone, Devin.”

“Charlie, I-” he said, reaching for her only to have her step away from him, again.



## Page 43

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“You’re a great father, Devin, but you are a lousy boyfriend,” she said, grabbing her bag.

“Because I don’t want more children? That makes me a lousy boyfriend?” he snapped.

“No, it’s because you were willing to hurt me in order to keep a promise that you never should have made in the first place,” Charlie said, and with that, she walked out.

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“We’re going to need more pink,” Abbi said, sighing heavily as she glanced from the small cups of paint that their teacher had placed on their table to look around them to see if she could find any more pink paint.

“Charlie doesn’t like pink,” Dustin said, getting up and walked over to the craft station and grabbed the bottle of green paint, her favorite.

“True,” Abbi murmured in agreement as she held the cup of green paint still so that he could pour more into it as Mrs. Greer finished whatever she was doing at her desk to walk back in front of the class, carrying a large white picture frame in one hand and a white flower pot in the other.

“Is everyone ready to make their Mother’s Day gift?” she asked with a warm smile as Dustin shared a look with his sister because they were more than ready.

They'd been making plans for the past few weeks since their teacher announced that they were going to need ten dollars each so that they could make a Mother's Day gift this year. As soon as their father picked them up that day, they'd asked and they'd kept on asking until they got home and he gave them each ten dollars to bring to school.

As soon as he had the money, Dustin had placed it in an envelope that he'd helped himself to from his Daddy's office, sealed it, and put it in his backpack. To make sure that he didn't lose it, he hid his backpack beneath his pillow and held onto it all night as he slept. The next morning, he'd put the backpack on and refused to take it off until he was finally at school and could hand Mrs. Greer his envelope and since then...

He'd been counting down the days.

Mother's Day wasn't for a few more weeks, but he wanted to be ready. He'd already broken his piggy bank and gave his father all his money and asked him to order Charlie's favorite chocolates from Sarris Candies because he remembered how much she liked them at Valentine's Day. He was also planning on getting her a teddy bear that Abbi already promised not to take and he was going to make her favorite breakfast and surprise her with it.

This Mother's Day was going to be perfect.

He'd made sure of it.

"Maybe we should get her another bunny," Abbi said, making his lips twitch.

"She wants a turtle," Dustin reminded her, still wondering how she was going to manage to get one without Daddy getting mad.

Then again, since Daddy loved Charlie almost as much as they did, she could probably get away with it. To be honest, he wouldn't mind another dog, Dustin thought as he watched Mrs. Greer push the cart that was filled with the picture frames and flowerpots that they were supposed to paint.

They were going to need more green, Dustin decided as he squeezed more paint into his cup.

"Which one do you want to do?" Abbi asked.

"The frame," he said with a firm nod because he had the perfect picture to put in it.

"I'm going to have to get flowers then," Abbi said, nodding thoughtfully as they watched the cart finally make its way to their table.

When Mrs. Greer reached into the box to grab his picture frame, he couldn't help but smile only...

It wasn't a frame.

"So," Mrs. Greer said, smiling warmly as she placed two white coffee mugs on the table in front of them, "I thought that since you would be celebrating Mother's Day with your father that it would be nice to make him something really special."

"What?" Dustin said, feeling his stomach drop as he glanced from the coffee mug that he didn't want to paint to the other tables and watched as everyone else started painting their Mother's Day gifts for their mothers.

"I just thought that your dad would probably like this more than a flowerpot or a picture frame," Mrs. Greer said, drawing his attention back to the mug.

“I don’t want to paint a mug,” he said, shaking his head as he reached over and pushed the mug away while Abbi stood there, looking like she was going to cry.

“Dustin-”

“I want to make a Mother’s Day gift for my mommy,” he said, gesturing to her cart.

There was a sigh, and then, “Dustin, it’s okay. Not everyone has a mother and that’s nothing to be upset about. You have a really great dad that loves you and I think it would be really nice to-”

“I don’t want to make a mug for my daddy! I want to make a Mother’s Day gift for my mommy!” he yelled, knowing that he was going to be in trouble, but he didn’t care.

He had a mommy and he was going to make her a Mother’s Day gift.

“Dustin, maybe we should-”

“I have a mommy!”

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Mrs. Greer said as she reached for him.

“I have a mommy!” he screamed as he placed his hands over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut, terrified that she was going to tell him that he didn’t have a mother one more time.

## Chapter 41

“I don’t want to fucking talk about it,” Devin said as soon as T.J. opened his mouth.

“Fair enough,” his best friend said as Devin grabbed a board and-

“Fuck!” he roared as he threw the board across the room, slamming it into the wall as he clenched his hands into fists, struggling against the urge to put his fist through the wall.

“So...are we still not talking about it?” T.J. murmured, looking thoughtful as Devin grabbed onto the edge of his workbench and slowly exhaled.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” Devin said, glaring down at the scarred surface as he tried to get the image of Charlie’s smile dying when she re

alized that they were never going to have children out of his head.

He should have told her sooner. He should have made sure that she knew what he wanted before he-

“Hey, asshole,” came the greeting that had him turning around and-

Slamming back against his workbench when Ben decked him. Before he realized what was happening, Ben swung again, knocking him on his ass.

“What the hell is your problem?” T.J. yelled, grabbing hold of Ben and trying to drag him back, but the man who normally wore a carefree smile wasn’t done yet.

He grabbed Devin by the shirt, dragged him to his feet, and-

“Son of a bitch!” Ben snapped when Devin returned the favor and decked him, splitting his lip.

“You only get one,” Devin said, wiping the blood off his chin.

“And if you ever make her cry again, I will fucking kill you, do you hear me?” Ben said, getting in his face.

“You have no idea what happened, so I suggest that you get out of my face right now,” Devin bit out.

“I never should have let you near her,” Ben said evenly, but he didn’t move.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Devin said, because at least they could agree on one thing, he thought as he shoved Ben out of his way and headed for the door, more than fucking done with this day when Ben’s next words stopped him.

“She doesn’t cry anymore, does she?”

“What?” Devin asked as he slowly turned around.

“She doesn’t cry in her sleep anymore, does she?” Ben repeated, wiping the blood of his chin.

“No, she doesn’t,” he found himself saying as he tried to remember the last time that the kids came running into his bedroom because Charlie was crying in her sleep and wouldn’t stop.

“It’s because she feels safe,” Ben said, helping himself to a rag off the bench to wipe the blood off his hand. “It took us a while to figure out, but we realized that Charlie only cried in her sleep when she thought something bad was going to happen. When her grandfather had another heart attack and had to stop visiting, she cried for months, terrified that something was going to happen to him. The same thing happened whenever social services came by and told her that they were still looking for a nice family that would take her away from us.”

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“She did the same thing when Grandma Bea started getting sick. She was terrified of losing her. I used to have to sneak into her room at night and hold her because nothing else worked. She’d cry until even that was too much and then she’d simply lay in my arms trembling. She’s terrified of losing the people that she loves and do you know why?”

Grinding his jaw, Devin shook his head once, not sure that he wanted to hear this.

“Do you know what happened to her mother?” Ben asked, tossing the rag in the trash as Devin stood there feeling sick to his stomach.

“She doesn’t know,” Devin said.

“She doesn’t remember, which is for the best.” Ben said, sighing heavily as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“What happened to her mother?” Devin asked.

“She tried to kill Charlie,” Ben said, shaking his head in disgust as all the air in Devin’s lungs left him in a rush.

“Holy shit...” T.J. said, looking like he was going to be sick.

“She doesn’t remember that though. The only thing that she remembers in the generic tale that social services told her, that her mother abandoned her on her grandfather’s front step. What they never told her was what her mother got sick of having to deal with a small child and tried to get rid of her,” Ben said, shrugging it off.

“What happened to her mother?” Devin found himself asking because he honestly wasn’t sure that he would be able to handle hearing what her mother did to her.

“No fucking clue and it doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that Charlie deserves better than to be treated as an afterthought,” Ben said, getting back to the matter at hand.

“I don’t treat her like an afterthought,” Devin bit out.

“No? Then what would you call the way that you’re treating her? You didn’t think that she had the right to know that she was never going to have a child of her own? Are you fucking kidding me? This is Charlie we’re talking about here. Do you have any fucking idea what she’s gone through? Do you have any idea what it means to belong to someone? What it would mean to Charlie to have a child? To be a part of someone like that? Because I’m going to tell you right now, that if you had any fucking idea what that would mean to her then you never would have fucked around with her head,” Ben said, shaking his head in disgust.

“I love her,” Devin said hollowly even as Ben’s words hit and when they did...

He’d fucked up.

“She deserves to be happy,” Ben said as Devin’s phone rang.

Biting back a curse, Devin answered his phone only to shove it back in his pocket less than a minute later and move his ass.

“What’s wrong?” T.J. yelled after him.

“Something happened to Dustin at school,” Devin said, rushing into his office and noticed that Charlie still hadn’t come in as he grabbed his keys and ran for the door.



He was in his truck a minute later and five minutes after that he was throwing his truck in park and racing inside the school. Before the front door had a chance to close behind him, he heard it.

“I want my mommy!” came the hysterical scream that had him frowning as he made his way to the front desk, because that sounded like Dustin only...

He'd never heard his son scream like that before.

“I want my mommy!” came the scream again, drawing his attention to the right only to find Dustin sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, one of his hands over his ears and his eyes squeezed shut tightly as he continued to scream, “I want my mommy!” while Abbi sat next to him, crying as she held onto his other hand.

“Oh, thank god, you're here,” Mrs. Haskins said, looking relieved when she spotted him.

“What happened?” Devin asked, walking around the front desk and headed towards his children.

“We don't know. The children were making Mother's Day gifts and their teacher was trying to do something nice for them. She brought in something special for them to make for you and he got upset,” she explained, wringing her hands together as Dustin continued to scream.

“I-I want my mommy!” Dustin got out around a sob.

“That's because they have a mother,” Devin said, feeling his heart break for his children as he knelt down in front of them.

When Abbi saw him, she released her brother's hand and threw herself in Devin's

arms. He wrapped one arm around her as he reached for his son, but Dustin wasn't having it.

"I just want my mommy," Dustin said as his small body trembled. "I have a mommy. Tell them that I have a mommy...please!"

Swallowing hard, Devin said, "You have a mommy."

"I just want my m-mommy," Dustin said, crying as someone reached past him and-

"I'm right here," Charlie said, pulling Dustin into her arms.

"Mommy," Dustin mumbled, crying harder as his small arms wrapped around her and held on tight.

"Shhh, I'm right here," Charlie said as she carefully stood up with Dustin in her arms. "Everything's going to be okay," she promised Dustin as Devin stood up, adjusting Abbi in his arms as he watched Charlie walk away for the second time that day and realized just how badly he'd fucked everything up.

He also realized that he needed to do something about it.

## Chapter 42

"I need fluffiness in my life, mommy," Abbi said, making Charlie's lips twitch despite the fact that all she wanted to do was curl up into a ball and cry.

"You have fluffiness in your life," Charlie said with a pointed look at the small kitten trying to attack her feet beneath the blanket and the bunny currently snuggled in her arms, eating a carrot.

“I need more,” Abbi said, nodding solemnly as Bradford, whom Charlie would like to point out she’d only jokingly suggested calling Bradford when they got him, jumped onto the couch near Abbi’s feet and curled up, looking appropriately pitiful as he waited for someone to give him another treat.

“I tell you what,” Charlie said, pausing to kiss Dustin’s cheek as he continued to sleep, “if you can be good and super quiet so that your brother can take a nap, I will seriously consider asking your daddy if we can go to the zoo this weekend.”

“The zoo with the small petting area or the one where you can walk with the deer?” Abbi asked with a calculating look in her eye that let Charlie know that she was probably already making plans to try to steal a deer, again.

“The one with the deer enclosure, of course,” Charlie said, somewhat offended that her baby girl would think that she would settle for anything less than the best level of fluffiness.

Nodding, Abbi said, “That might be acceptable.”

“And if you are super good and let me get some work done while your brother naps, I might order Blackjack’s pizza for dinner,” she said, unable to help but smile when Abbi said, “I’ll be super good.”

“Okay, we have a deal then,” Charlie said, pointing to her apartment. “I’m going to leave the door open in case you need anything.”

“When’s Daddy getting home?” Abbi asked, absently petting her bunny while Charlie forced a smile on her face.

“Probably after dinner, sweetie. He had to run back to his shop and finish a project,” she said, repeating what Devin told them after he’d dropped them off.

“Okay,” Abbi said, shifting her attention back to the movie that she was watching as Charlie ran her fingers through Dustin’s hair one last time before she forced herself to walk into her apartment.

She told herself that she had absolutely no reason to be upset, especially not after today when the kids had called her mommy, which meant more to her than anything in this world. She loved them and that was more than enough, Charlie told herself as she grabbed her camera off her bed and headed to the office and-

“I’m sorry,” came the unexpected words that drew her attention to find Devin sitting at her desk, waiting for her with a bouquet of white roses in his arms.

“There’s nothing to apologize

for,” Charlie said, forcing the words out that she hoped would end this conversation as she walked out of her office and headed for the kitchen, deciding that this would be the perfect time to clean her camera.

“Then why do you look like you’re about to cry?” came the strained question a moment later as she laid her camera on the kitchen island and grabbed her kit out of the bottom cabinet.

“Just leave it alone, Devin, okay? I’m fine,” Charlie promised him as she tried to remove the lens, but her damn hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

“I’m not,” he said tightly as he laid the flowers on the kitchen island in front of her.

Slowly exhaling, Charlie closed her eyes and said, “Please,” because she wasn’t sure that she could handle this right now.

“Baby, look at me,” Devin said, but she didn’t want to look at him, not right now

when she was struggling not to lose it.

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“Look,” she said, licking her lips as she grabbed hold of the kitchen island as she struggled not to cry, “I love you, Devin and I can accept the fact that I am never going to have any children, but I can’t do this right now. I just need some time to accept this, okay?”

“When I made that promise-” Devin started to explain, but she didn’t want to hear about that damn promise right now.

“Devin, please don’t,” Charlie said, so close to losing it right now.

“When I made that promise I never planned on breaking it,” Devin said, ignoring her plea and continued. “I just wanted to be there for my children and to be able to take care of them. I didn’t want to do anything that would make it harder for them. The only problem is that I never expected that I would want to spend the rest of my life with someone and what my promise would mean for you.”

“You don’t have to explain,” Charlie said, because she already knew why he’d made that promise and as much as she hated it...

She couldn’t hate him for it.

“Yes, I do, Charlie. If I had known that you would walk into my life one day and completely fucking destroy it, I would have done so many things differently. I never would have made that promise and I sure as hell never would have wasted the last five years trying to keep it. When I made that promise I didn’t consider what it would mean for you because I never expected to find the love of my life.”

“Please stop explaining, Devin,” Charlie said, opening her eyes as she pushed away from the kitchen island. “You don’t have to explain anything. I know why you did what you did, and I get it, but I just need time to accept it, okay?” Charlie said, heading for the door.

“Charlie, wait,” Devin said as she grabbed her bag, deciding that she’d pick up the pizza instead of having it delivered to give herself some time to clear her head.

“Charlie, please wait,” Devin said as she headed for the door.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, opening the door and-

“Charlie, please!” he said, gasping in pain, making her frown as she turned around to find Devin, who was looking really pale, holding onto the kitchen island as he struggled to stand up.

“What the hell happened?” she said, dropping her bag on the floor and rushed over to help him.

Shaking his head, Devin continued to gasp in pain as she stood there, struggling not to freak out but it was really difficult to do with him muttering, “Please kill me,” as he dropped to his knees.

“Okay,” she said, nodding like an idiot because she had no idea what was going on. Licking her lips, she dropped to her knees, looking for something that would explain why Devin was now dropping onto his side with another muttered, “Kill me,” as he curled up into the fetal position.

“I’m really going to need you to tell me what happened, Devin,” Charlie said, giving up on trying to figure out what was wrong and rushed back over to her bag to grab her phone only to frown when he said, “Four months.”

“What’s four months, Devin?” she asked, trying to figure out who she was supposed to call.

There was a gasp of pain and then, he said, “Until I can give you a baby,” making her frown as she glanced back over to find him in the fetal position, cupping himself, and making her frown as she replayed his words in her head and when she did...

“Oh, my god, Devin! What the hell did you do?” she asked, dropping her phone on her bag and rushed over to the freezer.

“B-begged my cousin to call in a f-favor,” he said, only to end that with another pained gasp as Charlie grabbed the bucket of ice out of the freezer and quickly made an ice pack for him.

“I don’t understand,” Charlie said, rushing over to him and moved to place the ice pack on him only to decide that it would probably be better if he did it.

“Two weeks to heal, four months before I can give you a baby,” Devin managed to get out as he rolled over onto his back and shoved the ice pack down the front of his pants as he slowly exhaled.

“Better?” Charlie asked, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Not even a little bit,” he said, shaking his head as he pressed his hands over his face.

“You were only gone for four hours, Devin. How did this happen?” Charlie asked, rushing to the bathroom to grab the Advil.

“Only took two hours to reverse the vasectomy. Pain meds started wearing off a little sooner than I thought they would,” he said when she walked back into the room.



“Devin, I-”

“I’m going to give you a baby,” he said firmly as she grabbed a bottle of water off her nightstand before rushing back over to join him on the floor.

“I don’t understand why you’d do something like this,” Charlie said, dumping a couple of Advil in her hands only to cringe in sympathy when he grabbed the pills out of her hand and shoved them in his mouth, swallowing them dry.

“Because I love you,” he said, rolling onto his side with a mumbled, “That’s better,” only to roll back onto his back a few seconds later with, “No it’s not.”

“And I love you, Devin, but you didn’t need to do this,” she said, hating to see him in this much pain.

“We’re going to get married and have another child,” Devin said firmly as he took her hand in his.

“Devin, I-”

“We’re also going to make it official. I emailed my cousin Garrett and he’s drawing up the adoption papers,” he said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Really?” Charlie said, feeling her lips pull up into a watery smile.

“Really,” Devin said, using his hold on her hand, he pulled her closer so that he could reach up and cup her face in his hands.

“Are you sure?” she asked, placing her hand over his as she searched his expression, trying to make sure that this was what he really wanted.

“Absolutely,” Devin said, pulling her closer so that he could kiss her, slowly brushing his lips against hers.

“How many?” she asked, making him chuckle.

“I think we could handle two more, maybe three,” he said, making her smile.

“Yeah?” she said, absently as she slowly lost herself in that kiss.

“Mmmhmm,” Devin said, running his hands down her back. “Just as long as you’re finally mine.”

## Chapter 43

Two Weeks and Five Days Later...

That was it.

He wanted a divorce, Devin decided as he sat there, seething as he was forced to watch his wife cuddling his children and pets while he was stuck on the other end of the couch, alone. As he sat there, absently running his thumb over the underside of the black wedding band that he now proudly wore on his finger, one thing became painfully clear.

His wife was trying to kill him.

For the past nineteen days, she’d kept her naughty little hands off him and it was fucking killing him. At first, he’d appreciated it and even foolishly believed that she was doing it because she loved him, but then the doctor cleared him to return to regular activities and...

Nothing.

Not one fucking kiss, caress, or touc

h to put him out of his fucking misery. The most he got was a kiss on his cheek and a quick hug seconds before he was forced to watch her give his children double the kisses that he got. Then again, that probably shouldn't surprise him given what happened on their wedding night...

Since he'd been somewhat incapacitated at the time, he'd been forced to ask for help to pull it off. He'd considered waiting until he was healed before they got married, but he didn't want to take any chances that she'd change her mind. So, he did what every self-respecting Bradford had done before him.

He'd kidnapped his bride.

Okay, so kidnapping might be a bit of an exaggeration since what he really did was tell her that they were taking the kids to the movies with Ben and T.J.'s help and then simply drove to New Hampshire while pretending that he didn't hear her mumbling something about a secondary location. Once they were in New Hampshire, he'd shamelessly used the twins to lure her out of the car and into the courthouse and once he had her where he wanted her...

She'd told him that she wasn't sure that she could marry him because she just wasn't feeling worshipped enough to find the energy to make it down the aisle.

That was followed by him agreeing that she should feel properly worshipped on her wedding day before locking her in a storage closet until she agreed to marry him. That led to him leaving her in there until she admitted that she loved and adored him and couldn't wait to marry him. Once she'd convinced him that she couldn't wait to marry him, he'd released her so that he could make her the happiest woman alive.

He'd ignored her glares while the Justice of the Peace married them and focused on the night ahead. The doctor hadn't cleared him, but he'd decided not to let that stop him. He'd planned on spending the night showing his wife just how much he loved her only to discover that his wife had made other plans, plans that ended with him sleeping alone while his wife and children cuddled on the other hotel bed, watching Disney movies all night while he'd laid there, seething.

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She was mean, Devin decided as he sat there, uncaring that he was fucking pouting. When it became more than obvious that his wife didn't care that he was pouting, he narrowed his eyes on her until he got bored and decided to get some work done. With that in mind, he got up and started to head upstairs only to turn around with a sigh as he went to find out who was knocking on his door.

He opened the door and-

"You owe me," Ben said, dropping a duffle bag by the door before heading over to the couch and immediately grunted when the kids tackled him.

"What's going on?" Devin asked, watching as his wife climbed to her feet, pausing to scratch Bradford behind the ears before she leaned down and kissed each giggling child on the cheek before turning around with a satisfied sigh and headed upstairs, leaving him standing there wondering if he'd missed something.

When it became obvious that no one was planning on filling him in, Devin headed upstairs and-

"Are you here to worship me?"

-felt his lips pull up into a pleased smile when he walked into his bedroom and saw his wife lying on their bed with only a sheet covering her.

"I might be," he murmured, running his gaze over his wife, taking in the devious little smile that told him that she was up to something as he closed their bedroom door behind him. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

“I’m giving you an opportunity to worship me,” Charlie said, nodding regally as she gestured for him to get on with it.

Chuckling, Devin pulled off his boots and tossed them aside. “That’s ummm, very generous of you,” he said, reaching back to pull his shirt off.

“I know,” she said, lying back against the pillows as she watched him.

“And Ben?” he asked, reaching for his belt.

“Has generously volunteered to watch the kids for the weekend,” she said, nodding solemnly.

“Volunteered?” he murmured, latching onto the word that caught his attention because he knew his wife well enough to know when she was up to something.

“I may have had to use blackmail, but since he’d agreed to do it, I feel as though that should count as volunteering,” Charlie explained, making his lips twitch as he shoved his pants off.

“I see,” Devin said as he pushed his boxers down. “Anything else I should know?”

“He also volunteered to watch them next weekend, too,” she said, making his lips twitch as he reached down and grabbed hold of the sheet covering her.

“That was very generous of him,” he said as he slowly pulled the sheet off her, revealing every devastating curve that drove him out of his fucking mind.

“Wasn’t it, though?” she murmured with a satisfied sigh as she lay there, waiting to be worshipped, something that he was more than happy to do.

## Epilogue

### Six Months Later...

“You promised us a baby,” Abbi bit out with an accusing glare that was matched by her brother as Devin continued to pace in front of the bathroom, waiting to find out if they were going to have another child that loved to drive him fucking crazy.

“You guys are brutal,” Devin said, chuckling only to slowly exhale as he glanced back at the bathroom to find Ben staring down at the pregnancy test as he popped a chip in his mouth.

“Well?” Devin asked, rubbing the back of his neck as he waited for his unofficial brother-in-law to break the news.

“Still counting down,” Ben said, popping another chip in his mouth as Devin glanced over his shoulder to find his wife running her gaze over the armoire that he made her for Christmas.

“Give up yet?” he asked, walking over to join her.

“Never,” Charlie said, shooting him a smile as he reached down and scratched Bradford behind the ears.

“I’m willing to tell you where the hidden compartments are,” he said as he wrapped his arms around his wife and pulled her closer so that he could kiss the side of her neck before adding, “for a price.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Charlie said with a determined nod as she reached over and ran her fingers over the Celtic design that he’d carved into the side.

“Are you sure? It would be so easy to tell you...” Devin said, letting his words trail off, knowing just how tempted she was to finally give in.

It had been eight months since he gave her the armoire and so far, she hadn’t been able to figure out how to open any of the secret compartments that he’d built into the armoire. He’d offered to tell her where they were, but his wife was determined to find them on her own.

There was a pause and then...

“What will it cost me?” she asked, making him grin as he thought of all those things that he would love to do with her. Since his parents were in town for the week, he could probably get them to take the kids for the weekend so that he could spend a little quality time alone with his wife.

It was going to be per-

“I can show you, mommy,” Dustin said, reaching up and pushed against the Celtic design as he opened the cabinet door at the same time, releasing the lever and making Devin narrow his eyes on the little traitor.

A small click accompanied the side panel sliding free, making Charlie smile as she leaned down and rewarded Dustin with a kiss that should have been his. “Thank you, sweetie.”

“You’re welcome, mommy,” Dustin said, shooting him a smug smile that had Devin narrowing his eyes on his son.

“Traitor,” Devin mumbled as he watched Charlie open the side panel the rest of the way, revealing the Christmas card that he’d placed in there for her, the same one that he’d never actually expected her to find.



“What’s this?” Charlie asked, shooting him a questioning look.

“Open it,” Devin said softly as he leaned back against the wall while he watched her, waiting for the moment when she realized just how much he loved her.

When he wrote it, he’d already resigned himself to living without her, but he hadn’t been able to resist telling her how much he loved her even though he knew that she would probably never read it. It had taken him most of the night to put into words just how much he loved her.

Throwing him a curious look, Charlie turned the envelope over in her hands and opened it before looking down as she pulled out the piece of paper that he’d placed in there and-

“Oh, my god,” she mumbled with a watery smile as her eyes teared up and he prepared himself for all the love and adoration that was about to come his way as she read what he wrote and-

“Thank you, sweetie!” Charlie managed to get out around a snuffle as she reached down and pulled Dustin in her arms as Devin stood there wondering what the hell was going on.

“You’re welcome, mommy!” Dustin said with an adorable smile as Charlie gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

“Test is done,” Ben said as he walked into the room and threw himself across the bed, looking bored while Devin tried to make sense out of what was happening.

“Why is he getting my kisses?” he demanded as Charlie placed the folded piece of paper in his hand with a murmured, “That was so sweet,” before heading to the bathroom.

“It’s positive by the way,” Ben said, only to chuckle when Abbi jumped on him a split second later.

“A baby? Really? We’re having a baby!” his baby girl said with a gasp of excitement as Devin felt his lips pull up into a huge grin as he opened the folded piece of paper in his hands only to feel that smile slowly die when he read the words neatly written across the paper in crayon.

You’re the best mommy in the world. I love you!

Love,

Dustin

Eyes narrowing, Devin looked up to find Dustin watching him with a devious smile as he said, “And that’s why you’re not cut out for world domination,” shooting him a wink before he ran over to hug Charlie when she stepped out of the bathroom, leaving Devin standing there, somewhat terrified that his son was really going to drop his ass off on a deserted island one day.

Then again, that

might not be so bad, Devin thought as he walked over and pulled his beautiful wife into his arms, deciding that he’d just have to take her with him because there was no way in hell that he was ever going to let her go.

Coming this December...

Misunderstood

A Neighbor from Hell YA Novel

## Excerpt

### Prologue

“Yeah, I’m not doing it,” Sebastian said as he stared down at his mother’s latest attempt to...

Well, he wasn’t exactly sure what it was supposed to be, but he knew that he didn’t want to put the gray/greenish, crumbling, oozing substance in his mouth. But the problem was that he’d been dared by his brothers, who were both standing next to him, pointing flashlights on the gooey mess as they took turns poking it with a spoon because none of them wanted to touch it with their bare hands.

“Then you forfeit,” Jonathan, his twin brother and the reason that they were all down here, said with a satisfied sigh as he reached over and plucked the iPad that their mother let Sebastian borrow, out of his hands.

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“Wait. I want a turn!” Mathew said loudly, earning a glare, which was the only warning that he was going to get if he got them in trouble.

“You weren’t in on this,” Jonathan pointed out.

“It was implied!” Mathew hissed as he pushed the sleeves of his Scooby-Doo pajamas up, slowly exhaled, picked up the spoon and dug in and right before they had a chance to see if their little brother would survive, they heard it.

The sound of a door opening.

“Go!” Sebastian mouthed to his brother as they both slapped their hands over their little brother’s mouth, grabbed an arm, and pulled him towards the back stairs.

“The brownies!” Jonathan whispered, making him frown until he remembered the gray mess they’d left on the counter.

Knowing just how badly this would end if their parents caught them out of bed, Sebastian released his hold on his little brother and mouthed, “Go!” before making his way back to the mess that he never would have guessed was brownies, slapped the foil on top of the pan, carried it back to the fridge, and slid it back onto the bottom shelf next to what his mother had claimed was macaroni and cheese. As soon as he was done, Sebastian clicked the flashlight off and headed back towards the stairs.

In seconds, he was racing up the stairs, down the hallway, and sneaking into his room where he plucked the iPad out of his brother’s hands before climbing out the window with a satisfied sigh.

“Oh, come on!” Jonathan, who just happened to be afraid of heights, bit out quietly as he blindly reached out, too afraid to venture out any further than that as Sebastian crouched down on the small roof just out of reach of their bedroom window.

“Oh, is this what you wanted?” Sebastian asked innocently as he held up their mother’s iPad just out of reach of his brother’s mad grab.

“It’s my turn!” Jonathan said with a murderous glare as he leaned out the window another inch, but sadly, that just wasn’t going to be enough to reach him.

“You’re right,” Sebastian said, nodding solemnly even as he shifted on the roof so that he could shoot a glance at their sister Jessica’s window to make sure that they hadn’t woken her up.

“So, you’re going to give it to me?” Jonathan asked, making Sebastian shake his head with a disappointed sigh, because really, his brother of all people should know better.

“I would. I really would,” Sebastian said, returning his attention back to the iPad in his hands as he pulled up Radcliffe Academy’s homepage, curious about the classes they were offering this fall.

“You could have just said no,” Jonathan said with a resigned sigh as he returned to the safety of their room.

“I could have, but then how would you learn?” Sebastian asked, shooting his brother a wink as he stuffed the iPad inside his sweatshirt.

“Just don’t drop it. I want to check out the extracurriculars they offer before tomorrow,” Jonathan said as he grabbed a book off their desk and dropped down on the bottom bunk where he would most likely fall asleep before Sebastian came back.

“I won’t,” Sebastian said, chuckling as he slowly made his way past his sister’s

window.

As soon as he came to the edge of the roof, he lowered himself to the next level and made his way to the chimney where he spent most of his time reading to get a break from his family. He loved them, he truly did, but sometimes he just needed a break. Since they were all afraid of heights, this worked out well for him.

It also didn't hurt that this particular spot was close to his parents' room and he'd be able to hear if they decided to check on them, which would give him plenty of time to get back to the safety of his room and climb back in bed before they made good on all those promises to wring his neck if they caught him on the roof again. Until then, Sebastian was going to sit here and check out the insanely cool school that was going to save him from spending another year doing the workbooks that his mother downloaded from the internet.

He loved spending time with his mother and studying whatever he wanted, but he missed school. He missed gym class, missed hanging out with his friends, being able to get a new book every day from the library, being taught instead of watching videos and doing busy work. For the past year, his parents had been trying to get them into a new school, hoping to find a private school that would take them without costing a fortune, but thanks to their school records, none of the schools around here had been willing to accept them.

Except for Radcliffe Academy.

His mother had gone to bat for them, calling and emailing the school every week for the past year until the school finally gave in and allowed them to take the entrance exam. When their test results came in, the school had offered them a scholarship and now, they were going to one of the best schools in the country and he couldn't wait. They'd have to take two buses to get there, but it would be worth it, especially if-

"Baby, please stop crying," Sebastian heard his father say, making him frown as he

looked up from his iPad.

Curious, Sebastian shifted to the edge of the roof and looked past the chimney. When he heard the unmistakable sounds of his mother crying, something that he'd never heard before, he found himself shoving the iPad back in his sweatshirt and carefully moving around the chimney so that he could make sure that his mother was okay.

"Shhh, baby, please. Everything is going to be okay," his father said while Sebastian watched his father through the window as he pulled his mother into his arms and closed his eyes. "It will be fine."

"No, it won't," his mother said around a choked sob as she wrapped her arms around his father and pressed her face against his chest.

"We'll figure something out. We always do," he promised, but from the look on his father's face, Sebastian could tell that he really didn't believe it.

Sebastian swallowed nervously as he knelt there, watching his parents, more terrified than he'd ever been in his life because he'd never seen his parents like this. When something bad happened, his parents usually teased each other until one of them was smiling and he knew that everything was going to be okay. But now...

He was absolutely terrified.

"How are we supposed to choose?" his mother asked.

"I don't know, Zoe," his father said, making him frown.

"I can't do this."

"We'll make it work," his father promised.

“How are we supposed to come up with forty thousand dollars every year for the next six years?” his mother asked, making his stomach drop.

“I don’t know.”

“How are we supposed to decide who gets to go to this school and have a real chance and which one stays here while we fumble our way through homeschooling him? I can’t do it, Trevor. I can’t do that to them,” his mother said as she held on tightly to his father while Sebastian sat there, realizing just how much his parents had been hiding from them.

They hadn’t offered bot

h of them a scholarship.

Radcliffe Academy had only offered one of them a scholarship, which meant that one of them wasn’t going. It meant that one of them wasn’t going anywhere. It meant six more years of workbooks at the kitchen table, running errands with their mother, and trying not to die of boredom.

“I don’t think they expect us to choose, sweetheart. Sebastian got the higher score,” his father said as Sebastian sat there breathing a sigh of relief.

That is until his mother spoke.

“What about Jonathan?”

“He can do another year of homeschooling, sweetheart. In the meantime, we’ll save every penny we get our hands on and we can send him next year,” his father promised as Sebastian wordlessly turned around and slowly made his way back to his bedroom.



“It’s about time,” Jonathan said, grinning as he sat up and tossed his book aside when Sebastian crawled back through the window. “I can’t decide if I want to join the robotics team or the soccer team. Both would be cool, but the robotics team gets a trip to Disney if they win. We should both join. We’d definitely win then.”

“Here,” Sebastian said hollowly as he pulled the iPad out of his sweatshirt and handed it to his brother.

“You’re done?” his brother asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah, I’m done,” Sebastian said, nodding absently as he climbed onto the top bunk, laid down, and closed his eyes.