



Make Me Fool You

Author: *Tamrin Banks*

Category: Romance

Description: Brianna Maxwell:

Why does this man have to drive me nuts? I've got so many things going on right now and James is just one more distraction that I don't need.

But he refuses to go away and when my mother backs me into a corner, telling me that I have to have a date for my sister's wedding or she's going to find someone for me, I know that I'm royally screwed. Even more so when James overhears my phone call and hands me an offer I can't refuse. A fake date for the wedding just to get Mother off my back.

Only when he holds me in his arms, it feels like this whole relationship is becoming entirely too real.

James McCullough:

I've been in love with Bri since we were gawky adolescent high school kids. But I let fear for her and myself pry me from her side. Now I've got my shot and I'm going to take it. I'm going to win Bri over one way or another. She's my one. The only woman I've ever loved. And I'll do anything to prove to her that we're meant to be. But when she feels betrayed by my silence, will she leave me and take my heart with her?

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CHAPTER1

Brianna

I sigh and shove the file folders I've been staring at for the longest time underneath the rest of the things I'm taking home with me. Standing and throwing my purse over my shoulder, I quickly stride to the door of my office and then turn and lock it on the way out the door.

"Goodnight, Dr. Maxwell. See you tomorrow." I smile and wave at the nurse on the way out the door but I don't stop. It's eight at night and I've been here in the hospital since five this morning. I'm exhausted, I haven't eaten dinner and it's the night for my book club. My mouth waters when I think about taco night. I love taco night. There's just so much you can do with a taco. And Ruth's pork tacos are insane. I love the slaw that goes on top of them. I could eat that pickled stuff all day.

Throwing my bag and files on the seat of my car, I jump in and start it. Only to slam the car to a stop when I see a shadow behind me. My heart pounds and I drop my head to the wheel.

"Shit! That was close."

"Hello, Dr. Maxwell. You're here late, aren't you?"

I groan and look up and up into the eyes of my former best friend. The man that used to make me laugh when we were kids. The man who dropped me like a hot potato as soon as we went away to college. Never even tried to contact me. It fucking hurt.

His dark green eyes smile at me like there's nothing wrong at all. Like we never had the best friendship in the world. Like I never hoped that I'd end up as Mrs. McCullough.

"James," I say, my voice colder than the night air tonight. It's been chilly all week as the fall weather starts moving in on us. The leaves on the trees in town and all around the properties in the area are gold, red, amber and orange. I usually love this time of year. Taking long walks in the woods by the lake to feel the beauty of the crisp air and the trees slowly cycling into their winter gear. It centers me. Makes me feel alive and happy.

But not this year. I just haven't had time. So my blood pressure is roaring and seeing James doesn't help.

He sighs and runs his hand through his walnut brown hair. It falls back into place immediately. That's one of the things that drives me crazy about him. He's so damn perfect. Nothing ever seems out of place on the man. He never puts a foot wrong. I'm a damn klutz and could trip over air. It's inhuman how perfect he always is.

"Why are you always so short with me, Doc? I don't think I've ever done a thing to you and yet you chat with everyone else in the building but not me."

"You're not there as much as them. I don't know you. There's a bunch of different reasons."

I lean forward and start my car again. Before I can react, he reaches in and grabs my car keys, pulling them out of the ignition through the open window.

"Hey! What the hell?" I scramble, grasping for his hand but he quickly hides it behind his back. "What are you, two?"

Opening the door, I reach around him and try to get my keys but he turns himself sideways, keeping them just out of my reach.

I huff and slap him on the shoulder as hard as I can. He doesn't even wince but I feel my body heat when his muscles shift under my hand.

Holy shit! When did James get so ripped?

He grins at me. "That the best you got, Doc?"

"Why are you trying to piss me off, James? I'm already late."

"For your book club?" he grins.

Glaring at him, I try to duck around him again. "How do you know that?"

"A little birdie told me."

"By any chance was this birdie named Ruth?"

He grins, unrepentant. "Maybe...maybe not."

"You can't just keep me from leaving James McCullough! I am exhausted and I need food. What I don't need is you doing whatever this is." I wave my hand back and forth between the two of us.

Leaning closer, he backs me up into my car. My eyes widen as I realize I'm trapped. For the first time, James doesn't seem so...innocent. His masculine scent wafts around me, surrounding me and making my mouth go dry. He smells fucking delicious. Even better than pork tacos.

“I’m not joking around, Bri. I’ve been trying since you came back here five years ago to get your attention. To get you to talk to me like you used to. Nothing. You’re like a damn vault.”

“We used to be friends, James. That’s why I talked to you. Now you’re just another guy. I don’t have anything to give you and I hope that you can turn the other cheek and move on.”

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“What if I choose not to?”

I cross my arms over my chest and lean into the car, trying to back as far away from him as possible. “Then you’re going to be disappointed. I’m not interested in whatever you want. Now, will you move?”

I lift my hands and shove at his chest angrily. It’s like trying to move a rock. His pecs flex under my fingers and I feel that quickening in my belly. A flutter like butterfly wings.

His big hands wrap around my fingers and tug me into him until his muscular body is plastered against every inch of my body. I can feel his breath sawing in and out of his lungs. Feel his heart racing under my fingers.

I glare up at him but all I can manage to whisper is, “Let me go, James.”

He shakes his dark head and his green eyes flash with emerald fire. His lips come down hard on mine. My lips part on a startled gasp and he plunges his tongue inside my mouth, tangling with mine. His kiss changes from punishing to slow and sensual in the blink of an eye. My heart races, my breath stalls and my unruly arms reach up and try to pull him closer. His hands lift them over his head and wrap my arms around his neck.

Lord, his hair is so soft under my fingers! Twisting and tugging at the short strands as he moans and grinds his body into me. My mind completely blanks out when I realize his hard shaft is poking me in the belly.

I push him away desperately, scrubbing furiously at my bruised lips. Trying to scrub away the feel of him, the taste of him.

“What the hell was that, James?” I hiss furiously.

“That was what I’ve been trying to tell you for the longest damn time, woman! There’s something here! I want you and you fucking want me! I can feel it.”

He licks his lips and my eyes follow his tongue, heat curling in my belly. A smirk tugs at the firm curve of his mouth. “You can’t lie to me anymore, Bri. You can’t run, can’t hide. This is gonna happen. One way or another.”

“Go to hell, James!” I push him out of the way and grab my keys from his limp hand. Closing and locking the door, I start my car and peel out of the lot.

A quick glance in the rearview mirror shows me that he’s still standing where I left him, his eyes following the car, a tiny curl to his lips.

Lips that kissed me until I couldn’t remember my own damn name. Lips that felt soft against mine as he devoured me. Blew my misgivings to smithereens and turned me on so fast that my head still feels fogged with lust.

No freaking way! Not happening again! I’m too smart to let this man make a fool out of me again!

CHAPTER2

James

I can’t look away from the car as it drives away, leaving me in the dust.

I should be worried. Terrified, even. My feelings for the spitfire doctor should scare the hell out of me. Because she's bound and determined not to give in.

But I saw the hunger hiding behind the anger in her beautiful, dark eyes. Felt the desire in her kiss. The need she's been hiding from me for years.

Now I've seen it, there's nothing that's going to stop me. I'm going to have Bri. Not for a single night. Hell no! I knew as soon as I saw her back in town, she's it for me. She's mine. My penguin.

You know a penguin only has one mate. One true love. That's what I've got with Bri.

She's just making it hard on the two of us but I'll get my way...eventually. I don't give up easily. And this is the most important thing I've ever fought for.

I don't know why she's so intent on never having a personal life but she's pushed away every offer since she got home. The cold fire in her eyes could decimate a lesser man.

But not me. My hand lifts to my lips and I grin. I shouldn't push her while she's off-kilter like this. But I'm going to.

Fuck it! I'll keep pushing her until she gives in. Starting right now.

I open my pickup truck door and slam it, starting the truck and following slowly behind Bri. I don't want her to change her mind. I know where she's going. Where to find her tonight.

I pick up my phone and call Ruth. "Hey, Ruth. How's it going?"

"Don't try and fool me, James. You want something." I chuckle under my breath.

“Can’t fool you, huh? Actually, Bri is on her way there. Can you get her situated someplace where she won’t be able to move out of the way. I’m on my way there.”

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She huffs out a breath. “Seriously. This is a book club. Did you read the book we’re discussing tonight?”

“Of course I did.” Most of it anyway. It’s been a long week at the firehouse and the guys have been harassing the hell out of me whenever they get the chance. It’s no secret to anyone else that I want Brianna. Probably not even a secret to her. But they’ve all seen me shot down time and again by the dark-haired, fiery woman.

I’m not giving up. No way. She’s worth every damn bit of ribbing I get from the guys.

“Alright. I’ll help you. Mainly cause I know you really like Brianna. But keep in mind that she’s been hurt and you need to step lightly. Something I’m not entirely sure you know how to do.”

“I can be as sensitive as the next guy,” I growl, pulling into the florist shop.

I run in and pick up the first bouquet I find with carnations in it. I know she loves carnations. She has them growing outside the door of her house. Bright splashes of cheery pinks and whites.

“I’ll be there in five minutes. Keep her busy and get her blocked in until I get there.”

“Fine. I hope she doesn’t hate me for helping you.”

“She won’t. I know for a fact that she likes me. She just doesn’t want to admit it.” I hope I sound more confident than I feel.

“Yeah. Well, I told you, Brianna’s been hurt. And no...before you ask. I’m not telling you a damn thing. I’m giving you a hint but if you want the whole story, you’ll have to get it from her.”

“Right. Just help me this one time.”

“I’m holding you to that, James. I respect Brianna’s wishes too much to help you more than this one time.”

“Good. See you soon.”

A few minutes later and I’m pulling into the lot of the bakery, smiling when I see that Ruth’s got all of Bri’s attention, showing her some pictures on her phone.

I duck in and grab the bouquet off the seat, brushing down my jeans nervously.

Holding my breath and then breathing out slowly, I push my way into the bakery. Ruth’s body stiffens in the seat but she doesn’t turn to look at me and neither does Brianna.

Until I’m standing in front of her with the bouquet and sliding into the other side of the booth.

“Let me out, Ruth,” she growls, her dark eyes glaring at me, burning with anger.

I rub at my chest like she’s incinerating my heart. But I push it all down. No time like the present to push her a little harder.

Ruth grabs her phone and stands. “Oh, that’s my Tate. I wonder what’s wrong.” The damn phone never even rang so she couldn’t be any more obvious if she tried.

She slides out and quick as a snake striking, I slide in right where she was sitting so that Bri can't slide out.

"Dammit, James! What is going on with you? I thought I made it plain. I'm not interested. Go find another fire bunny to play with."

"You think you're a fire bunny?" I laugh wryly. "You're about the furthest thing from that."

"You know what I mean," she huffs, her tanned cheeks flushing. "I'm not into firemen. So if that's what you're looking for, go look somewhere else."

"I'm not looking for an easy lay, Bri. I could have that any day of the week if I wanted. I want something real. Something like what I feel for you."

"Horny?" she grins cheekily and my own cheeks stretch with an answering smile.

"I've got a hand for that. I want you."

She groans. "Seriously. You need to back off. And stop saying shit like that!"

Delight courses in me. I love to get a rise out of her and her cheeks are flushed a pretty cherry red. "You're a doctor, Bri. You're telling me that you're embarrassed by a simple statement of fact. I haven't been with another woman since I saw you. It's all been you. I can't even think about any other woman."

Her full lips twist wryly. "I'm so blessed. I'm not interested in any man. It's not personal. I just don't want to get involved with anybody. Why do you keep pushing this?"

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“Because I know that you’re lying. You can fool yourself but you can’t fool me. As soon as I kissed you, I could feel it. The hunger. Desire.”

“You’re a pretty man, James.” Her eyes drift down my body and my dick jerks in my jeans, jumping like bass after bait. She has that effect on me. “Any woman would be lucky to have you. I’m just not interested. Find another woman who’s willing to jump into your bed.”

“Who said I wanted you to jump into my bed?”

Her dark eyes dance and she laughs, throwing her head back, her long, dark hair sliding down her back in glorious waves. I clench my fists to keep from reaching out to wrap my fingers into her long tresses.

She clears her throat, sobering. “If you’re trying to tell me you don’t want me...don’t bother. I felt it. Against my body, James. You can’t hide that.”

I shoot her an impatient look. “I believe I’ve tried telling you that I want you. I’m not hiding it. I’m trying to hit you over the head with it for god’s sake!”

“Let’s get started! So did everybody read the book?” Sophie, the owner of the bookstore stands up, her vivid sapphire eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Of course we did. Carinna never disappoints. I swear this one is my favorite story so far. Red and Carrie are the sexiest couple she’s ever written. Who thinks that Red sounds like Chris?” she laughs.

Ruth giggles. “A sexy musician who comes looking for his first love? Hmmm. Seems a little suspicious.”

“Okay, let’s ask our newest member what he thinks of Carinna’s new romance!”

I sit up and shake my head wildly but Ruth waves me over.

“Okay. Fine.” I stand up and stare around at a sea of women’s smiling faces. Every last one of them looks like they’re about to laugh their asses off at me. But I don’t give a shit. I’ll embarrass the hell out of myself if it means that I’m near Brianna for long enough to make an impression and win her heart.

“Well. I thought that the main characters were pretty well-written but the story was pretty thin,” I say.

Every woman in that place gasps and clutches their copies of the book to their chests like I’ve just said the dirtiest swear word in the book.

I turn and find Brianna laughing, her head thrown back and her entire body shaking.

The room erupts into a fury of loud voices telling me how wrong I am.

And all I can see is Brianna’s laughing eyes and smile in the corner booth. She doesn’t even try to leave again. Just sits there while those women take me apart and smirks at me.

I didn’t care, though. She didn’t run and I got to spend a few precious minutes with her.

Win-win in my book.

CHAPTER3

Brianna

I sigh and stand, walking out the door when my phone rings. I can see James standing over by his truck waiting for me. It's quite obvious to everyone there that his cool gaze is focused directly on me but I ignore it for now because I know exactly who's calling.

"Yes, Mother. What can I do for you tonight?"

"You know, it would be nice if you sounded more like my daughter when I called. I've gotten more warmth from telemarketers," she huffs.

"I'm sorry. What do you need?" I try to inject some warmth into my voice while I unlock my car door, keeping an eye on James at the same time.

"Have you gotten a date for your sister's wedding? It's not very long now and if I need to find a date for you, you need to let me know."

"I told you I'm going without a date."

"No you are not. This is too important for you to blow off. It would look terrible if you couldn't manage to find a date for your sister's wedding. A beautiful, eligible doctor? Everyone will be speculating on what the issue is with you because obviously there has to be something wrong with you that's pretty bad for a man not to date an eligible doctor. Seriously? No. I won't allow it."

"I think you've forgotten that I'm an adult. You can't bully me into doing whatever crazy thing you want!" I growl into the phone, grumbling when I manage to drop my car keys under the car.

“Seriously, Mother. I’ve got to go.”

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“This isn’t the end of this conversation. I’ll start looking for someone for you now since you’re being so damn stubborn.”

“No! Dammit! I’m not going to go out with some random guy you manage to scare up.”

“Bye, dear!”

“Aaah!” I scream and just manage to stop myself from heaving my phone across the parking lot. I’ve lost more than one phone after talking to my mother.

“Sounds like you could use a little help?” I stiffen and turn slowly, not surprised at the cat that ate the cream smirk on James’s face.

“No. I am fine. I definitely don’t need anything from you.”

“You’d rather go out with a perfect stranger that your mother scares up who could end up being an ax murderer than me?”

The sad, little lost boy look on his face makes my heart clench in my chest.

“Don’t give me that look! I’m not letting you use this situation to push me into a date. I told you...I don’t date.”

“Sounds like you’re going on one no matter what. You might as well go with someone that you know and trust.”

“You think I can trust you? Really? Why would that be?”

“I think if you bothered checking around town you’d find out that I’m a catch. All the mothers in town are trying to get me to go out with their daughters.”

I want to punch that smug look right off of his face. Seriously? Who the hell does he think he is?

He holds up one strong, tanned hand. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that I’m an idiot and a jerk for even suggesting what I did.”

“That might be the case. But honestly, I’m a good guy. You can ask around.”

And the sad thing is...I’ve already done that. When he first started asking me out when I moved back. And from the way everyone in town described him he might as well have been a saint. Or an angel with wings and a damn halo.

I open my mouth to blast him again and refuse to even consider it...only to get a message from my mother.

A text with a photo of some jerk wearing a sweater vest and about a pound of hair gel. And I know that I can’t do it.

“Fine,” I huff out a strangled breath. “We’ll do the wedding stuff. But that’s it. Don’t expect this to lead anywhere. I’m too busy with work and I just don’t have time for dating.”

His smile is huge, triumphant and makes me step back a pace. Figuratively and physically.

This guy is trouble with a capital T and it would be so easy to let him get past my

defenses.

But I'm not going to be my sister or my mother. My work is too important to get pushed aside by a needy man who needs his ego stroked twenty-four-seven.

"So what's the first step?" he asks me and I just stop myself from pulling my hair out in frustration.

"First step is getting my mother off my case. Then I'll let you know after that."

He nods and backs away to his truck. "Sure. You take care of that and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Oh that's not necessary. I'll get ahold of you before the weekend."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, baby girl." His voice is firm and gritty and I know I'm not changing his mind.

"Fine. Night."

He turns to leave and like an idiot I stand there to watch. I gotta admit. He looks good coming and going. His sculpted ass is a thing of beauty. Round and muscular.

My head drops to my shoulder and I can't stop staring. Only to find myself flushing when he turns around at the car door. That smirk that only he has lights up his face and I groan to myself.

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He climbs in and waves then blows me a kiss.

“I’ve never understood why you refused to go out with him so many times. I mean...he’s gorgeous and he’s so into you it’s not funny.”

My face turns beet red and I shoot Ruth a glare. “I’ve got my reasons.”

“Well I hope you’re planning to saddle up and ride that cowboy because I know he’s good for more than an eight second ride.” Her wicked smile has me blushing again.

“Stop it! I agreed to go out with him to all the wedding hoopla for my sister. That’s it!”

Her blond eyebrow quirks. “Are you sure that’s all it is? Because I swear I saw drool on your lips a second ago.”

I shove her and cringe internally. “Jesus! Give me a break! He’s not just a hunk of meat.”

She sobers instantly. “No, he’s not. He’s a great guy. Please don’t mess him up. Just give him a chance.”

“I’m not interested in dating. And if I was, it wouldn’t be him and you know why.” It feels like I’m on automatic pilot when I say it.

Ruth nods and sighs. “Just keep what I said in mind.”

“I’ve got to call my mother and get her off the hunt. She’s already sending me texts with photos and 401K information.”

“Jeez! What the hell?”

“Those are the most important requirements for a husband to her.”

“Gross. Well, you take care of that and I’ll see you next week. Hopefully this weekend is a revelation for you!”

I groan and pick up my phone to call my mother. I’d just text her and turn the phone off but she might show up at my door and that’s the last thing I want.

“Mother? You can call off the dogs. I’ve got my own date.”

I grimace when she starts the third degree. I don’t know much about James’s life currently so I just wing it.

After all, I doubt if she knows anything about him either. He doesn’t exactly move in her circles.

We make a great couple because I don’t want to move in them either. And as soon as this farce is over, I’ll make sure she understands that.

Or die trying.

CHAPTER4

James

Itake a deep breath and hold it when I tap on the door to Bri’s place. I’ve never been

here and I feel like a bunch of butterflies are loose in my belly.

But it's not for any reason except the woman who opens the door to me.

"You're beautiful, Bri."

She's wearing a long dress in wine red that clings to all of her lush curves, caressing them like a lover. Her long, dark hair is up and threaded with stunning crystals that shimmer among the deep brown strands. Her makeup is tasteful and subdued except for a deep cranberry lipstick that makes me dream about those lips wrapped around my dick while she's on her knees in front of me.

She rolls her dark eyes and shakes her head. "Seriously? You know this is not a real date. You don't have to say those kinds of things to me."

A frown crosses my face. "I know that you think that. But this is real, princess. I'm counting this as a date. I'm counting all the hoopla as dates. And I'm going to make you want more. That's my goal and no matter what you say, I'm gonna win. You're gonna want me. You're gonna want it all from me."

Her mouth falls open and I swear to god it feels like my dick is about to bust through my pants. I shift uncomfortably. One thing I don't want to do right now is let Brianna know what's going on down south. Knowing her she'd turn right back around and call her mom and tell her that she isn't going to be there.

That doesn't work for me.

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Instead I hold out my arm and wait for her to hook her slender arm through mine.

Shooting me a skeptical look, she finally reaches out tentatively and lets me tug her over and link her arm in mine.

She's so tiny that I have to look down to see even the top of her head but my heart swells in my chest.

This is the moment I've waited for so long. The chance. Just one small chance to prove that I'm the one for her.

I smile and lead her out to my truck.

"Maybe we should take my car," she says, eyeing the high climb to reach the bench seat.

I shake my head. "No problem. I've got you, baby girl." She gasps when my arms slide under her legs and lift her up so fast that she doesn't have a chance to protest. She lands against my chest and my body reacts like I've been shocked. Electricity coils in my belly and shoots out to my limbs.

"What are you doing?" she gasps. Her startled eyes are whiskey gold and wide with shock. Long lashes flutter like a butterfly in a field of flowers.

"I got you." I lift her up easily and carefully set her on the seat, fluffing her long wine skirts around her like she's a queen on her throne. My queen.

The normally confident woman that I know and love flushes a pretty red and her eyes drop to where her fingers twist in her lap.

I love it but I also know that I'm pushing her again. And I have to walk a careful line to not push too much.

So I just shut the door after making sure that her long skirts are clear. Jogging around the front of the truck, I climb in and breathe deep, my head swimming. I can smell the spicy floral that she wears and it makes me fucking hard as a rock.

"Ready, princess?"

She nods her head and her full cranberry lips tighten but she doesn't say anything.

And that's a win for me.

I pull up in front of her mother's house which is lit up like the Vegas strip. Cars are coming and going and red-jacketed valets quickly move them around like a massive game of Tetris.

It's finally our turn and I hand the young man the key. "Don't ding her."

Then I walk around quickly before anyone else can touch my girl. I jockey the other man at the door out of the way. "I've got her."

He huffs and steps away, eyeing me severely. I'm sure he gets off on handing beautiful women out of expensive vehicles but this woman is mine and she doesn't need anyone's help but my own.

"You know that's his job, right?" But she slips her dainty hand into mine, her short, bare nails a stark contrast to what I assume all society women love.

She gathers her skirt in one hand and we make our way up the marble steps to the front door where her mother is waiting. She exchanges air kisses with her daughter and then her eyes slide to mine. Eyes that are remarkably similar to my angel's. Except cold and calculating and blue. Not full of joy and a zest for life that I've never seen in another woman. Not like warm honey dripping down a honeycomb.

"How do you know my daughter, young man?"

"We work together."

A sharp, predatory smile crosses her thin lips. "So you're a doctor?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm an EMT. For the fire department."

Her lips tighten. "I see. Well, welcome to our home. Please enjoy yourself." Her attention shifts to her daughter and I can see Bri's shoulders stiffen. "I'll talk to you later, Brianna."

We move past her and I hear a deep breath release from the beautiful creature next to me.

I lean down and whisper in her ear, smiling when she shivers slightly. "Are you alright?"

She nods but I can still see the tense shadows in her whiskey eyes. "I remember your mother a bit." When she nods, I smirk. "I thought for sure she'd take things a lot worse than that."

Her eyebrows lift and she chuckles. "That's not terrifying to you?"

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I shake my head. “Nope. I’ve seen way worse.”

“Well, she scares the shit out of me,” Bri mutters under her breath sharply.

I chuck her under her chin. “Stick with me, kid. I’ve got you covered.”

For just a minute it feels like she sees me. And she likes me. There’s a warmth and trust in her eyes that lifts my soul.

“Oh shit,” she mutters again. I see another younger woman running up to us, a smile on her lips that doesn’t reach her cool blue eyes.

“There you are, sis. I wasn’t sure you were going to make it. And you could have knocked me over with a feather when Mother said that you actually had a date.” Her cold gaze shifts to me and she eyes me with the same enthusiasm as a snake eyeing a tasty meal. Her thin mouth lifts up and she shifts closer to me, essentially pushing her older sister away from me. “It’s so nice to meet you. How on earth did my dear older sister manage to snag you?”

My brow quirks. “Other than me being an incredibly lucky bastard that talked her into a date? I consider myself to be the one who got lucky.”

She nods her head and her blonde hair shimmers under the lights like an angel. “I don’t know as I believe that but it’s very gentlemanly of you to say.” She taps me on the arm with a long, painted red nail. “Make sure and save me a dance.”

Then without even glancing at her sister, she glides into the crowd, losing herself in

the crush in seconds.

I glance over at Bri, not surprised to see the darkness creep up her cheeks.

“Is there anyone in your family that’s not a bitch?” I ask her, laughing when she chokes and then gasps out a belly laugh all the way up her body.

“Let’s go mingle,” I say. “I can’t wait to see who else we run into here.”

She throws back her head and laughs, the lights glinting on the crystals in her dark hair like raindrops.

“Let’s go.”

After half an hour I’m ready to call it quits. I’ve never met such a bunch of pretentious assholes.

After an hour, holding Bri in my arms while I whirl her gently-swaying body around the room, I know I never want to be anywhere else.

“So...how do you feel now? Still worried about your mother?”

Her golden-brown eyes dance. “You mean you’re not?”

“Absolutely not. I’m the happiest damn guy in this place. I’ve got the most beautiful woman here in my arms and she’s smiling and laughing. Why would I give a damn about whatever your mother thinks? Or anybody else here for that matter.”

I see her Mother heading straight for us and she sighs, leaning her head on my shoulder, sinking into me like I can shield her from whatever’s coming.

And fuck do I want to.

Instead Bri lifts her head and her shoulders go back. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch her meet her mother across the room, both women staring at me. Her mother’s is a glare but Bri smiles at me and my heart turns over. That’s what I’ve been wanting. Her attention. A chance to make myself indispensable to this fiery woman.

I stroll around the room when the two women move away, talking.

I find myself in an alcove and just across from me, behind a huge tree decorated with crystal ornaments that look like snowflakes of all shapes and sizes, I see Bri’s sister’s fiancé and he’s not with his Trinity. His lips are fused to a tall blond with a gold dress that looks poured over her slim figure. I shake my head.

“Shit!” I don’t want to have to tell Bri about this. The bearer of bad news is usually the one that gets all the credit for a bad situation and not the person who actually committed the sins.

I rub my hand down my face, suddenly exhausted. Can tonight get any worse?

Bri pops up next to me, tears in her eyes. “Let’s go. I think I’ve had enough for tonight.”

Yep. Obviously it can.

CHAPTER5

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Brianna

Honestly, my mother drives me nuts. And it's time to get a breath away from her.

We stand outside, waiting for the valet to get James's truck. He reaches over and settles his arm around my shoulders. I shiver and I know I should make him move that damn arm. But the problem is I don't want to.

I feel safe when he holds me. Safe from the obnoxious interference in my life from my family. Safe from people who act like my friends and then stab me in the back.

"Are you alright?" he asks gently.

I shake my head and sigh. "I don't want to talk about it, James. Just take me home."

He nods his head but I can see him watching me the whole time.

He helps me in when his truck pulls up and then I sigh and lean into the cool glass. Closing my eyes I zone out and try to push my thoughts back.

"We're here, princess." James gently shakes my shoulder and I open my eyes, surprised that I actually relaxed enough to fall asleep.

I step out when he holds his hand out. He walks me to the door and then leans in to kiss my cheek. "Have a good night, baby. Don't let the bitches get you down."

When he turns to walk away, my heart clenches in my chest. I don't want him to

leave. I want what he gives me with no qualms. Safety, security, happiness.

“James,” I whisper. He turns immediately even though my voice is a bare thread of sound in the dark of the night.

“Yeah, Bri?”

I close my eyes, terrified of what I’ll see. “Stay.”

I can feel the heat from his big body. “Open your eyes,” he growls, his deep voice gruff and gravelly.

I open my eyes and gasp when I see him standing over me, his green eyes sparkling with desire.

“What do you want, baby girl? I want the words.”

My lips open before I can talk myself out of what I’m about to do. “I want you, James. I need you.” It may not be fair to use him but we can both benefit and I just can’t think beyond the need for his touch. The need for how he makes me feel.

He groans. “Give me your keys.”

I hand him my keys and he crowds me into the door when he pushes the key in and turns it. I should feel claustrophobic. Feel that need to escape that I always feel when men do this to me.

But not with James. For some reason I trust this man with all of me. Heart, soul and body.

The world spins on its axis when he throws me over his shoulder.

“Whoa! James!” I squeal, laughing wildly.

His big hand caresses my ass and he chuckles. “You’re taking too long. Where’s the bedroom?”

But we barely make it three steps inside the hall before he whirls around and I feel the world spin again. I barely find my feet under me before he picks me up again and slams me into the wall, growling, “Fuck it!”

His hands start tearing at my dress and I feel the seams rip. My heart thumps wildly in my chest and I scrabble at his back. His big hand trails up my bare thigh and my legs wrap around his waist, wine spikes digging into his muscled backside.

“Don’t you dare drop those legs, baby. I wish to fuck I could make this last but you’ve been teasing me so fucking long I’m not sure I can.”

Whimpering, I wriggle in his arms, desperate to get closer. Feel more of his body pressed against me. My hands rip at his dress shirt and he pins my body with his, his hands tearing at the shirt until it rips off and buttons ping to the four corners of the room.

My eyes drink in the sight of him. My fingers trail down his bare chest. He’s got muscles on muscles and when my fingers touch his warm skin, his stomach contracts and the deep v leads my fingers lower still until my deft digits slip inside his waistband.

He grunts when my hand wraps around his throbbing shaft. “Oh fuck! Don’t stop, Bri!”

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His lips slide down my throat and his own fingers rip at the zipper on my back, slipping it down until the cool air washes across my skin and I shiver.

His head pops up, “Are you good?” he gasps, his face flushed with lust and desire. Green eyes glittering with hunger.

I nod my head wildly. He grins and then his hand slips in my black lace panties, fingers teasing the edges of my slick center. My breath catches painfully. His fingers dance just barely along my seam until I huff and my hips chase his fingers.

“Please,” I whimper.

“Oh, you sound so pretty when you beg, princess.” That damn smug smirk tugs at his full lips again. Glaring at him, I growl, “Dammit, James!”

Before my next breath, his head drops and his teeth scrape along my throat, one finger diving inside my slick core.

“Oh god!” I groan, my head falling back to hit the wall with a soft thump.

The air is heavy with our groans and whimpers. Growls of pleasure as my fingers dance along his shaft, tugging hard. Moans as he pushes his thick finger in and out of my slit while his thumb slips up to grind into my clit.

My body feels like it’s racing to something epic. Fire sizzles in my veins and I hiss when his teeth close lightly around a spot on the sensitive column of my throat.

“James!” Another finger joins the first and my hand drops. I can’t think, can’t talk. My senses feel overloaded, the sizzle of desire racing up and down my trembling body until I stiffen and scream wildly.

“Oh shit, James!” My legs tighten around his slim hips and I can’t stop shaking, my vision a white blur of sound and light and pleasure.

“So damn sexy,” he whispers in my ear and I shiver.

My eyes open and his emerald gaze is fiery hot. Flames shoot through my core. My arms tighten around him when he tries to drop me to the floor.

“No. I want you. I need you so much, James.”

“You’ll have me. But our first time shouldn’t be on a wall for fuck’s sake.”

Shaking my head wildly, I grab at his pants and tug at his zipper. “I can’t wait. Now! Please,” I whimper, desperation tearing at my throbbing body. I feel empty.

“I need you to fill me up, James. Now.”

“Shit,” he hisses through his teeth as I manage to tug his erection out of his pants.

“Baby, please,” he groans.

“Now, James. I need you. I feel so empty.”

With a muttered growl, he picks me up and lines up with my weeping slit, his heavy rod sliding through my juices a couple of times until I grunt and my hips push into him, his hard shaft slipping inside me just an inch.

“Oh fuck!” he growls. And then like an unleashed animal he drives straight into me,

impaling me on the thick velvet of his shaft.

“Yes!” I scream, pleasure and pain colliding in my soul as my body tries to adjust to his invasion.

He doesn’t give me a chance to catch my breath though. Driving hard, he grunts and slams into my aching core over and over. Faster and harder until it feels like he’s so deep inside me that his cock kisses the very end of my slick tunnel.

Shivers of ecstasy trail up and down my skin when his lips, tongue and teeth rake the sensitive bud of my breast. His lips close around one while his fingers grind my clit.

“Come now,” he growls, his voice so harsh it doesn’t even sound human. “I need you to come now.”

And like I can’t help myself, my body reacts, trembling wildly as my orgasms roars over me, drowning me, pulling at me like an undertow of lust.

With a roar, he ruts into me until jets of his warm release spurt inside me, setting off another round of pleasure that drags and drowns me.

CHAPTER6

James

“Oh shit! James, come on! I overslept and we’re going to be late for the wedding!”

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I come to, stretching and yawning, my eyes drinking in the sight of Bri hopping around on one foot trying to pull on a dress and heels at the same time.

“What are you doing? Aren’t you supposed to get dressed at the church?”

She makes a face at me. “Oh, hell no! I am spending as little time with my mother and sister as I possibly can. So I will get there dressed and ready to go, thank you very much!”

Both of us scramble around, bumping into each other. I want to say the hell with this wedding but I know that would just bring Bri’s mother’s wrath down on her head.

In less time than I would expect, Bri’s ready to head out the door and she’s stunning.

My breath catches and I can’t stop staring at her. She flushes and fiddles with the long satin tie on the empire waist of the evergreen dress. It brings out a subtle green light in her soft hazel eyes and I’m lost as soon as she lifts her gaze.

“Fuck, Bri. You’re stunning! You’re going to outshine the bride today.”

“Yeah, right,” she snorts. “Please don’t wish that on me. Mother would blame me for looking good just like she’d blame me for looking bad.”

I grasp her hand and lead her out the door. “Let’s go, princess. I want to get this over with so I can bring you home again and make love to you for the rest of the night.”

Her dark eyes sparkle with desire. “I think that sounds amazing and I really wish we

didn't have to go now!"

I laugh and settle her in my truck. "Soon enough, baby girl. Soon enough."

The drive to the church is silent and the air feels electrified with a pulsing need that thrums just under the surface. It feels heavy and wanton.

When we arrive, her mother is waiting for us, her face red with fury. "What have you done, Brianna? I know that you're at fault for all of this. There's no way that your sister would have done something like this without your support!"

She reels back against the side of the truck. "What are you talking about? I haven't talked to Trinity since yesterday."

"Right," her mother snarls. "Well, I'm sure you're happy that the wedding is off!"

"What?!" Bri screams. "There's no way. I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding."

"I'm sure. But your sister is furious and has called off the wedding at the last minute. We'll never live this down. It's a stain on our good family name."

My eyebrows lift in shock. What the hell kind of mother is more worried about the damn family name than she is that her daughter is apparently very upset. No bride calls off the wedding just because.

Bri pats her mother's arm but moves quickly away. "I'll see what this is all about."

I drift along behind her purposeful stride. That's another thing I love about Bri. The woman doesn't mess around. If there's something that needs taken care of, she'll get it done in a timely fashion. She's not one to put off bad situations.

She picks up her skirts and starts running when we get inside the building and we can hear echoes of screaming and crying all around us. I can't figure out where it's coming from in the huge hall but Bri heads directly to the back.

"What the hell is going on?" she hollers as we come around the corner just in time to see Trinity haul off and slap her fiancé so hard that his head snaps back and there's a large, glaring red handprint on his cheek.

His face gets a mulish set to it and he moves closer to Trinity which is the wrong move. Bri moves right in between the two of them. "Stop it!" She turns to her sister. "What on earth, Trinity?"

Tears streak down her cheeks and mascara drips under her eyes. "That snake in the grass was cheating on me."

Bri sniffs. "You can't be serious. Maybe you misunderstood something totally innocent."

"No. I didn't. I saw them together this morning when he was supposed to be getting ready. He was ready all right," she snorts and then sobs quietly behind her hand.

Bri turns to stare at the man. "Cameron? Do you have something to say?"

His cold blue eyes turn to me and he sneers. "I knew you saw me but I never thought you'd sell me out."

Bri's head whips around. "What the hell are you talking about?"

My heart sinks when I see the wide-eyed fury taking over the warmth in her hazel gaze. "It's not what you think, Bri. I did see him last night kissing another woman but I didn't know what was going on and I didn't really get a chance to talk to you about

it.”

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Her left brow lifts. “I’m not going to talk about that, James. But you should have told me about this! I could have prevented what happened this morning. Or got it cleared up last night.”

“Really? How exactly would you clear this up? Do you think it’s alright that this man is obviously cheating on your sister? Would you encourage her to just forget about it and move on with the wedding? Continue with the sham because it looks good on paper?”

Her head snaps back and her full lips thin with anger. “Are you kidding me? Of course not! Cheating is never okay, James. Never. But it worries me that you didn’t think this was important enough to mention.”

My hand comes up and slashes the air. “Stop saying that! I was concentrating on you last night. Not these fools!”

Her dark eyes ice over and I can feel the arctic chill moving into my bones. “Don’t do me any favors, James.” And she turns away and I feel the finality of losing her sink into me.

“Bri?” I beg her, my hand moving towards her but she moves away, her face turned away from mine.

“My family needs me right now, James. I think it might be best if you go.”

“How are you going to get home?” I ask, hoping that she’ll give in. But she just shakes her head.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll call an Uber or something if I need to.”

My shoulders drop and I know I can’t fight with her right now. “Alright, Bri. I’ll let it go for now. But I’m not giving up.”

She reaches over to hug her sister and her body stiffens. I turn and shuffle away from her, my whole body feeling like it’s about to stage a coup. I don’t want to leave her. It feels like my heart is dropping to the floor at my feet and I can’t breathe, can’t think. It’s like I’m slowly being suffocated to death.

And I know if I can’t get her to listen to me, change her stubborn mind, I’ll never own my heart again. It will always beat for her and her alone.

CHAPTER 7

Brianna

“I told you that guy was no good as soon as I saw him at the party. If he hadn’t been here, your sister would have never found out about...well, Cameron’s indiscretions.”

I lift an eyebrow, stunned. “Indiscretions? Is that what we’re calling it now? He cheated on Trinity. Probably from the very beginning because he’s just that kind of jerk.”

My mother shrugs one bony shoulder, her eyes cold. “So what? It doesn’t matter if the guy cheats on you. As long as you get what you need out of him, it’s all good.”

“And what’s that? Money? Power?”

“Either of those...yes. You sure as hell were never going to get anything like that with that...person you brought.”

My heart twinges in my chest and I rest my hand on it, feeling the rhythm, knowing that for right now it works. But for how long. Because even though I pushed James away, it feels like I cut a piece of my soul out when he turned and left.

“I honestly don’t know how you can act all holier than thou when you’re still willing to trade your daughter to Cameron if it means money and power are at your disposal.”

She shakes her head, her thin mouth tightening. “You just don’t understand how the world works, Brianna. Some people say it’s okay to love a poor man but I tell you, it’s just as easy to love a rich man as it is to love a poor man. You just have to focus on what you want and it’s easy.”

“I don’t need all the things in the world and whatever I do need, I can provide for myself. I don’t need a man to get me things. All I need is love from him. Safety, trust, security. Those are the things that matter to me.”

Her mother’s mouth tightens and she grimaces. “You sound like a naive child. Those things come from money as well.”

I shake my head, anger and frustration building up and bubbling over. “I don’t know who you are anymore, Mother. Since Dad died you’ve been so focused on things. Things you covet, things you can buy. That’s not me. I cannot be like that.”

“Really? It didn’t seem like it took very much to push that boy to the curb.” Triumph sparkles in her cold eyes.

“That was my own damn fears. The loss of Dad. The way my ex treated me at college and even the way that James kind of pushed me to the side when I went away. None of it has to do with money. Which seems to be the be all and end all to you,” I mutter under my breath.

“Think what you want, Brianna. But the truth is that you still kicked him to the curb. And it was for your family obligations. Not really because of anything he did. Seems like you know where your priorities really lie. Now I need to check with the minister and make sure that all the guests will be told that the wedding is cancelled.”

I eye her like you eye a snake about to strike. “I thought for sure you’d go ahead with this wedding and convince Trinity to go ahead with it as well.”

Her lips twist. “I would have if he hadn’t made sure that the whole damn town found out about his cheating. The boy just couldn’t keep it hidden. The Maxwell family name can’t be attached to such a scandal.”

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She turns and stomps off, her high heels clicking on the floor. I sigh and then open the door to the room where my sister was supposed to be getting dressed for the ceremony. Her slim figure is hunched over in a way that I know our mother would never have approved of.

“Hey, sis. How ya doing?”

She shrugs and sympathy wells in me. It’s been a long time since I’ve been friends with my sister. When we were little we got into all kinds of trouble. Until she got old enough that my mother saw how beautiful she was. How much like her. And overnight she no longer had fun. She turned cold and focused on all the things my mother did. Power, money, our old family name and everything that entailed.

“Are you okay with all of this?”

Her blue eyes lift and there’s a lost, shamed look in them that makes my heart twitch. “I guess I have to be, don’t I?” Her lower lip wobbles and tears well in her crystal eyes. “I don’t understand how he could do this to me. I thought we understood each other.”

“Did you really love him, sis? Or just what he stood for?”

A single tear rolls down her alabaster cheek. “I don’t know,” she whispers. “I thought I did. But I feel relieved. Like I had a lucky escape. What does that say about me?” she wails. The trickle on her cheeks turns into a waterfall of tears.

“Oh, baby. I know what you mean.” I reach for her and hold her shaking body while

she cries like her heart's broke. And maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Maybe she just convinced herself that she was in love with Cameron because of Mother's machinations.

It doesn't mean she's not hurt by his cheating.

She sobs and shivers until I feel a shudder run through her and I lean back, grabbing a tissue off the vanity. I wipe the tears off her perfect cheeks, marveling that she still looks fresh as a rose. I'd look a mess. My eyes would be red and swollen and my nose would be running. It's amazing that she looks even better.

"You know...I swear to god, you're an alien. Nobody looks better when they cry."

She chokes on a watery laugh. "I'm sure I don't!"

I push a strand of her smooth blond hair behind her ears. "You do. It's freaking annoying. I'd be a damn trainwreck."

She shakes her head. "You would never let yourself be in this situation. You're too strong to get caught in a mess like this."

I sigh and turn away from her bright eyes. "We all have baggage and make bad choices based on it."

She snuffles into the tissue and eyes me with bright, sharp eyes. "Is that why you broke up with James?"

I stand and pace the room. "He should have told me what he saw last night. He lied to me."

Trinity snorts. "He didn't cheat on you or lie to you. He just didn't know how to tell

you something so he put it on the back burner.” She shrugs a slim shoulder clad in an ivory silk robe. “I’m not sure why you lost it like that but considering that Mother is so happy about it she’s practically gloating...I’d say it was a mistake.”

My stomach drops as I consider her words. Did I overreact? I can still see the hurt on his face, the way his emerald eyes widened when I told him to leave and then closed in pain.

I shake my head. “No. I can’t trust him. He’s just like all the other men out there. They leave you and break your heart.”

Trinity grimaces. “Because Dad passed away? It’s not like he wanted to leave us. He had a heart attack. You can’t blame him for that. Sometimes we just get a shitty hand from life. Doesn’t mean that you close yourself off from all the good things that life can give you. Every day is a gift. You can’t just throw it away. How will you feel if James is the one that you’re meant to spend your life with? If he’s the love of your life and you push him away?”

My heart clenches and pain streaks through my body. My eyes close and tears well up. “He pushed me away once. It hurt so damn bad that he didn’t want anything to do with me. It was like my heart was ripped out of my chest. I can’t let him do it to me again,” I whisper, voice rough and ragged.

“Did you know that Dad talked to him before you guys left for college?”

I whirl to stare at her, my mouth dropping open. “No!”

She nods and snuffles, blowing hard into the tissue. “Yeah. I think Mom got ahold of him.”

“What happened?”

“He told him that you needed to finish school and you couldn’t do that if you were stuck back here or with him. Mentally, that is.”

“Why would he do that?” I gasped.

“Because he thought you needed to keep all your focus on school. We all knew that you wanted to be a doctor so damn much. It was your calling. I always wished that I had something like that. Something to give my life purpose. But I never did. I just have myself to trade for a future.”

“Oh, honey. Don’t sell yourself short. You can change all that. Throw away all that shit that Mother stuck in your head and just let someone love you for the person you really are. Not the fake one that she tailored you into.”

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“I don’t know about that. It might be too late for me. But you’ve got a man that really loves you. I could see the love all over his face last night. He is desperate for you. Don’t let Mother ruin that for you. Give the man a chance.”

“What about you?”

“My life is a mess right now. But I’ll get it back on track somehow. That’s not your problem. Your problem is that you pushed the man you love away.”

“I don’t know if he’ll forgive me,” I whisper, my words catching in my throat.

“I saw the look in his eyes. That man will forgive you anything. All you need to do is go to him and talk. Give up a little bit of that control you pride yourself on and go get the man you love.”

“Yeah.” My shoulders straighten and I smile. “I just need to talk to him. Sounds easy,” I laugh.

“Not easy but definitely worth it.”

I pat her shoulder. “Are you going to be okay by yourself?”

She puts her slim, perfectly-manicured hand over mine. “Trust me. Don’t let this fester. I’ll be fine.”

I pick up my phone and jump when it rings in my hand. Ruth’s number flashes on the screen and I smile, picking up immediately. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m so sorry, Bri. I hate to have to tell you this but there was an accident out on the highway. James was there for some reason.” My smile fades and I feel terror well up in my chest. My heart stops.

“Is he?” I can’t even finish the sentence. There’s no way. No way that he can be gone when I haven’t talked to him. Haven’t straightened things out. Haven’t told him that I love him.

“No. But he’s at the hospital right now. I was pretty sure that you’d want to know. Tate called me to let me know. He’s at the hospital with him.”

“I’ve got to go. I’ve got to see him.” I babble, hanging up the phone and running for the door.

“Bri! You can’t drive like this! Give me a minute to get dressed and I’ll take you.”

“I need to see him.”

“You’re going to get into an accident on the way there. Just hang on. I’ll take you.”

Trinity runs to get her trousers and blouse. “Give me a second. Don’t you dare head out that door!”

I pace back and forth, my mind running wild with images of James lying alone in a white bed, his body broken beyond repair. My hands tear through my hair, tugging at it like a crazy person.

“Come on! Let’s go!” Trinity grabs my hand and pulls me out the door. Both of us running like we haven’t in years.

“Buckle up, sis!”

With shaking hands I buckle the belt and try to shut my brain down. My eyes close and I lean on the cold glass, feeling tears wet my cheeks.

What the hell am I going to do if he's gone? I can't breathe. Can't think. Terror boils up in my belly and I feel my stomach heave.

"Don't you dare throw up in my car!" Trinity groans. "He's fine. Just calm down."

But her foot pushes the pedal to the floor and in no time we're pulling up outside the hospital.

I shove the door open so fast I almost topple over onto the ground. Catching myself I run in the door and gasp, "James. The EMT. Where is he?"

Cathy stares at me, her head whipping around when Trinity runs up beside me.

"I'm telling you! I'm fine! Stop poking at me, dammit!"

Wild-eyed, I twist when I hear the deep, familiar voice. My feet move before my brain catches up. I rip the curtain aside and wilt when I see him sitting up in the bed, his green eyes narrowed on Tate and the doctor. My eyes drink in his familiar form. Except for the bruise on his cheek and the dark hair tousled on his head, he looks fine.

And my heart lightens immediately. He's okay!

“James!” I cry and throw myself at him, weeping.

CHAPTER8

James

“I’m so so sorry, James! I never should have told you to leave! This is all my fault!”

I pat Bri’s back and my eyes jump to her sister in the doorway. “What the hell?”

Trinity’s lips curl in a smile and she walks over to Tate and the doctor. “Why don’t we give these guys a minute?”

Tate is quick to leave the room and I smirk. Not like he didn’t have his own issues with Ruth when they got together.

I pat Bri’s shaking back. “Hey, baby girl. I’m okay. Where’s my strong girl? You gotta stop crying! You’re tearing me apart!”

Her dark eyes lift, swimming with tears. “I’m so sorry, James. I shouldn’t have said all those things. It’s not your fault, none of it’s your fault! It’s my Mother’s and Cameron’s! Anybody but you! I know you just didn’t know how to tell me. I am such an idiot! I fell right into her trap.”

I shake my head, my forehead leaning into hers. “Hey. Don’t worry about it. I wasn’t giving up on us. I just knew you needed a little space and you would have realized that your Mother was playing on your fears.”

“I’m so sorry,” she sniffles, her red eyes puffy and yet still beautiful to me. Everything about her is absolute perfection to me.

“Don’t worry about it, baby girl. Like I said, I had no intention of letting you walk away from me again. I love you too much.”

Her full lips tilt up. “Even though my family is terrible and I am an idiot.”

I chuckle. “Even then.” I lean down, my lips clinging to hers, tasting the salt of her tears on my tongue.

I sigh and shift on the bed, my wrist twinging.

“What? What’s wrong?” She pulls back and I can see her switching to doctor mode. Her eyes run up and down my body and I can feel my cock twitch in my jeans. Her hands run up and down my sides, setting off an earthquake in my body. Shivers run up and down my arms and settle in my belly.

“Stop that, baby girl!” I grab her hands and hold them tightly in mine when she tugs hard, trying to break free. “I’m fine.” I wince when she tugs at her hands again, the streak of pain in my wrist flaring up.

“Your wrist? Is it broke?”

I glare at her. “I think you know that. Jeez, baby. Settle down and let me talk.”

She stops fluttering and her whiskey eyes focus on my face. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I got hit by a car when I stopped to help a person in a rolled car. There wasn’t anybody there yet and I couldn’t just leave them alone like that.”

“Somebody hit you!” she screams, her voice climbing at least an octave.

“Settle down. That voice of yours could cut glass. Shit! My head hurts a little too.”

“Did you hit your head? Do you have a concussion? Have they done a cat scan? X-rays? MRI?”

My eyebrows lift. “I don’t think that’s necessary. I just need some Tylenol and to rest. Some ice for my wrist. Then I’ll be good as new.”

“You’re getting those tests done,” she growls, stiffening.

“They’re not necessary.”

“What did the doctor say?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s just being an idiot. I don’t need all that stuff.”

“But you’re going to do what he says. Because I love you and I need to make sure that you’re alright. And you’re not going to fight with me about it.”

“Really?”

“Really. And then I’m going to take you home and take care of you.”

He snorts. “You’re going to smother me!”

She grins. “Yeah. Maybe. But that phone call scared the hell out of me, James. I love you so much it hurts. When Ruth called, it felt like my whole world died. If anything happened to you...”. Her voice trails off and a tear trickles down her golden cheek, dancing over her freckles like a tiny diamond.

“I’m fine. I swear. Better than the guy who hit me. I thought Tate was gonna kill him when he got there.”

“Good,” she sniffs. “Asshole.”

The doctor peeks around the door. “So can we talk about those tests now, James?”

She shakes her head, her usually perfect hair standing up wild on her shoulders. “No need to talk. He’s going to be a good boy and do exactly what you say.”

My eyes narrow. “I better be getting something for making you guys happy here?”

She leans over and whispers in my ear. “I might have plans for you later. But I need to know that you’re up for it.”

I shoot the doctor a smirk. “Let’s do this. The faster we get this shit done, the faster I

can get home.”

The doctor chuckles. “Now you’ve got someone to hold your hand, huh?”

“Something like that.” I laugh and groan, holding my side when Bri flushes bright red.

And less than an hour later, I’m holding prescription painkillers, sporting a brand-new ace wrap on my wrist with a clean bill of health. My ribs are only bruised so no restrictions except take it easy on the wrist for at least a couple of weeks and take the painkillers, ice for inflammation.

Bri helps me into her car and then runs around to the driver’s side, sliding in and shooting me a shy, sweet smile. “I’m so happy that you’re alright. I was coming to see you soon anyway. I had a talk with someone who reminded me that love forgives and you didn’t actually do anything wrong.”

“Ruth?”

She shakes her head and smiles wryly. “My sister if you can believe it.”

My eyebrows lift. “I can’t believe that.”

“I think catching Cameron kinda woke her up and she realized that she doesn’t want to live her life like my mother has.”

“Well, that’s all to the good.”

“I feel bad for her though. It’s going to be all around town what happened and I know she’s going to be so embarrassed by all the attention.”

“Maybe it won’t be as bad as you’re thinking.”

Snorting, she shoots me some side-eye and a reluctant laugh escapes me. “Okay. Yeah. Ridge City is a small town and they’re going to be all over this for quite awhile.”

“Exactly. Maybe she should take a vacation.”

“I don’t know if that would help or hurt the story.”

“Ugh,” she groans. “Well, I’m sure she’ll handle it like she always does. With grace. Way more than I would if you ever cheat on me.”

“Won’t happen. You’re the woman I’ve dreamed about for years now. The one I fall asleep thinking about. Wondering what you’re doing and if you ever think of me. The one that I think about when I jack off in the shower.”

“Well, that was very romantic until the last part!”

“Hey, it’s true,” I protest. “You should take that as a compliment.”

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll try and work on that.”

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She pulls into the driveway and shuts off the car, turning to give me a saucy wink. “Now, I’ve got you right where I want you and you can’t get away from me.”

I lean over and kiss her gently, my lips clinging to her soft, warm lips. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be than with you, princess. Anywhere you are, that’s home to me.”

Tears well in her whiskey-brown eyes again, the gold flashing with heat. “I can think of a few other places I’d rather be with you than sitting in this car.”

“Then take me home, sweetheart. I’ll follow you anywhere you go. From now until the end of my days, my job is to take care of you, love you and protect you.”

And my strong, fierce woman smirks at me. “Weird. That’s my job too!”

My life is good. I’ve got a good job, a fantastic woman and a future that looks bright and full of love. I’m a lucky bastard and I fucking know it!

Now I have decades to prove it to my soulmate. I’m not sure that’s enough time but I’m up for the challenge!

Epilogue One: James

“I’m telling you, maybe you should just give your mom another chance. It’s hard raising kids on your own. I’m sure she did her best.”

Bri glares at me, pushing her long, dark hair up on her head into her signature bun that she wears for work. “I’m not ready for that, James. She made her feelings about

you known and I'm not ready to forgive that.”

I shrug. “It was a snap judgement. She just wanted you to have someone to take care of you. You can't fault her for that.”

Her head snaps around. “I can and do. Snap judgement it might have been but she should have taken the time to get to know you before she wrote you off.”

I laugh. “That would have made it much better. If she knew me and decided I wasn't worth the effort.”

A reluctant smile curls her lips and she crawls back onto the bed and prowls up my body. Instant heat flows under my skin, like a raging forest fire burning me up from the inside out. Tingles hit my skin everywhere her strong hands touch as she crawls up my body until she straddles my thighs. My dick stretches and hardens almost immediately.

“What are you doing, princess? I thought you had to get ready for work?”

Her devilish smile has my heart pounding wildly. Her fingernails dance along my bare chest, tracing downward until my stomach sucks in and her fingers wrap around my iron shaft. Gasping, I lean my head back into the pillows. “Baby. You're killing me.”

Her mouth leans closer and I can feel her warm breath caressing my face. “Feels good, doesn't it, James.”

My eyes open slowly. Her fingers tighten and she starts to jack me slowly, then hard and fast, alternating until my hips are thrusting up into her hips where she's hovering over me.

“Don’t stop, princess.”

“I have a better idea.” She slides down along my body and my heart literally stops and then careens wildly out of control in my chest when her lips close around just the tip of my shaft. Her tongue delicately traces the seam of my head and she growls, low and hungry in her throat.

“Damn, baby. What’s got you so wound up?”

“I don’t know. I just know that I need you right now.” And her hot, wet mouth closes on my head as she draws my shaft deeper into her throat. I can feel her muscles closing around the head as she gulps in air through her nose.

Deeper, harder and faster, she licks and sucks and drags her teeth lightly along my engorged shaft until I feel the tingling building in my spine. My fingers tangle in her hair, tugging her off.

“No,” she moans. “I wasn’t done with that.”

“I need more,” I growl, the sound rumbling up from my chest.

I grasp her hips and lift her so that she’s over top of me. Slowly, so slowly, I lower her down onto my shaft, feeling her warmth enveloping the head of my shaft.

Groaning, I gasp and struggle to keep going slow. Keep moving into her deeper, dragging my cock along her walls until she’s whimpering and then she drops onto my lap. Her body stiffens and she throws her head back.

Tangling my fingers in her silky hair, I pull it free from all the pins. Her golden eyes glare at me. “I just got that up.”

Grinding up into her, I watch her eyes light up with desire. “And now you’ve got this up. What are you going to do with it?”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” she moans. Rotating her hips and grinding down on me, I can feel her smooth, velvety heat closing around my shaft over and over again when she rises and drops down, her hands balanced on my chest.

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We move as one, each grunt and thrust driving need higher. Her pussy tightens even more and it's hard to move. She moans and tenses and I feel the first flutters of her lower body as she screams and rides me to her release.

The pulsing of her body pulls me deeper and my balls draw up tight seconds before I shoot streams of my cum straight into her waiting warmth. Shuddering and whimpering, she falls to my chest.

I kiss her smooth cheek. "Have I ever told you that I love how you leave getting dressed until the last minute every day?"

Giggling, she traces my abs, and sighs into my chest. "No. But I kinda figured that out!"

"Yeah. I thought you started doing that on purpose. So we're still going out tonight after you get off work since I'm off, right?"

"Yep," she pushes off. "But right now I'm going to be late for work if I don't rush. Especially since someone made a big mess out of my hair!" Her brown eyes glow with love as she chides me lightly.

"You love it and you know it."

Giggling, she pulls her scrubs on. "I do. I really do. Almost as much as I love you."

I watch her whip around the room and then dash to the door. "Where's my kiss?" I ask her, pouting just a little.

She holds her hands out. “No way! I’ve got to go and you’re not getting a second chance to wreck me.”

“Fine. But you better be ready tonight. I’ve got big plans for you.”

“I will be. You just save your strength. I’m feeling very frisky today!”

Laughing when she runs out the door, blowing me a kiss, I pick up my phone and wait to hear the door close.

As soon as I know she’s gone, I dial a familiar number. “Hello. Yeah. She’s gone. Come on over. No, I don’t think she has a clue.”

Half an hour later, there’s a knock at the door and I let Trinity in, grinning. “Hello, sis! I’m glad you could make it.”

Her blue eyes sparkle with laughter as she hugs me. “As if I wouldn’t help you. This is going to be a big night. Is everyone coming?”

“Yep. I’ve even invited her mother. Not sure if she’ll show up but if she does I am hopeful that my dear soon to be fiancé won’t kill her.”

“It will be fine. Let’s get everything ready.”

* * *

“You ready, baby girl?” I laugh when Bri ducks her head out of the huge walk-in closet. We moved into her house after we got together. It’s big enough for the two of us and the family we hope to have one of these days.

“I’m ready. But you still haven’t told me where we’re going.”

“And I’m going to blindfold you so you can’t see!”

Her skeptical look makes me want to laugh but I hold it in. “Kinky. I feel like you’re up to something here.”

“Just want to surprise my beautiful girlfriend.”

“Fine,” she sighs. “Let’s go. I’m starving.”

I lead her to my truck and slip the velvet blindfold over her head. Then I pick her up and settle her in the seat. Kissing her head lightly, I click her seatbelt in place. “Have I told you that you look beautiful?”

“You have mentioned it,” she smirks.

“Well, I meant it.”

The ride is quick and I’m happy that I blindfolded her when I see the sign out front of the fanciest restaurant in town, La Vida.

“Shit!” I whisper, seeing all the people standing around outside laughing.

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“Hang on, baby. Let me come get you. I’ll be right back.”

She nods and I jump out, running up to the crowd of laughing friends.

“Hey, you guys are supposed to be inside! She gets a look at you guys and she’s going to know something’s up.”

Muttering and chattering happily, they all move inside and I wince when I see the sign, ‘Congratulations, Brianna and James!’

“Talk about putting the cart before the horse.”

But I head back to the truck and pick Bri up like the most precious thing in the world.

“Took you long enough,” she complains.

“There was a crowd outside and I wanted to make sure that we still have a table.”

“A crowd? On a Tuesday night?”

“You know it’s the most popular place in town.”

“Right. Okay. Well, let’s eat. I’m so hungry,” she moans, which makes my dick jump.

But when I walk in and find the decorations in place and all of our friends waiting, my nerves get the best of me and I can feel a cold chill. What if she says no?

I remove the blindfold and wait for her eyes to clear up. When she sees everyone, they immediately start cheering.

“What on earth?” Her pretty mouth drops open and she stares at me.

I drop to my knee and hold up a black velvet box with a diamond solitaire heart on a platinum band. “Princess, I’ve been waiting to do this for a long time. Waiting for that right moment. I don’t know if this is it, but I can’t wait anymore.”

Tears fill her whiskey eyes and drip down her golden cheeks.

“Baby, I have loved you for so long, it’s almost as natural to me as breathing now. I can’t picture my life without you in it. You’re the first thing I think of in the morning when I open my eyes and you’re the last thing that I think of when I close my eyes and drift off to sleep at night. I’m sure that on my deathbed, many years from now, the last thing I’ll think of before I leave this earthly plain will be my beautiful bride.”

Her hands cover her mouth and I can see the smile in her glittering eyes. “Baby girl, there’s only one thing that will make my life more complete than it is now...and that’s marrying you. I want the whole wide world to know that you’re mine.”

“And you’re mine,” she laughs.

“Right. That goes without saying, baby girl. So now I have to ask you, will you marry me, princess? Will you be mine for all time?”

“Only if you say the same.”

“I do.”

“Then I do too,” she whimpers.

The room erupts in applause and cat calls as I slip the ring on her finger. People rush up to congratulate us and waiters start distributing champagne to toast.

The next to last person to come up is her mother. Bri stiffness and I see her lush mouth twist slightly.

“Mother,” she says, her voice giving away nothing.

“Brianna.” Her mother nods to me and I smile, holding onto Bri’s waist.

“It’s nice to see you, Monica. Glad you could make it.”

“It’s an important occasion. I needed to see my baby get the man of her dreams.”

Bri nods and air kisses her mother’s cheek. “Thank you for coming.”

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Monica turns away but then turns back, drawing in a deep breath. “I’m sorry that I said what I said about James. He seems like a good man and it’s obvious that he’s very in love with you. I’m so glad that you found what we all look for. Love.”

Tears gleam among the whiskey glow in Bri’s eyes. “Thank you,” she breathes. “I am happy. James is the best man I’ve ever met.”

Monica nods and then smiles at Trinity when she gingerly slips up to our little group.

“And I’m very sorry that I pushed you, Trinity. I know that you might not have been hurt by Cameron if you weren’t trying to model your life after my decisions.”

Her sister smiles. “It’s alright, Mother. I’ll survive.”

Monica grins. “I’m sure you will. Both of you have considerably more common sense than your mother.”

“Not true. But thank you for saying so.”

I reach out a hand to shake Monica’s hand. “Thank you for coming. Don’t forget to get a drink and something to eat. We’ve got a ton of little appetizers. Everyone’s welcome.”

Guilt flashes on her face but then she pulls her shoulders back. “Thank you.”

I watch her walk away and then turn to Trinity and Bri. “I can’t believe she showed up,” the younger woman whispers.

“I can.” I kiss my wife on the cheek. “There’s nothing that love can’t fix. And I’m sure she loves you girls.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Trinity walks away and I see her mingling and chatting with our guests.

Bri sighs and puts her head on my chest. “I love you so much, James. This is the sweetest, most sensitive and loving thing anyone has done for me. I can’t wait to be your bride.”

“I can’t wait to marry you either. I can’t wait to spend my life with you and whatever family we’re lucky enough to have.”

Bending down, I let my lips slant along hers, hard and demanding, until she’s breathlessly panting, leaning into me. Her hands tangle in the collar of my jacket and she has a death grip on it.

“Now. Let’s go mingle and show these people what love really looks like.”

“Yes, let’s.” I tug her behind me and she throws her head back, laughing joyfully. This is the woman for me. My past, my present and my future all rolled up into one smart, snarky and beautiful package.

Watching her charm and chat with our friends, I let my thoughts turn to what our future holds.

And I know, it’s nothing but good. Because I’m marrying an angel and angels only bring good.

Epilogue Two: Brianna

I feel tears well in my eyes. That damn stick! Negative.

Throwing away the test, I wash my hands and open the door only to find James waiting outside the door.

I shake my head and he pulls me into his comforting arms. “Baby, even if we never have a child, we have so much that I can’t begrudge our life. We both have so much love to give, we’ll figure something out. So many kids need parents. We can adopt.”

Sniffling, I raise my eyes to his. He winces and groans. “Baby, don’t look at me like that. You know I can’t handle it when you look so sad. I swear to god, it breaks me.”

I nod my head but it feels like my heart is being ripped out of my chest every time that damn stick says no.

I lean into his chest and let the scent of him surround me, calm me. Then I pull back and straighten my spine. “I’ve got to get ready for work. I’m going to be late.”

He grins that wicked smile of his that makes my wanton pussy thump.

“Stop that!” I swat him. “You need to go too. You’re going to be late as well.”

“Right.” He glances at his watch and his firm lips twist. “Ugh. The captain’s gonna kill me.”

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“Go, go.” I shoo him out the door. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay. But if you need anything you call me.”

“I absolutely will. And I’ll see you tonight.”

He leans over and his lips fuse to mine like he needs my kiss to keep breathing. Panting, he pulls away and stalks to the door. “Love ya, baby girl!”

After the door slams, I slump down. It feels like it takes all my energy to stay upright. I haven’t told James how much this hurts me every month. I want a child so badly and I know he does too. He’ll make a great father.

But not for us. Unless we go ahead and adopt. And I’m just not sure I’m ready to give up on us.

I grab my purse and sweater and duck out the door, locking it behind me and turning on the security system from my phone.

About noon, I’m getting ready to take my lunch break when a young boy is brought in by a social worker. He’s quiet and I see bruises and scratches all over him along with a wrist that he’s cradling to himself.

“Hey, buddy,” I say softly, anxious not to scare him. His green eyes are wide and frightened and I just want to hug him to me. Take away the shadows I see in his eyes.

But I push those thoughts down and carefully examine him, moving his arm gently

until he gasps and pulls away.

I nod my head to the case worker that I've seen around. I close the door behind us in the hallway. "What's his story?" I ask.

She sighs. "He was in a car accident with his parents. He's eight years old. He was the only survivor."

My heart twists in my chest. "That poor kid," I breathe.

She nods. "Yeah. And he has no living relatives that we've been able to find. They're still checking but it doesn't look good."

"So he goes into the system?" I can feel my heart jump. Foster care is not a perfect remedy and so much can go wrong.

"Yep." I can tell she's not that happy either. He's such a tiny little thing.

The green eyes remind me of James and a lightbulb feels like it goes off in my head. "What if you could find a couple that wanted to adopt him...if he doesn't have any family that wants him, I mean."

Curious, her eyes dart to mine. "Well, then there's classes and things they would have to do. And it might take a little while but as long as everything went well..." her voice trails off and I nod, thinking quickly.

"Let's get him some x-rays and clean up those cuts and bruises. The nurse will be in in a minute and I'll be back."

She smiles and goes back in the room. "Hey, Cindy. I want you to take care of the boy in this room personally. He doesn't have any family with him."

The dark-haired nurse smiles. “You got it, Doc!”

As soon as I’ve made my notes and made arrangements for his care, I check his chart.

“Adrian Martinez.” I nod and pull my phone out of my pocket, taking a deep breath while I listen to the rings.

“Hello, baby girl. I was just thinking about you! Do you need something?” His warm voice makes my legs turn to mush. I sink into a chair at my desk and smile.

“Just you.”

“Well, you’ve got me. But you know that,” he chuckles.

Drawing in a shaky breath, I grip the phone tightly. “Actually, there’s something else I want to talk to you about. They brought in a little boy earlier. His name is Adrian. But the social worker brought him in. His parents were killed in a car accident.”

“Oh shit! Was he in the car too?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised you didn’t get the call.”

“We might not have been the closest to call.”

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“Right. Well, anyway. She said they haven’t been able to locate any living family so far. So I thought if you were okay with it, I’d check and see if it’s alright with her. If we looked into adopting him. If he doesn’t have any family,” I say quickly.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” He hangs up and I smile at the phone.

I can feel it. This is right. This is what we’re meant to do. Adrian needs a family and heaven knows, we’ve got so much love to give.

I whistle and walk down to the examining room where he is. “Can I talk to you for a minute?” I ask the worker, nodding to Cindy to keep an eye on Adrian.

“My husband is on his way here. We’ve been thinking about adoption. If you can’t find a home for Adrian, we’d like to see if we’re a good fit for him.”

She smiles and says, “I thought you were thinking about something. I’ve got a good feeling about this. But we’ll get things going on our end. I’ll give you a list of things you need to do. And you should get an attorney to help you go through the process.”

“No problem. My husband has a friend who is an attorney.”

“Good, good.”

Warmth radiates across my back and I turn to smile at James who runs up to me. He kisses my cheek. “What changed your mind?” he whispers.

“Wait until you meet him and you’ll see.”

And he peeks in the door. “Is he alright? What’s wrong with his arm?”

I glance at the paperwork. “It looks like it’s just a sprain. Otherwise just some bumps and bruises.”

“This is Miss Carroll. She’s a social worker with the county. This is my husband James. He’s an EMT with the Ridge City fire department.”

“A doctor and a firefighter. Wow! This might be the easiest adoption I’ve ever handled. But that’s if he doesn’t have any family,” she warns.

I grasp James’s hand tightly. “We understand. I’m not going to get my hopes up until we know for sure.”

James shoots me a skeptical look. He knows I’m already all in.

“Let me get Adrian taken care of and then I’ll check in with you later.”

Miss Carroll nods and I walk in the door to get Adrian ready for discharge.

He’s still a little wide-eyed but he seems more settled and he answers my questions calmly if a little quietly.

And I can feel myself falling under his spell. He’s such a smart, sweet boy.

* * *

It takes a little longer than we hoped. Adrian did not have any family members. But we had so much to take care of. Classes to take and papers to sign. And a sweet little boy to get to know better.

But that Christmas we finally get the gift we’ve always wanted.

A bright-eyed little boy smiling as he opens presents that we've stacked up under a gigantic Christmas tree brimming with lights and ornaments.

Our baby is home and my heart overflows with love as I hug James and watch the giggling little boy that I've come to know and love.

"I love you, James."

"I love you too, baby girl."

Peace, hope and joy swell in my heart. Our lives are finally perfect. I've got what I always wanted, the man I love and a family to raise and take care of.

It doesn't get any better than this.

My head cocks and I can't stop the smirk on my face. Unless we find a little girl to add to our family!