



No Regrets

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Description: Brianna Miller knew better than to let her best friend, Kaden Riggins, get under her skin. The sexy lawyer was brilliant at everything he did. His bedroom skills were no different. One drunken night led to the loss of her virginity and a surprise pregnancy that had her questioning everything she knew about him, especially when he chose to walk away and never look back.

Kaden Riggins didn't know about his daughter until an angry Brianna confronted him in a restaurant nearly a year after their steamy night together. He thought about her and the way her lips tasted, the scent of her perfume, and how much he missed her in his life. But there was plenty he regretted about that night and a baby he'd never met was too much.

When a death in the family pushed them closer together, Kaden found himself longing for Brianna's touch. Their daughter stood to inherit a lot of money and the only thing stopping it was the lack of him being married to her mother. After making a quick marital arrangement, the two find themselves playing house only the feelings that lingered between them were anything but an act. The superficial reasons for coming together gave him a second chance with her again, but Kaden would soon find himself falling in love with Brianna. This time, he had no regrets.

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Chapter One

When it rained in December, the cool drops of moisture felt like ice abrading her skin. Although they hadn't seen a white Christmas in a long time, this would be Shiloh's first, and Brianna intended to make it perfect for her little girl. Well, as perfect as one person could.

Brianna sat at her dining room table going over her finances, wondering where she'd get the extra money to buy presents. With her mother's medical bills, Shiloh's daycare, and the usual monthly expenses, little remained in the bank account for luxurious items. Working as a waitress at Heavenly Hosts only paid minimum wage, but the tips kept her from having to find another part-time job. Trying to support her family, she worked whenever she could and still came up with three dollars in her checking account. She didn't even want to think about the money she took from the account she started while pregnant for Shiloh's education.

She took a deep breath wondering if, aside from the double shifts she was already pulling, she could get a part-time job for Christmas. Her daughter deserved the best. Even at one, she deserved to have presents just like other children.

"Honey, stop fretting over it." Regina came downstairs with Shiloh in her arms. "It'll all work out some way or another."

"Yeah." She looked up to see a toothy grin on her daughter's pudgy face. "Come and see Momma before I go into work."

She held out her arms, and Shiloh went happily into her mother embrace and settled

in against her. Somehow, holding Shiloh made the world right. She kissed her baby's curly brown hair, almost long enough to pin back in a barrette. Just from her bath Grandma had given her, she smelled fresh.

"Don't work yourself to death tonight, Bree." Regina grabbed a cup of coffee and settled in the seat across from her daughter at the table. "Money's only money."

"Yeah, but when you have none, it becomes a necessity." Shiloh looked up at her, her dark emerald eyes shining bright. "Will you be a good little girl while mommy's working?"

Shiloh giggled, and Brianna couldn't help but smile. She looked so much like her father it nearly hurt to think about it. With Shiloh on her hip, Brianna finished getting ready for work and finally started toward the front door of their townhouse.

Shiloh, being the smart little girl she was, knew her mommy was getting ready to leave and started putting up a fight, not wanting to let her go. Brianna dealt with this every time she left for work. Aside from feeling guilty about her mother raising her daughter while she worked, she felt guilty for making her little girl cry.

"Sweetheart, please don't do this tonight." She pecked Shiloh's chubby cheek, hating that she was so weak when it came to her daughter.

Shiloh cried, and reluctantly, Brianna handed her over to Regina and headed out the front door. Once the door closed, she took a deep breath and leaned against the door. Each tear shed from her little girl's eyes cut through her, but she forced herself to remember working was to put food on the table and to pay the bills. She had to do it, and if there were any way around it, she'd go that route. But there wasn't. She had to work, since her mother was disabled, and provide for her family. She wished fate would ease up on her a bit, because all she could do was the best she can.

Finally inside her car, a beat-up Mazda that threatened to die on her any time she turned the engine off, she fixed her makeup and headed to work. She couldn't think about her daughter or Kaden. Thinking of those two was strictly forbidden while working, and somehow the time passed faster.

* * * *

"Oh, come on, Kaden. Look at the ass on that one. Don't tell me you don't want to tap that thing all night long."

Kaden sat with his buddies at Heavenly Hosts, staring at a waitress with a behind the size of a watermelon. "No, Derek, I think I'll give that one to you." Laughing, Kaden shook his head at his buddy.

"No, that girl is more Kaden's flavor." Mark pointed to a well-stacked waitress dressed in a plain button down white top and short black shorts who flirted with two business men. He stared a little longer than necessary, then shook his head. "Air for brains. Been there done that. Not really my style anymore."

Mark chuckled. "Since when do you care whether or not she has brains? I thought you just worried about how fast you could get them to spread their legs and get off?"

"Nope, not our Kaden. Not anymore." Tony shook his head, mocking his friend. "He wants to be attracted to her mind instead of her behind."

The three men started laughing at Tony's remark, and Kaden tried his best to ignore them. Truth be told, he didn't want anything more than a fun time. Although he'd had his share of fun times, only one had come back to bite him in the behind.

He thought about Brianna a lot lately, wondering how she was and what she was doing. He even thought about looking her up and going to see her while he was in

town but knew that'd be stupid. After walking out on her nearly two years ago, he doubt she could face him without her swinging a fist.

“Oh, look at that one.” Mark pointed to another waitress wearing the same getup as the flirt still standing at the table with the businessmen. “Damn, I’d tap that ass. I’m getting hard just thinking about it.”

Kaden turned, letting his gaze wonder from her long, tanned legs to her tight, firm butt and on up to her chocolate brown hair. Hair pulled up the exact way—He leaned out of the booth, trying to get a better view vaguely hearing Derek’s comment of this being the one for him. Surely that waitress wasn’t Brianna. Surely she didn’t still work for—

She turned around, and his heart stopped dead in his chest. Brianna stood before him as beautiful as ever, with her midriff showing. The white shirt the others wore matched hers, though she tied hers above her navel. And damn if she didn’t make his blood hot.

“Dude, stop gawking. It’s pathetic.” Tony punched him, nearly knocking him out in the floor.

She sure as hell didn’t look pregnant, or like she ever been pregnant. If anything, she looked trimmer now than she had be the night they—

The blonde with no brains came up to their table, and her eyes locked on Kaden as she swept her tongue across her pink glossed lips. “Hello, gentlemen. My name’s Lindsay, and I’ll be your waitress this evening. Are you ready to order?”

The three men gave their orders, leaving Kaden last. “I just want a steak, medium well, and a glass of Coke.”

She nodded, seeming to take her time writing down his simple order. “Oh, um, do you know that waitress’s name?”

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The girl looked up from her notepad in the direction he pointed. “Yes. Brianna Miller. Why?”

“No reason.” By God, it was her. His head swam as if he had one to many drinks.

She gave him a curious glance and took off toward the kitchen, only to stop by Brianna and whisper something that had her turning to look at them. Kaden ducked in the booth feeling like a fool with his buddies chuckling. This isn’t how he pictured seeing her. Not after . . .

“Hello.” Her sweet voice came from behind him, and he knew he was a goner. “Lindsay said that one of you wanted to see me?”

Like traitors, all three of his buddies pointed to him, and Kaden wanted more than anything to disappear underneath the table. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her look at him without recognition, yet. Could this situation be more awkward?

Mark spoke up, trying his best to charm her, though Kaden knew it didn’t work well with Brianna. “Tell me, doll. Are you single?”

She grinned, propping a hand on her hip, flirting just like Lindsay their waiter. Must be in the job description. “Depends. Are you going to leave a big tip?”

Mark chuckled, making Kaden’s jealousy spike a notch. “Doll, just wearing that getup is guaranteed to get you a nice, big tip.”

She laughed. “Is there anything I can get you, gentlemen?”

“Kaden needs a nice big glass of ice water, if you don’t mind.” Tony spoke up beside Mark. “He needs to, uh, cool himself down.”

“Kaden?” She turned to completely to face him. He swallowed hard and shook his head before finally meeting her eyes. “Oh, my God.”

“Hello, Bree.”

Without replying, she took off the way she came, and he groaned, taking off after her. He met up with her outside at the back of the building. She bent over, holding her stomach as if she were going to vomit.

“What do you want, Kaden? Just leave me alone.” As he came closer, he saw she was shaking. Although it was cold, he doubted the temperature was the reason.

“I don’t want anything. I came here tonight because I was in town visiting my father, and my buddies wanted to have a fun night at a new restaurant. I didn’t know you were here, and I sure as hell didn’t know you’d be dressed like that.”

She jerked her neck, pinning him with teary eyes. “How I dress is none of your concern.”

“No, but you sure as hell don’t look like you’ve been pregnant.” He hated the bitterness in his voice, but he couldn’t blame himself. She did trap him into having a baby after he clearly told her he wanted nothing but a good time with women. He wasn’t the fatherly type and sure as hell wasn’t husband material.

He pulled off his suit coat and held it out for her. “Here. You’re shivering.”

“I’m only going to tell you this once, so get it through your thick skull. I don’t want anything to do with you, and I sure as hell don’t want you concerned about my well-

being. You didn't have the audacity to care while I was pregnant with Shiloh, so why the hell would you care now. Just leave me alone."

She pushed past him, hot with anger and ready to lash out at the next person that so much as even looked at her. He let her get a few feet away from him, only far enough that he could no longer breathe her scent before he spoke again.

"Why the hell are you so pissed at me? You came on to me. If memory recalls, you were in it fifty-fifty."

Wrong thing to do. She turned on her heel and started back toward him, a new kind of fire in her eyes. The bad kind.

"Fifty-fifty, my ass. I have been there for that little girl every second, and what have you done? Nothing. You made your deposit and moved on to the next leggy tramp willing to spread her legs. How dare you even insinuate that this is my fault!" Her voice rose with the last sentence until she screamed at him.

Her reaction only made his temper worse. "You're the one that trapped me, honey. Not the other way around. I told you I didn't want to be tied down, and what the hell do you do? You go get knocked up after we spend one night fucking each other's brains out. What'd ya do, 'forget' to take your birth control pill?"

Her jaw hardened. "I wasn't even on the damn pill!"

"That explains it."

"Of course it explains it. I was drunk and a virgin. I had no business saying those things to you, but you should have backed away. We . . . we're both stupid, okay. But don't you dare blame me for this."

She started walking again while his brain processed what she told him. “You were a virgin?”

She groaned and turned back again. “Yes. Hence, why I wasn’t on the pill.”

“But you were twenty-three.”

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“Contrary to popular belief, not everything in a skirt spreads her legs to have a good time. Twenty-three is a perfectly normal age to lose your virginity. Not everyone is a sex fiend and loses it when they hit puberty.” She huffed, putting her hand back on her hip, more of a defensive movement than flirting. “Look, go have fun with your friends, and I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Bree, wait.” He came up to her, wishing they could erase the past and be friends again. He wanted to say he was sorry, even though he blamed her for the pregnancy. He wanted to be her friend, to tell her that through everything, it’d be okay.

“Time is money.” She tapped her foot, waiting for him to speak.

Instead of telling her what he wanted, he chickened out and said, “How’s your mother?”

Surprised, her lips parted, but she controlled her shock. “Uh, fine thanks. She lives with me now and helps me take care of Shiloh.”

He nodded once, and they started walking toward the front of the building. “You support your mother and your daughter?”

She huffed a breath. “Yes. Not that it’s any business of yours, I do. And she’s your daughter too, Kaden. I didn’t create her all by myself.”

Ouch. “What do you want me to do, Bree? I’ve never been around kids my entire life. I’m not father material. What do you want me to do?”

“You know what? I can’t even believe I’m having this conversation with you. I didn’t want kids any more than you did, but when something is growing inside you, it’s kind of hard to ignore. Yeah, you got the easy way out, and I didn’t beg you for anything then, and I sure as hell am not begging you for anything now.” At the doorway, she turned toward him. “Just go about your business and forget about us.”

With that, she opened the doors and left him standing in the cool night air, holding his jacket, befuddled. Of all the women he had slept with, he picked the biggest damn pain in the ass to have a kid with.

“So how was it?” Mark asked when he arrived back to the table.

“How was what?” Kaden started cutting into his food with vengeance.

“How was what? Come on, man. You were gone a good twenty minutes. Don’t tell us you didn’t bang her in the parking lot. We’re not that stupid.”

Kaden sneered at his friend. “I didn’t bang her in the parking lot. I banged her a little over a year ago, and she got pregnant.”

The table fell silent, and the men shared glances while Kaden ate his steak. Before he could stop him, Mark called Bree back over to the booth, for questioning Kaden supposed.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not your waitress,” she said politely. “If you need something, I’ll find Lindsay for you.”

“No, wait a minute.” Mark pointed to Kaden, who only glared at him. “This dickhead just said he has a little bastard walking around on this earth. Please say he’s nothing but a dickhead and made that up.”

“Mark,” he ground out between his clenched teeth.

“So you’ve been talking about us with your little friends?” She tilted her head to the side. “Unbelievable. Unfuckingbelievable that you would just walk in here on your high horse and treat me this way. I don’t give a shit about what you say to others about me, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let you bad-mouth my daughter to your friends.”

By now, she’d drawn an audience, but her temper only fumed. Kaden knew she could care less about anyone in the room staring at her because her eyes were locked on him, and her nostrils flared as if she were a bull that seen red.

“I didn’t say one damn thing to them,” he said defending himself.

“Yeah. You never do a damn thing, do you?” She stuffed the tray under her armpit. “Go back to your fancy cars and huge penthouse and leave me the hell alone. Unlike you, some of us actually work our asses off for the income we get paid, and it’s still not enough. We don’t get to sit around in fancy offices playing lawyer because daddy gives you enough money to survive.”

She finally turned and walked away, and the audience resumed their conversations, though some still glanced toward their table. Mark looked dumbfounded, as did Tony and Derek. Kaden should have just turned around and walked out that door when he first saw her. He knew it wouldn’t be a happy reunion, and dammit if he didn’t know why. Yeah, she was pissed for him leaving her to practice law in the city, but she had told him to go. She told him she didn’t want anything from him.

Why were women so complicated?

“You can pick up the check.” Kaden stood, keeping his eyes on Mark, who bobbed his head. He’d had enough fun for one night and needed a good stiff drink after dealing with the blast from the past.

He just hoped he never had to come back to this dreaded town ever again.

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Chapter Two

“Mom, I’m fine. You go ahead and have fun with your friends. Shiloh and I will be okay.” It was Saturday, and nearly a week had passed since she had her little meeting with Kaden. She couldn’t bear to tell her mother she had seen him because then they’d have the whole marriage talk again.

Bree groaned. She didn’t even want to think about marriage to that man.

“Promise to kiss her goodnight for me?” Regina asked over the telephone.

“I will. She loves Nana’s kisses.”

After they hung up, she checked on a sleeping Shiloh and then went downstairs to figure out her finances again. Christmas was two weeks away, and still, the bills kept rolling in.

She’d been at it for nearly an hour before a knock at the door pulled her away from her thoughts. She stood, not caring that she was barefoot and dressed in sweats, crossed the room and unlocked the door.

“Hello, darling.” Blair Riggins came through the door, pulling Bree into a bear hug. “Oh, it’s so good to see you. How’s my sweet little grandchild?”

“Shiloh’s fine. She’s sleeping right now. I just put her down for her nap.” Bree looked at Blair as if she were an alien. “What are you doing here, Blair?”

Blair walked inside the townhouse as if she was welcomed, and Bree groaned, slamming the door shut. Blair Riggins wasn't her biggest fan but the feeling was mutual. But after seeing Kaden and the whole situation, she really didn't want to have anything to do with any of his family.

"I'm here because my son said he saw you the other day." She sat on the couch, looking stiff as she did. Good, Bree thought. Not as luxurious as the leather she used to own when she'd been single, but she had a baby now. Give and take a little. "He said that you had a bit of a disagreement."

It was all Bree could do not to snort. "Your son and I have disagreed since the very second I told him I was expecting his child. It's old news."

Blair pursed her lips. "Bree, he means well."

"Yeah. Right. For who? My point of view clearly says he's still the same love-'em-and-leave-'em type."

"Well, if you knew that, then why did you sleep with him?"

"I was drunk, and your son was a handsome man. We were best friends, and it all went to my head. I never planned on having a baby this early in life, and I sure as hell didn't plan or trap him as he seems to think."

Blair looked around the less than spectacular room. "Will you let him be in the baby's life if he wants?"

"He doesn't want to be. Quite frankly, I'm not sure I trust him with my child." Bree stood with her hands on her hips, wishing her life wasn't so chaotic.

"Please don't make this go to court, Bree. It'll be so much easier on all of us if you

just agree to visitation and custody.”

Bree narrowed her eyes at the woman on her couch. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s a warning. Kaden deserves to be in his child’s life, and you have no right to keep him out of it.” Blair stood, obviously uncomfortable sitting on Bree’s lumpy couch. “I personally think marriage is suitable for the pair of you. That way it guarantees the baby will have both parents. It’s healthier on her emotions, and the psychological benefits are a plus.”

“Excuse me for saying this, but you need to butt out of my life.” Bree stood with the door open, giving Blair the hint she was not welcome. “I know what’s best for my daughter, and I will abide by my knowledge. I gave birth to her after all.”

Blair nodded, pursing her lips tighter. “Choose your battles, sweetheart. Do you really think you have a chance at winning full custodial rights to the baby when Kaden’s father is the best divorce attorney in the state?”

“Please get out of my house.” Bree clenched the doorknob and waited until Blair passed by and stood on the other side of the threshold. Then she slammed the door in her face and slid the lock home.

She wouldn’t let them take her baby away. She didn’t care if it took everything she had to find a good attorney. She wouldn’t let them take her away.

Bree slid down to the floor, unable to hold back the emotions streaming through her body. Even though it’d been nine months since she’d given birth, her body still wasn’t back to normal. She cried more than she should and got angry for no real reason. Her bills kept piling up, and she hadn’t a clue how she was going to pay them. Too much was on her plate to worry about a custody battle.

Shiloh's cry sounded over her own, and she instinctively stood to get her sweet baby. She dried her eyes on the large sweatshirt she pulled on and hoped she didn't scare the poor child to death. Kaden didn't even consider her his. Why would he want custody of the baby?

"Ssh, sweetheart. Momma's here." She picked up her daughter and cuddled her close, automatically stopping the crying. She patted her wild curly hair and kissed her head before sitting back in the wooden rocker in the corner of the room. "Everything's alright. Momma will make sure of it."

* * * *

"Sorry about the loss of your grandfather, Kaden." Derek came up to his buddy, not seeing him since the night they went out to dinner. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

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Kaden nodded, not really wanting to talk to anyone. As the funeral home cleared, all the flowers stacked inside the vehicles, he made his way to the front of the building, unable to hold back his emotions any longer.

Tim Riggins had been the most exceptional man Kaden had ever known. From the first time his grandfather took him out on the docks to the first time he had actually let Kaden have a glass of his finest whiskey, he'd always been the one person that didn't push Kaden to do anything. He had wanted him to be happy and had said happiness only comes from within.

He loved Brianna to death. Treated her like his own granddaughter. He even once said that he could see the two of them getting married. Kaden chuckled at that as two fat tears rolled down his cheeks. She'd only been twelve at the time, making him fifteen. He clearly didn't want a wife, and she clearly didn't want to marry him. Little did he know how much he had screwed up their relationship until now.

"Kaden?" Greg Riggins came up behind his son, patting his back. "You okay, son?"

"Just thinking." He scooted over in the seat, allowing room for his father to sit. "I figured I should probably tell Bree about Grandpa's passing, but she's really pissed at me right now. I'm not so sure calling her would be a good idea."

Greg folded his hands in his lap. "Women are fickle creatures, son. But I'm sure if that's all you intend to say, she'll bite her tongue until you hang up. Why don't you give her a call?"

Kaden shrugged. "I suppose a two-minute conversation couldn't be that bad."

He stood to leave, but his father caught his attention. “Son, we’re gathering the family together tonight to have the reading of the will. Make sure you’re available.” He paused for a moment, meeting Kaden’s eyes. “And not drunk.”

He left him alone in the funeral home, the room seeming so big without anybody near. Bree’s number was still programmed into his phone, but he knew it by heart. He flicked open his black cell phone, punched in the number, and hit “talk.”

Three rings later, a breathless Brianna came to the phone. “Hello?”

“Bree?” His voice sounded groggily even to his own ears.

“Kaden? What’s wrong?”

No arguing so far. Maybe his father was right. “Um, I just wanted to tell you my grandfather passed away. He died yesterday morning, and I would have called you then but I’ve been busy helping with the funeral arrangements. He didn’t want a big funeral, so we had it today. Uh, I just thought you’d want to know.”

He sniffed, refusing to get emotional on the phone with her.

“Are you okay?” she asked, not something he was expecting.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

A heartbeat later, she spoke again. “Do you need me to do anything? Um, I have tomorrow off. Do you need me to come to Raleigh?”

Her kindness tore at his haywire emotions. “No, I’m fine. Thanks, though.”

Silence filled the phone line, and it was all he could do not to ask her to come over

tonight. Through thick and thin, she was always there for him, and he really wanted to have her here now.

“I can come tonight,” she said, taking him by surprise. “Shiloh is with Mom for the night, so it’ll be just me.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.” Even as he said it, tears rolled down his cheeks.

“What if I want to? Will you let me?”

A million times, yes. “Yes.”

“Okay. Uh, I’ll probably be there in an hour or so. Can you give me directions?”

He told her everything she needed to know and hung up, feeling a sense of peace come over him. Even though they fought like cats and dogs, she wanted to come to his side when she knew he needed her the most. It would have been so easy for her to brush him away, like he had when she came to him over a year ago, but she didn’t. She knew he needed her and offered to take off from work to come be with him.

He couldn’t possibly feel more like an ass than he did right then.

* * * *

Kaden waited in the foyer before the family gathered to read the will. Brianna’s car appeared at the gates a moment later, and his heart picked up a beat. He never thought he’d be eager to see a beat-up Mazda, but he couldn’t help feeling excited to see her. Pathetic really, considering the hell she’s been through. He’s probably the last person on earth she’d want to see.

She parked in front, obviously not planning to stay long. He came out of the house

and greeted her on the steps. She wore a slinky black dress with a knot at the waist that accentuated her breasts. She was beautiful in every right.

“Kaden,” she climbed the steps and didn’t think twice before pulling him into her arms. “I’m so sorry.”

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If anyone knew him, she did, and she knew how close he was to his grandfather. His eyes were puffy enough as it was, but he didn't shed any tears. He allowed himself to revel in her softness while she was here.

"You didn't have to come, but I'm glad you're here."

She smiled, looking up at him. "Tim was like a grandfather to me, too. Hell, he even planned on us getting married when I was what, twelve? You weren't much older."

He nodded. "Fifteen."

She shook her head. "How's Evelyn?"

"Grandma's holding up well." He led her to the side, where a glider sat in a secluded patio. She took a seat and he sat beside her. "Georgie and Buster are taking it pretty hard. They don't understand Granddad isn't coming back."

"Poor things." They slid in silence, gliding back and forth.

"I'm sorry about the whole restaurant thing." Kaden blurted. "I-I didn't know what to say to you, and I sure didn't expect to see you that night."

"Kaden, I really didn't want to talk about us. I'm here for you and to pay my respects. Talking about us only makes me angry." She leaned forward, stopping the gentle gliding motion. "Do you agree with your mother?"

Kaden furrowed his eyebrows. "Agree with what?"

She turned toward him. “She thinks you should be in Shiloh’s life and even threatened to take her away from me if I didn’t let you. I can’t let you take my baby away, Kaden. She’s everything to me now.”

Kaden stiffened as if all his muscles had a charley horse at the same time. “I’m not taking anything away from you. When did she say this?”

“A week or so ago. She stopped by on a Saturday and told me all this.” She looked like she wanted to cry to him, and instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her.

“Don’t worry about her, sweetheart. I’ll take care of it.” She still smelled of the same strawberry shampoo she favored. The same damn stuff he had to use every time he showered at her place.

For so many years they’d had a platonic relationship. He had spent so many nights at her house when he visited town and never once thought about touching her sexually. Not until she called him that one afternoon and needed his shoulder to cry on.

Brett, her current boyfriend, had dumped her and along with the relationship had gone her job. He had to admit, the damn job paid well considering all she did was wait on tables, but then again the damn meals cost almost as much as a normal working class citizen made in a week.

She’d called him for support, and he gave it to her. He opened the wine and let her have at it, knowing she’d be perfectly safe in the comforts of her own home. He must have been drunk as well, because never in his right mind would he have allowed himself to take her. Not in the condition she was in. And never, ever, would he have not used a condom. Even drunk he still made sure he covered himself before taking a woman—for his protection more than theirs.

But that night he had let his good sense and good judgment go out the window, along

with his rational brain. And now they had a baby because of it.

He pulled back staring in her eyes. “Will you let me see her?”

“Uh, I thought you didn’t like kids.”

She had him there. “Maybe my kid will be different.”

When she hesitated, he continued. “Just for an hour. You can be there the whole time, and I give you permission to beat the hell out of me if I do something wrong with her.”

She laughed. “I suppose. How could a girl refuse that kind of offer? I told you I’m off tomorrow. You can come by my place any time.”

He nodded. For some reason, Brianna had been blessed with the peacemaking skill. She always looked for a way to solve people’s differences, no matter what the situation.

“Oh, I don’t live at the house anymore. Mom and I rented a small townhouse on the opposite side of town. It’s in a nice neighborhood. Not as nice as the house, but Mom likes it. It’s closer to town, and she doesn’t have to wait that long for an ambulance if she needs oxygen.”

He knew Regina had a lung condition, and it had to be difficult for Bree to take care of her mother and the baby. Especially since she worked at the restaurant and did more than her fair share of supporting her family.

“But anyway, remind me to give you directions.”

“Kaden? We’re about to start—oh, Brianna. When did you get here?” Blair stepped

around the corner looking elegant as ever with a wine glass in her hand.

“Earlier, Mom.” Kaden turned toward her. “Did you tell Bree that I’d take away Shiloh from her?” Blair looked like the cat that ate the canary. Kaden shook his head. “Unbelievable, Mom. You know damn good and well, I’d never take that child from Bree because she’s an exceptional mother. And how dare you go see her at her home and threaten her with something that is none of your concern.”

Blair tipped the glass back, downing the last of the drink. “I was looking out for the benefit of the family. You should have demanded a paternity test and, if the baby was yours, demanded that you get visitation rights.”

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Kaden pinched the bridge of his nose. “The baby’s mine, Mom. No paternity test needs to be taken.”

“So trusting. Why not have it put in writing?”

“Because I know!” Kaden stood taking the few steps necessary to the concrete railing.

“You can’t be certain. You have money. She can’t pay her bills. How do you know it’s not a ploy to get you to support her? Did you think about that?”

“Mother, I’ll not repeat myself again. Butt out and let me handle my business my way.” Taking a deep breath of fresh air, Kaden leaned against the railing.

“Fine. You’re wanted inside for the reading.” His mother turned with a huff and went through the doors she came from.

Kaden could feel Bree’s eyes on his back, though he didn’t know what to say. He just stood up to his mother for her and everything Blair had said could have been true. He didn’t really know if Shiloh was his baby. He’d never seen her and didn’t dare ask questions. Brianna didn’t offer any answers. He believed her when she said she was a virgin and knew she hadn’t been with any other guy. So that ruled Brett out.

“You didn’t have to stand up for me,” Brianna finally said, coming up behind him. “You have every right to assume those things.”

“Yeah, but you’re about the only person outside my family that I trust.” He turned

and saw her small body closer to him than he would have thought. Amazing that he didn't even hear her make a sound. "Thank you for coming tonight, even though I'm sorry my mother did that to you."

"No sweat. You sounded like you needed a friend on the phone." She smiled and looked toward the door. "So are we going in, or are we going to sit out here all night?"

"Are you giving me a choice?" He wished she were.

"Sure. I'm just here for the ride."

He grinned, knowing better than to piss off his father. He thought she knew it too, because she had a sly look in her eyes—the one she had when she was up to no good. God, how he missed hanging out with her. She made his life fun.

"Come on." He grabbed her hand and led her to the doorway. "It's like ripping off a band aid. Pull really quick and then be done with it."

Once inside, every one of his family members gathered around to hear what his grandfather declared. His grandmother received the house and most of the assets. His four kids received equal shares of stock options, putting their small fortune at around five million a piece. And the grandkids received funds set aside for them.

"Oh, Kaden's has a note beside it." Greg, who was executor of the will, looked up at his son. "It says here that you are to be married before you receive the money."

Kaden's eyes widened. "Married? Why do I have to be married?"

Greg looked toward Bree, who stood next to Kaden, hand clasped hard in his. "Because your grandfather wanted you to be happy. He even stipulated who you are

to marry.”

Bree’s face blanched. Kaden knew what was coming before Greg even said it.

“He wants you to marry Brianna Lynn Miller within thirty days of the date of death, or no money will be settled. To anyone.”

Chapter Three

Brianna knew this had to be one horrific nightmare. One very bad dream that kept getting worse as the days went on. Kaden's hand clasped hers in a deathly grip. Everyone stared at her, greed and envy showing on the faces around the room.

"Dad, you can't just stipulate that in the will. Why would he stipulate such a ridiculous request? Not to mention telling me who to marry!"

"Each may have a copy of the will. It states in plain English that unless you are married to Brianna, no one gets anything." He shrugged. "Dad was keen on you two being together. I guess the ornery old man will live on from the grave."

Kaden dragged Brianna across the room, grabbed the will from his father's hand, and read it. "No fucking way."

"Kaden, there are children in the room." Blair commented, pouring herself another glass of wine.

Brianna had never seen a group of people so determined to have her head than those who stood around the room. It's a shame the old man died yesterday, and they all gathered around, ready and expecting their portion of his money.

"It's not happening. I don't give a shit if it's a billion dollars each. I'm not marrying someone for money."

"Oh, come on, Kaden." His cousin Jade spoke up from the far corner of the room.

“It’s not like you don’t know each other. You have a baby together for crying out loud. Why not sign the papers, seal the deal, and after we get our money, you get your divorce. Hell, Greg’s a divorce attorney. He’ll make it really simple, won’t you, Greg?”

“Jade.” Greg rubbed his chin, thinking about the claims. “We’re all very tired, and it’s been an eventful day. What do you say we sleep on it, and, Kaden, you can give us your answer tomorrow morning.”

Bree studied Kaden’s face, never seeing him so angry before in her life. And they grew up together. She stroked his arm with one hand while he threatened to break her fingers on the other. If this was the breaking point, it sure was a doozy.

“I’ll give you my answer now. I’m not marrying Bree for money.” Everyone started clearing out of the room, as Kaden stood with her and his parents.

“Sleep on it.” Blair insisted, knowing her son was furious with her right now. “Go home, take a hot shower, and sleep on it.”

“Whatever. I’m not changing my mind.” Gripping Brianna’s hand, he turned and dragged her out the door with him.

She hated how angry he was, and judging by his temper, he was ready to punch someone or something. Sure enough when they got to his car, he rammed his fist in the hood, not even flinching as the loud bang echoed through the night. Bree jumped, wondering if she should just get in her car and go. But the hurt expression on Kaden’s face made her stay.

“Get in.” He beeped the alarm and the door locks slid back granting them access. She didn’t hesitate.

Once strapped in, Kaden took off down the drive at a breakneck speed and nearly ran through the gates as they came upon them. She hadn't a clue where he was taking her but figured his place would be ideal. She glanced over at his profile, seeing the taut, strong, stubborn jaw. He was angry all right. Furious better described him though. But she wasn't exactly sure why.

"Is marrying me really that bad of an idea?" She tried for humor, but when his gaze met hers, there was no humor anywhere to be seen.

"This isn't about you." He turned and added reluctantly, "Not really."

She folded her hands in her lap and chose to stare out the window instead of making conversation. He evidently didn't want to talk, and she didn't feel like getting barked at. He drove the winding streets, going deeper into the darkness, deeper into the night. Not much to see except the city lights up ahead. The rest was pitch black night.

"I really need to get home to Shiloh. Mom will worry about me if I'm not back at a decent hour." She tried a soft tone, though he did nothing but pull his cell out and throw it in her lap.

"Call your mom and tell her you'll be late. Or better yet, tell her you're spending the night." He turned off the main road onto a side street that led back into the darkness away from the lights.

"Kaden, I can't just stay the night. I don't have money for a hotel, and Shiloh needs me to be with her. I already ask my mother to do too much. She doesn't need to keep my child all night long."

He turned, glancing at her. "Like it or not, babe, this involves you too. I wish like hell it didn't, but it does, and we're going to be up all night trying to figure this out." He finally pulled into a driveway and slowly came to a stop. "Unless you have a miracle,

then by all means, let's settle this now and get it the hell over with."

"You don't have to be an ass." She grabbed the phone and punched in her telephone number. After explaining to her mother something important had come up, she clicked the phone off and threw it back in his lap. "Are you happy? It's not like I spend enough time with my daughter. Did you ever think I might actually like to be with her tonight?"

"Bree—"

"Save it. Give me the dotted line to sign on, and I'll be out of your way." Not knowing what else to do, and possibly just wanting to get away from him, she opened the door and climbed out of the confines of his car.

"It's not that simple, Bree." He came up behind her and pulled her to face him. "I don't want to get married under any circumstances. Not to you, not to anyone."

"Fine. Then what is there to discuss?" She crossed her arms over her chest and noticed, even in the darkness, his gaze wandering down her body.

Surely he couldn't still be interested in her. No. He was male and having a baby had made her breasts fuller. Something different for him to look at. God, she needed to get away from here. She shouldn't have come in the first place.

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“Bree, Shiloh was in his will too.” He grabbed her arms pulling her to him. “He was going to give her his Texas ranch—as a matter of fact, Shiloh Lynn Miller-Riggens is worth about \$5.8 million right about now, because the damn property is in her name. Not to mention he has a trust fund set up for her for when she turns twenty-five. That’s about a million itself.”

Her shock was noticeable. He touched her cheek, a soft caress of his warm fingers against her cool skin. Her baby was a millionaire. What were the freaking chances of that?

“I want Shiloh to get her fair share. Not because I know you need the money or that I want my daughter taken care of. I want her to have something to remember her grandfather by.”

“The ranch was his favorite place on earth,” Bree whispered.

He nodded. “So if we get married, I’m making it perfectly clear it is only for that reason. Shiloh gets the ranch—already has the ranch—and the rest of my family get their share.”

She nodded. “Kaden, you know I never wanted you for your money, don’t you?”

“I know it. You’re my best friend in the whole entire world. I didn’t realize how much I missed you until today when I needed you most. I’m really glad you came.” He pulled her to him for a hug, a hug she didn’t want to end.

Oh, why did he have to do this now? She didn’t want to love him. She didn’t even

want to like him. But he made both very easy for her. She didn't want him to pull away. She didn't want his arms around anyone else but her. How dumb was that?

"Let's go in. You're freezing." He pulled back and then rubbed her arms with his hands.

For the next two hours, they worked on making a marriage agreement. Naturally she'd sign a pre-nup, but they'd also legalize their marriage agreement to last as long as their arrangement.

"Sex." Kaden grabbed a marshmallow from the dish she carried in the living room and popped it in his mouth. "What are we going to do about sex?"

She was trying to busy herself making the s'mores next to the fire, but the topic refused to answer itself. "Uh, how do you answer a question like that?"

He grinned. "I do believe, my darling Bree, that I made you blush."

"Did not," she said defensively, pressing the graham crackers together. The creamy marshmallow and chocolate gushed out onto her fingers, making a mess of the whole thing. She handed Kaden the one she made, then licked her fingers.

"Well, we agreed on a year. Does that mean we're celibate for a year? Do we share pleasures? How do you want to do this?"

Before she thought about it, she replied, "Celibate."

His eyes met hers as he bit into the tasty treat. Slowly he chewed the gooey dessert, and she wanted to avoid looking at him. She wanted to pull away from their magnetic power and go about her business unaffected. But his presence was too vast in the room, taking up all her breathing space, making her head swim. No, alcohol hadn't

been the only thing that night to make her loopy.

“You want to go without sex for a whole year?” He questioned her as if she were a crazy person saying she was sane.

“Why not? I have no problem with that now.” She shrugged, pushing a marshmallow on the coat hanger and shoving it in the fire.

“Have you had sex since that night?” She tried to lie. She tried to come up with a comeback. It didn’t work. Her silence spoke the words for her. “Damn, honey. Why?”

“I don’t have time for relationships. I work double shifts, and what free time I have, I divide it between Shiloh and sleeping. Sex doesn’t even cross my mind.”

She could tell by the look on his face that he doubted that, and he was right. Sleeping, she dreamed about sex, sex she only knew with him. She hated to admit it, but she fantasized about him, more than she really needed too.

“Brianna, stop lying to me. Sex is sex. If you want to fuck me, just say it. I’ll write up the agreement, and in the end, we’ll part about our merry ways.”

It’d be so easy if that were true. Although she knew if Kaden laid his hands on her again, they wouldn’t part about their merry ways. He had ruined her for every other man, because she desired no other. Even the guys that hit on her at work didn’t even entice. Kaden was it. And if she let him into her bed, he’d break her heart.

“I’m not having sex with you.”

“Fine. I think your making a big mistake though.” He wrote something on his notepad, and she huffed a breath.

“You just want to get laid.”

“Yeah. It’s not so bad for you to want the same thing either.” He pinned her with his eyes. “Do you even remember that night we spent together?”

Oh, did she remember. “Sure. We had sex in every position humanly possible on just about every surface of my house. You liked to nearly drown in the shower, but I made it worth your while. Of course I remember.”

His eyes flashed with humor. “Then you weren’t as drunk as I thought. I don’t feel as guilty of taking advantage of you now.”

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“Yeah.” She finished making her s’more and quickly bit into the treat to keep from talking anymore.

The taste of chocolate and melted marshmallow filled her mouth, and she couldn’t help the pleasure of it. She moaned a bit, realizing all too late that Kaden watched her every move. Why did he always have to make things so hard?

“You can stop gawking at me. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re still pissed at me for that night, aren’t you?” He threw the tablet to the coffee table and reached for the necessities to make his own s’more.

“No, Kaden. I’ve let it go. If we did use protection, I wouldn’t have Shiloh, and I can’t imagine my life without her.” She sat back against the coffee table as she handed him the coat hanger.

So many times they had done this. So many nights they’d stay up talking about all the shit happening in their lives and eating s’mores while sharing. It was just like old times, when they were the best of friends and knew everything about each other before the other one dared to share. Thinking about it almost hurt.

“Do you have a picture of her?” He licked the melted marshmallow off his finger, turning to meet her eyes.

“Yeah, sure.” She grabbed the little bag that she bought to match the dress, which only held the necessities—one tube of strawberry lipstick, her driver’s license, and a few dollars cash. She did manage however to put Shiloh’s baby picture in there, just

for kicks.

She pulled the picture out and handed it to Kaden, trying to avoid his reaction when he saw his own eyes staring back at him. It didn't work. He slumped against the couch, facing her with an expression of awe.

"She looks like you." She tried to sound casual as she merely stated the truth. "I think in that picture she was trying to tell me she hated cameras. Sort of like her father."

Brianna stared as Kaden took in the picture of his daughter. She couldn't have been more than a few weeks old, and it was just a simple snapshot of her lying on the floor, giggling, but she saw Kaden figuring it to be more. If she didn't know better, she'd say near regret crossed his face for not being in his daughter's life. For being in Brianna's life.

"She's beautiful," he finally said. With his eyes and practically all his facial features, Brianna thought the same thing. The only resemblance Shiloh had to her mother was the color of her hair and some of her personality. The rest was Kaden made over.

"I know. She looks just like you."

He set the picture on the coffee table, staring at it as if it were just going to get up and walk off. Then he turned to her. "Do you think she'll like me? I mean what is she supposed to call me, the stranger that just walked into her life?"

"Calm down. She's easy to love, Kaden. She's very accepting and loving toward others and I'm sure she'll treat the stranger that is going to walk into her life tomorrow, the same." Why he was getting defensive she didn't know.

"What made you want to meet her?" There, she had asked the one question that she'd held in ever since she seen him in the restaurant.

He sat staring at his hands as they dangled over his knees. “I don’t know. She’s a part of me. I guess—I’m hoping she’s a good part.”

Brianna smiled, knowing what he meant. “Kaden, she’s the best part. I don’t know what you think or how you feel, but you’re not a bad person. Yeah, we both made mistakes, but that was eighteen months ago. We can’t take it back, and I don’t even want to.”

She scooted over next to him, looping her arm in his. “You’re still my best friend.”

He finally smiled. “You’re my best friend too, Bree.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he returned her affection by laying his cheek against her. This felt right between them. The awkwardness was gone, at least for the moment. It almost felt like the night they spent together before the booze. Only Kaden was the one doing the comforting.

“Are you ready for bed?” he mumbled.

If only he knew. “Uh, guest room, right?”

She felt his smile, then his lips pressed against her hair. “Yeah, but my door’s always open. Don’t forget it.”

Images ran through her head before she could stop them, and all were vivid with details that warmed her body from head to toe. She didn’t need to think about that. She didn’t need to screw up their relationship again. She just didn’t need to go there and had to be strong throughout the upcoming year. Because, if anything, Kaden Riggins was temptation. Pure, raw, sinfully wonderful temptation she had tasted, and wouldn’t be opposed to tasting again . . . and again.

Chapter Four

He was really doing this. Kaden pulled in behind her, glancing at the small white building Bree now called home. Damn things changed over the course of the year. First order of business would definitely be moving her out of this hellhole and back into a house she'd call her own, even if they never truly shared it as a family.

Damn. He killed the engine of his Mercedes just as her mother stepped out from the townhouse. Eighteen months ago, Regina Miller looked like the mom every kid wanted—a housewife by nature, loving toward her daughter and supportive to her husband. Ex-husband now, but that was another story for another time. Now, Regina stood with her hand on her apron-covered hip, looking like a bull seeing red.

He stepped out from the car, trying to prepare himself for her attack, though she didn't attack the person he suspected.

“You go to a funeral for one night and come back married?” Regina all but yelled at Brianna causing some nearby neighbors' gazes to wonder. “Brianna, did you learn nothing from the first round of foolishness with this boy?”

Brianna licked her lips, nervously trying to usher her mother inside. “Mom, people are watching. Let's go inside and talk about this.”

Kaden came up to them and saw Regina ready to spit fire. He knew he should say something but “hello” felt awkward.

“Mom, come inside, now. You need oxygen, and we need to talk.”

Finally, Regina stepped inside and Brianna followed behind her, leaving Kaden to close the door after them. The small living space closed in around him tighter than a glove. If he wanted to, he could touch both walls by holding his arms out. A set of steps sat next to the door, and the foyer led into a hallway to which he assumed led to the living room and kitchen.

He followed the way the women went, finding his assumptions to be right. The small living room served as a dining area as well, and a little bathroom sat underneath the steps. Considering what Brianna used to live in—a four-bedroom, three-bath home of at least two thousand square feet of living space—to this, he knew she left for the money. With the way she worked off her pretty behind, he knew she didn't have much of it left.

“Mom, would you sit and listen to me. It's not what you think.” She stood next to her mother, forcing her to wear her oxygen mask.

“Not what I think? My daughter is married to the same man that abandoned her pregnant with his child eighteen months ago—did I miss something, or does that accurately describe the situation?” Regina glared at him before turning her head away from them both.

“Mom, please.” A baby started crying, and Regina looked toward Kaden as if he were solely responsible for it. “Just, listen to me.”

Brianna took off down the hall and climbed the steps as if she were competing in a marathon. Before he even had time to blink she came back down, carrying a tearful child with the same emerald green eyes he and his father shared.

“Mom, Tim's will stated that if we didn't get married, Shiloh wouldn't get her inheritance. He's giving her his ranch in Texas, the five-million-dollar ranch he loved so much. That's more than I could ever give her in this lifetime, and I believe she

deserves it.” She situated the baby higher on her hip. The small child looked at Kaden with amazement in her eyes. “He also set up a trust fund for her which she can use for college if she wants, or to buy her first house, or for something that I can’t give her. Mom, it’s only for a year. Until the estate is settled.”

“It’ll just be a year for you to get attached to him, for that baby to get attached to her father, and then what? He’ll leave. Just like he did when he found out you were pregnant.”

“Ms. Miller, I have no intentions of running away from my family.” Kaden finally said, realizing he never called Regina “Ms. Miller” his entire life.

“Yeah?” she sounded amused. “You’re the love-’em-and-leave-’em type, Kaden. Tell me once when you’ve had a relationship longer than a year.”

“Mom, this isn’t fair.”

“What wasn’t fair was seeing my daughter go through the pain of childbirth without the father, the wonderful sperm donor, there helping her through it. Do you think pushing a live human being out of a vagina is easy?”

Kaden shook his head, dropping his gaze to the floor.

“Damn right it’s not easy. Especially when complications arose.”

“Complications?” He darted a glance to Brianna, who shook her head.

“Nothing major,” she replied.

“Nothing major? Shiloh’s heart rate dropped to the eighties because the placenta detached and sent you into premature labor. And then once you started pushing her

out, she decided to come out breech. If that's nothing major, I'd hate to see something important."

Kaden's heart stopped beating in his chest. He stared at Brianna, who was doing her best to keep from crying in front of the child, he supposed. And then the sweet little baby smiled at him, and he couldn't hold it back anymore. He wanted her to like him, even if the rest of her family hated him.

"Can I hold her?" he asked, the child's grin growing wider. She seemed almost shy, laying her head against her mother's chest, though she still stared at him.

"I don't want him anywhere near my granddaughter, Brianna. I'm too weak to be there for you both when he breaks your heart again." Regina popped the mask over her mouth, seemingly done with their conversation.

"He's her father, Mom." A tear fell to Brianna's cheek, a tiny rivulet gliding across her smooth skin. "And like it or not, he's here now."

She turned to him, closing her eyes before speaking. "Shiloh, sweetie, this is your daddy."

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Taking a step toward her, Kaden reached out, and the small child willingly leaned toward them. She wanted him to hold her, and he couldn't have been more thrilled.

He lifted her small body into his arms. "Hey, Shiloh."

She grinned, laying her head against his shoulder. She smelled fresh of baby powder, the sweet scent of youth. He couldn't help the invisible fist squeezing his heart. Eighteen months of guilt washed over him, as he wrapped the child in both his arms. How he walked away from her so long ago, he'd never know. She felt right. She felt perfect. She felt like home.

"While you two reacquaint, I'm going to take a shower and change." Brianna rubbed her daughter's back. "I'll be back in a minute, sweetie."

Once she disappeared, the child's smile was gone, big wet tears forming in her eyes. "It's okay. Mommy will be back in a minute."

"She's a momma's girl." Regina commented. "Once Brianna's out of sight, she wails until she comes back."

As if on cue, Shiloh's whimper sounded. Kaden didn't know what to do. One minute the child was smiling at him, and the next she cried. Her small whimper turned to a wail, and he panicked.

"You're going to have to take her upstairs." Regina commented. "If Brianna asks, I'm going to the Bridge house."

Just like that she left Kaden and the small wailing child alone in the townhouse. What had he gotten himself into?

Okay. Bree was only upstairs. He'd take the child up, let her see her momma, and then she'd be fine, right? Shiloh's chubby cheeks turned red with her cries, while her breath came in gasps. So much for liking him. The child seemed as if she hated him at this particular moment.

He climbed the steps, hoping Bree would give him some pointers. Now, he realized why he didn't want kids. They cried. They pooped. They got into more trouble than humanly possible before the age of two. He had no business raising kids.

He found what he assumed to be the bathroom and rapped on the wooden door. As if psychic, Brianna opened the door. The shower was still running, and her magnificent body only covered in pink terry cloth. She smiled before grabbing the wailing child and soothing her until the silence engulfed them again.

"Your mom went to the Bridge house."

"Figures." She stepped back into the steamed room, and shut the shower off. "At least I washed my hair. Normally I can't even do that."

She walked past him, the child now sucking her thumb as she rested against her mother's wet shoulder, and went down the hall into another room. Once he came to the door, he realized it was her room.

"Sorry about the mess. When I come in from work, I usually just strip and fall into bed. My clothes normally stay where they lay until laundry day." She sat the baby on the bed, pulling her pillows to the side.

"I think she hates me." Kaden said, leaning against the door frame.

“She’s my girl. She acts this way with everyone, so don’t get discouraged.” Brianna began brushing through her wet hair with quick rapid strokes. “She did go to you, didn’t she? That means something.”

“I’m the stranger who’s invaded her home.” The child stared at him, her lashes still holding small teardrops.

“She’ll get used to you.” Brianna, grabbed a large shirt from her closet and pulled it over her towel-covered body. Before he had time to even comprehend what she was doing, or to be a gentleman and turn his back, she pulled the towel out. The damn thing fell only to mid-thigh, barely covering her behind. “We didn’t discuss it, but when are you bringing your stuff here?”

How did he tell her that she lived in a dump? “Uh, actually, I was thinking of buying a house.” She turned to face him, her nipples dark beneath the stark white fabric. “Uh, with four people living together, I just figured we’d need more space. That is, if you want.”

“I can’t afford a house payment.”

“I can.” He stepped away from the door, deciding to take a seat next to the baby on the bed. She was actually really cute when she wasn’t cry. Funny he thought since she looked like him. “You don’t have to worry about finances, Bree. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Kaden, no offense, but I don’t want your money. I don’t want anything from you.” She grabbed a pair of shorts and pulled them on while remaining modest the entire time. “And if you buy a house, that’ll get tied up with the divorce settlements and be one big hassle.”

“No it won’t.” While he talked to Bree, the child crawled toward him, pulling on his

arm to lift herself off the bed. Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms, situating her on his lap. “I buy it. We live there. No big deal.”

She narrowed her eyes then stared at her daughter in amusement. “Whatever. Mom won’t like the idea, though.”

Regina would just have to get over it. “Do you want to go house hunting, or is it something you want me to handle?”

“If it’s going to be anytime soon, it’ll have to be your doings. I don’t have any more days off for two weeks straight.”

He knew it was because she asked for the extra shifts. She needed the money, but soon she wouldn’t have to worry. He couldn’t say so, but she’d see in her own time. She wanted more time to spend with their daughter, and he was going to give it to her.

“That’s fine with me. Uh, I’m keeping my place in Raleigh. I still have work there, and probably won’t be able to travel back and forth every night.” Especially when he had big cases to deal with.

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“Oh, okay.” She sat next to them on the bed, watching as the child lay against him, sucking her thumb. “She never acts this way with strangers. I told you she’d be easy to get along with.”

He rubbed Shiloh’s back as if it were the most natural thing to do, and her big emerald green eyes stared up at him. “If only everyone treated me this way.”

* * * *

A week went by, and Brianna hadn’t heard much from Kaden. With him working, and her working, it left little time for idle chitchat. He was gone before she got up and asleep before she went to bed. Crazy as it may seem, she thought their arrangement would be different.

Christmas would be here before she knew it, and she still had shopping to do. Luckily with all the overtime she’d been working, she saved enough money to actually buy presents. Granted, it wouldn’t be much, but at least her child would have stuff under the tree.

She came in early one night, to a quiet house. Her mother evidently had already gone to bed, and she didn’t know if Kaden was here or not. She threw her stuff down on the dining room table only to see Kaden sitting on the couch watching television.

“Hey,” he said, flipping through the channels.

“Hey. What are you doing up?”

“Waiting for you.” He clicked the TV off and rubbed his eyes. The poor boy looked beat, even as he sat in his dress pants and nice blue button-down shirt. Normally he changed when he first got home. “I found a house. Well, actually Dad found the house since I’ve been in court all week. I was going to look at it tomorrow and wondered if you could come with me.”

She was taken aback with the kindness in his expression. “Uh, maybe. I’m off during the middle of the day for about two hours. Can you schedule an appointment then?”

She came over to him, plopping down on the couch. Sitting never felt so good. She kicked off her shoes and yawned a really big yawn. She knew he didn’t like living at the townhouse, and her mother agreed that she’d stay here while they moved into a new house. She wouldn’t have to deal with babysitter issues since Kaden agreed to put Shiloh in preschool, but she didn’t think all this would be happening so fast.

“Yeah, I can make it then.”

He pulled her foot onto his lap and started rubbing her aching insoles. “Do you have a specific time?”

Like she could think with him being this close? “One. I come home around eleven to be with Shiloh, give mom a break, and then go back to work around three. Two hours should be enough time right?”

He nodded, concentrating on her feet. “I also wanted to ask you to go shopping with me. I need to get Shiloh and you some presents.”

He pressed his thumbs into her arches, and she wanted to moan at how good it felt but bit her lip instead. The man was good at what he was doing, that was certain.

“Uh, sure.” Her head fell back to the arm of the couch, her body turning to complete

mush. “But you don’t have to, you know.”

“I know.” When he finally looked up, she saw the deep emerald eyes turn almost black. Stubble covered his chin, giving him the sexy, edgy look all women loved. Once upon a time, she loved it too.

“Um, I should get in bed.” She was a chicken. If he made any advances, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to say no.

“Okay.” He slid her foot off his leg, keeping his eyes on hers. The man had been one week celibate and as far as she knew that was a record. For as long as she could remember, he had a woman on his arm, as well as in his bed. Now he was married to her, but didn’t have her in his bed.

“Kaden.” It was as far as she got before he pulled her legs down and covered her body with his. She opened her mouth to protest, but he misread her and took it for encouragement.

With one sweep of his tongue, what little sense she had left went out the door. His body felt hot against hers, his mouth so gentle yet erotic. He had a fabulous mouth that definitely made women scream. Yeah, she knew this firsthand because he had made her scream over and over.

With slick thrusts, his tongue glided against hers, and she couldn’t hold back any longer. She pulled him hard against her mouth and kissed him back. She’d probably live to regret it, but it had been one hell of a long day. She needed a goodnight kiss. Or so she told herself.

“Wait, Kaden. Stop.” He did, though he only stared at her, his body wedged between her legs. “We can’t do this.”

“Why not?”

“Kaden, come on.” She pulled away from him, forcing herself to sit up. “You don’t like me. Not in that way, and having sex would only make our relationship more complicated.”

“Having sex would make our relationship a lot easier.” He sat back, watching her she knew, but didn’t dare to turn around to find out.

“Yeah. Um, I don’t think so.” She stood abruptly and headed for the stairs before she gave in and jumped his bones. “I’m going to bed.”

She all but ran upstairs and locked herself in the bathroom. She inhaled deeply and smelled his cologne. She smelled like him. God, that alone was enough to make a woman’s knees weak. She leaned against the door, realizing her body responded all too well to his mouth. Her nipples beaded underneath the white shirt she wore, and her breasts ached for his touch. Her womb clenched almost unbearably, while her panties were wet with wanting. What the hell had she been thinking, kissing him back? Leading him on and then cutting him off. That was just cruel.

She changed into a tank and boxers—her normal attire for bedtime—and made her way to the bedroom. Kaden had been sleeping on the pullout bed built into her couch, but she wanted him in her bed tonight. Maybe her mother was right. This marriage was bologna because there was no way she’d walk away without a broken heart. It was impossible, because the last time he left her heart shattered, and this time, she wasn’t sure if she could mend it back together again.

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She fell in bed and was grateful for the soft fluffy pillow to hug. Not as good as Kaden's warm body, but good enough for her right now. All she needed was sleep, and she'd regain her common sense back. She had to believe it, because too many more nights alone with him and he'd make her love him . . . again.

* * * *

Kaden pulled up to the two-story ranch-style house his father set up for him to see today. He called Bree and told her the details, though she seemed a little short with him on the phone. He was stupid to kiss her last night, though nothing in the world could have stopped him. And kissing her only made him want her more.

He killed the engine just as the broker stepped out of his own Mercedes with a wide, toothy grin on his face. Just what he needed to deal with today. Another salesman.

"Hello, Mr. Riggins," the man said thrusting his hand toward Kaden as he slammed the door behind him. "I'm Howard Hughes. Your father said you and your wife were looking for a house to buy."

"Yes, sir." Kaden shook his hand as the man babbled on. Evidently Howard and his father had gone to school together.

"Well, good. Good. I have several houses available for purchase in different price ranges, but your father said money was no hindrance?"

"Yeah. Whatever my wife wants, she'll get." Just as he said the words, Brianna pulled in the drive in her ratty old Mazda that hummed something awful when she

pressed on the breaks. Howard gave Kaden a curious glance, and he grinned. Just because he drove a Mercedes didn't mean his stubborn wife would give up her ratty old car. In fact, he had just offered to have it serviced, but she refused.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said almost immediately while running toward them in a slinky red dress that accented her curves with every step she took. Her long black jacket hung to her knees though hiding most of her body from Howard's approving eyes. "Shiloh was a bit clingy to me. More than usual."

"Shiloh?" the man asked Kaden.

"Our daughter."

Bree smiled when she came closer, sticking her hand out in greeting to Howard. "Hi. I'm Bree."

"Howard Hughes. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Riggins."

After she pulled her hand back, Kaden wrapped his arm around her, pressing a kiss to her hair. He didn't care what she thought, but Hughes wasn't going to get any ideas. For one year, Brianna was his. And he intended to convince her of it.

"Well, follow me. This house is very beautiful." He started the whole spill he probably gave every couple when they came to see his featured properties.

An hour later, they put five houses behind them and came up on the last and final one of the day. A single story cul-de-sac the broker announced as a four-bedroom, three-bath, four-thousand-square-foot home. He could see exactly what was going on in Bree's mind when she looked the house, though he knew she'd never say she wanted this one. She'd go for the cheapest because she didn't want to be a burden.

“What do you think?” Kaden whispered as she checked out the master bath.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered back. “But we can’t have something like this, Kaden. It’s too expensive.”

“I told you not to worry about that. Just pick out a house you like, or tell the broker you want to see more.”

She looked almost sad as she stood staring into the master bath, longing, he knew, to be able to afford something like this for herself. She was extremely independent, too much for her own right.

“Sweetheart, we’ve been over this.”

“Yeah, and we agreed to split the bills down the middle. I can’t afford something like this.” She turned to face him, sad.

“Bree, I told you I’d buy the house. It’s not that big of a deal.” He stepped closer to her, pulling her to his body. “Get whatever you want.”

She wrapped her arms around the small of his back, and for a brief second, leaned on him, allowing him to support her. “I really like this one. I think that first bedroom would be perfect for Shiloh. Plenty of room for her toys and her own space. What do you think?”

“I think we just bought a house.”

After signing the paperwork and sealing the deal, the real estate broker handed them the keys to their new home. Brianna called in to work to say she’d be in later, giving them plenty of time to go shopping for Christmas presents.

He bought just about everything Bree picked out for Shiloh, and she nearly smacked him for spending as much as he did, but he loved it. Spending hours with Bree when they didn't fight or talk about the past was peaceful and wonderful. She made a few purchases herself and they walked away with two armfuls of stuff for their baby.

"You're ridiculous, you know that?" They took his car since, well, hers wasn't guaranteed to make it.

"Brianna, stop being so uptight. It's only money, sweetheart." He saw her shake her head in his peripheral vision. "Besides, I didn't actually buy the house. My parents did, as a wedding present."

"Kaden!" She tried putting up a fight. But he stopped her before she started.

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“Brianna, listen to me, because I’m only going to say this once. Stop worrying about everything. I’ve told you a million times you don’t need to work double shifts—or at all—but you do for your independence, and I respect that. But when someone offers to help you, or to buy you something, smile and say thank you. Okay?”

“Kaden, it’s not that simple. I have no money. I can’t just not work and depend on you to support me.”

“No?” he pulled in beside her car and parked. “I told you—we agreed that I’d take care of you and Shiloh. Stop being a pain in the butt and just let me.”

“Kaden, we might be married in name and legal system, but we aren’t emotionally or physically. I can’t allow myself to depend on you when I consciously know you’ll be gone in a year. I can’t allow you to spoil our child and just walk out of her life as if you never existed.”

“I never said I’d walk out of my child’s life.”

“Yeah.” She opened the door, letting a cold breeze in their warm environment.

He watched her enter the house, the door slamming behind her. Her expression said it all. He also didn’t say he’d be in her life either and that’s what hurt her most.

Chapter Five

The day before Christmas Eve, Brianna spent most the day unpacking. Kaden forced her to take the day off, and the three of them situated themselves in their new home. Blair had a hand in decorating, making the place beautiful, yet it also made Brianna feel like an intruder in her own home.

Shiloh played in the living room with some of the new toys Kaden had bought her while he sorted through their belongings right next to her. Much to Brianna's surprise, Kaden had taken to being a parent. If Shiloh was hungry, he fed her. If she wanted to play or to be held, he normally stopped what he was doing and did what she wanted to do. He even talked to her—mostly about Brianna—gaining her advice. She smiled, tears forming in her eyes.

Shiloh was becoming a daddy's girl.

"Hey, I've got the pictures unpacked. Where do you want to put what?" Bree rounded the corner to see Shiloh in Kaden's lap, holding a picture of her the hospital took.

"I don't care. Shiloh, sweetie, you need to lay down for a nap." She picked up her baby and started toward the room, her grandmother cleverly designed with a pink theme.

After situating Shiloh in the nice new bed, Brianna flipped the lights off and met Kaden in the hall. She closed the door and tried walking around him, though he grabbed her arm and pulled her back against the wall.

“Bree, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She tried jerking her arm away from him, but it didn’t work. He prevented her movement with his strength and his body. “Let me go.”

“Not until you tell me why you’re so mad. You practically jerked Shiloh out of my arms.”

“I’m not mad, and she needed a nap.”

“She was perfectly fine in my arms.” He brushed her cheek with his fingertip and she broke down. “Sweetheart, why are you so unhappy?”

“I can’t handle it. I’ve always had my independence, and I just feel like you, your family, my mother are all taking it from me. I’m not in control of my own life anymore. I feel like a stranger in my own home.” She wiped her tears, smudging her makeup.

He wrapped his arms around her. “Sweetheart, we aren’t trying to take your independence. I only want to make your life easier.”

She sniffled laying her cheek against his chest. “I like being in control, Kaden. I can’t handle stuff when it’s out of my control.”

He slid his hands down her back. “Fine. Just thump me on the head when I’m getting in your way.”

“Kaden, it’s not that I don’t appreciate it. I do. I’m just not use to having someone to share my responsibilities. I’ve gotten used to being on my own, and I’m set in my ways.” She pulled back, wrapping her hands around his neck and pulling down for her kiss.

This woman was possibly the most confusing woman on the face of the earth. One minute she's pissed at him, and the next she's kissing him. He didn't like the pissed part, but the kissing part was really nice.

"We're suppose to go to my parents for Christmas Day." He pecked her cheek. "From what I hear, they have a whole room full of presents for Shiloh."

She immediately retracted from him. "Great."

"Bree, why do you hate my parents? You've known them all your life, and up until now, they've been like your second parents. What happened that changed your mind?"

She stepped away from him, walking back down the hall to the massive living room full of clutter and boxes. "Your mother threatening to take my daughter away for one thing."

"Bree, she isn't going to do anything."

"Yeah? She likes to remind me all too frequently that her husband is the best damn family attorney in the whole fucking state of North Carolina. I wouldn't stand a chance going up against him." She threw a wad of paper across the room, not caring where it landed. "Forgive me for not being peachy with your family."

He stood watching as she unwrapped small figurines and threw the paper wherever she cared. The last thing he needed right now was his wife—his best friend—scared of his mother's threats. He didn't need her constantly looking over her shoulder because she was afraid someone would snatch Shiloh and be gone. If anything, he needed her trust him much as he needed his next breath. But it didn't look like he'd earn it anytime soon. No matter how many kisses or how many affectionate things he may say or do. She needed to feel safe with him, and ultimately he'd show her by

making her daughter safe in his care.

“Do you not trust me?”

Left and right, she slung newspaper over her shoulder. “What reason have you given me to, Kaden? A lot’s happened in a year. Yeah, you’re still my best friend, but it’s not like it used to be. We can’t talk about things anymore, because our lives are intermingled.”

“You can trust me, Bree. I’ve always been honest. I’ve been there for you during the hard times. I’ve—”

“Stop right there before you piss me off royally.” She turned, holding her hand up. “You ran when I told you I was pregnant because you weren’t ready to be a dad. You didn’t bother to call, or ask about me during the nine months before and after I carried and delivered your child nor did you even want to talk to me when you saw me at the restaurant the first night we saw each other in eighteen months. Don’t you dare say you’ve been there for me during the hard times because you have no idea how hard raising a kid solo is, not to mention my ill mother. I worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day and still barely had enough money to pay all my bills. Necessities, Kaden. It’s not like I had a credit card full of items that I purchased on a whim. I’m talking doctor bills, utilities, rent. As far as I’m concerned, you got off pretty damn easy, and if your grandfather hadn’t have died, I don’t think we’d be having his conversation right now.”

Kaden couldn’t hold in his own temper. “So you got what you wanted. A house you don’t have to pay for. Utilities you don’t have to pay for. Insurance you don’t have to pay for. I take care of Shiloh when I’m home even though I have boatloads of work to be done. And dammit, yes, I did run when you told me you were pregnant, because I knew that in all the years I’d been fucking women, left and right, you were the only one I bent my rules with. I never in a million years ever forgot a condom. Never,

Bree. I knew it was my baby, and I knew I wasn't ready. If I'd have come back then, I would have proposed because I couldn't stand to see you alone. You try to act like a badass, but deep inside, you're scared shitless and, babe, we're in that boat together."

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She scoffed. “Why’d you forget the condom, Kaden? Spare already used from your wallet? If I remember correctly, you did have sex with some other girl that night. What was her name, Bethany?”

“You know what, Bree. You stay on your side of the house, and I’ll stay on mine. Before you know it, the year will be over and we can get back to our normal lives again.”

He stormed off, pissed that he let her get to him. Pissed that she knew all the right buttons to push at all the right times to get the reaction she wanted. But not for long. She didn’t want him in her life, then he’d stay out of her life. Period.

* * * *

Spending time with the Riggins family was pleasant on all accounts except for Kaden’s behavior. Ever since their little battle in the hallway yesterday, he hadn’t so much as acknowledged her existence. And she also noticed he spent less time around Shiloh. Whatever caused his foggy mood, she refused to let it ruin her daughter’s first Christmas.

“So, Tim told me you and Kaden were looking to put Shiloh in a childcare facility.” Blair cornered Brianna in the kitchen, as she poured more wine for herself. “I know a few places that are excellent for children’s education. A friend of mine sends her daughter to one, and she’s mastering four different languages.”

Brianna resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “We’re just looking for something to take the stress off my mother keeping her everyday. Kaden is going to watch her at night

when he's home, and I'll have her in the mornings, but we'll have to have some extra help a couple days a week. My mother's been great about helping, but I don't want to be a burden to her."

Blair was amused. "You don't like to be a burden to anyone, do you, Brianna?"

"I like my independence, Blair." She grabbed a few chips and shoved them in her mouth, very unladylike.

Blair sipped at her wine, watching as Brianna picked at the chips and dip. "Are you and my son using birth control?"

Brianna sucked a chip down her airway and started into a harsh round of coughing. Kaden walked in just as Blair started patting Brianna's back. Without saying a word, he brought her his beer, and she gratefully grabbed it and took a long pull from the bottle.

"What got you all choked up?" His hand slid down between her shoulder blades, forcing her to take a breath.

"Nothing. We're just having a little girl chat." Blair smiled, patted her son on the shoulder, and exited the room to mingle with the other thirty family members.

He watched Brianna as she drank again from his beer, then hand it back to him. "I take it my mother was at her best?"

"She's trying to kill me."

"What'd she say?"

"Let me just say the only thing she was short in asking was what position we used

during sex.” Brianna grabbed his beer and tipped it back again. Alcohol didn’t solve anything, but she sure as hell couldn’t handle this sober.

“I need this more than you.” He grabbed his beer and downed the last of the bottle in one gulp. “Why the hell were you talking about sex?”

She shrugged. “She’s your mother.”

“Well, she sure as hell doesn’t need to know about my sex life.” He glared at her and added, “Or lack thereof.”

“We made an agreement.”

“That only a virgin would make.” He rolled his eyes. “We’re about to open presents.”

Brianna stared at him as he dumped the empty bottle in the recycling bin. If Kaden was going to treat her like dog shit along with the rest of his family, what was the point in her being here? He should have taken Shiloh to be with them and left her at home. At least then she wouldn’t have felt like crying, just like she did now.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked turning back to her.

“No matter what I do, nothing ever pleases you. I come here because it’s freaking Christmas to be with your family, and you’ve got a rod stuck up your ass about something. Your mother isn’t any better, and it seems the more I try, the less I’m liked.”

She poured herself a glass of Chardonnay, hoping the wine would help ease her nerves. First thing after the holidays were over, Brianna pledged to make an appointment at the spa. Her Christmas present to herself would be a massage.

He came to her and took the glass away from her lips. “Look at me. You’re the one who made it crystal clear that you didn’t want anyone’s help. You don’t want me around for anything but Shiloh, so I gave you your wish. Nobody forced you to come here, and nobody is treating you like dog shit. If you didn’t have a chip the size of Texas on your shoulder, maybe you’d relax and have a good time.”

“Where’s my baby?” Brianna’s vision blurred from her tears as she stared into Kaden’s eyes.

“Stop it, Bree. Nobody’s making your life a living hell but you.” He set the glass to the side, bracketing her body with his arms. “Our baby is with my father, who is showing her his old Civil War collection. She’s perfectly fine, and everyone loves her. Are you coming in the living area to open presents or not?”

“Fine.” She sniffled, ashamed tears came to her eyes. Kaden huffed, wiping them away with his thumbs.

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“I plan on leaving after we open presents.” He pressed his lips to hers. “I just hope we can fit all of Shiloh’s toys in my car.”

“I hope they’ll all fit in our house.” Unable to prevent it before it happened, she wrapped her arms around his waist. “Are you really pissed about the sex thing?”

He kissed her again, more thoroughly. “We’ll talk about it at home.”

After making their way back to the living room, Kaden made a noticeable effort to include Brianna in everything. If she hadn’t known the situation, she would have guessed that they really were a legitimate couple. He held her hand, sat by her side, and even hugged her to him time and again while the kids enjoyed opening their presents and making a mess with the wrapping paper.

Each Rigger took special notice to Shiloh, playing with her and loving her. Brianna watched as Kaden’s niece Jenny helped her with her presents and then showed her how to play with them. His sister Kristy sat close by with Shiloh in her lap, helping her young daughter show the small child how the toys worked. Naturally, the one Jenny and her family bought was the coolest.

“So, Brianna, what exactly is it that you do now?” Gregg sat with his glass of scotch propped up on his knee, as he relaxed in his favorite leather recliner.

“I’m a waitress at the Heavenly Host restaurant.” She hadn’t so much as said the words as Kaden pressed his lips to her temple.

“Really. A lot of my acquaintances eat there when they come to visit. I’ll have to tell

them your name and to make sure they leave my daughter-in-law a big tip.” He winked, and she smiled.

She always liked Greg. Compared to her father, the man was a saint, and calling any lawyer a saint was a major compliment. Although any time she needed to be bailed out of something whether it be legally or otherwise, Greg was always the one to count on. Unlike his wife, who was totally the opposite of him.

“You mean Kaden is making you work, instead of staying at home with that precious baby?” Jade asked stuffing her nose in their business once again.

“Kaden is not making me do anything.” Brianna felt his grip tighten on her arm. “I like working.”

She stuck her nose up and started playing with her own child, who look like a mixture of a moose and a raccoon. Greg seemed pleased that she handled herself well and wasn’t after his son for the money. Blair was another story.

“Parenting is a full-time job as well, Brianna. You benefit so much from being at home with your children.” She picked up the Shiloh, as if making a point and continued. “I wouldn’t give anything for the years I spent raising Kaden, Kristy, and Kevin at home. Children after all are only this age for a very short time in life. They grow up so quick.”

“Mom,” Kaden said in warning.

“Kaden, it’s true. Being a stay at home parent is beneficial on both parts.”

“Yes, and a working parent is beneficial as well on both parts.” Kaden turned and molded his body around Bree. “Bree is a wonderful mother, and Shiloh couldn’t be a better baby.”

She knew what he was silently saying to his mother, and thankfully, she got the message. Was it going to be this way for the rest of their marriage? Kaden's hand slid to Bree's thigh, and she tensed, wondering if this was such a great idea in a house full of family and children. She quickly covered his hand with her own and leaned against him, as if nothing was wrong. Relationships—even when fake—were so complicated.

The day started turning toward night, and they still had an hour-long drive to the small city they called home. Shiloh fell asleep in Greg's arms and, when handed over to her father, seemed more at peace than if she was in her own bed at home. Bree could see why. Kaden's arms created a sense of security. Did we get everything, babe?" Kaden grabbed Shiloh's jacket and began stuffing her arms inside the sleeves, while she slept soundly against his chest.

"I think so." She grabbed her own coat, slipping it on, and prepared to take the baby so Kaden could put his on.

"No. I got it." Like a pro, he slipped one arm, then the other in the sleeves without so much as moving the baby.

"You drive careful, sweetie." Blair kissed Kaden's cheek, then the baby's. "You've got an extra special bundle with you."

Brianna wanted to roll her eyes though she didn't. She smiled, grabbing Shiloh's bag to look busy. This night was the most uncomfortable night she'd lived through in quite sometime.

"Brianna, it was good seeing you." Blair grabbed her shoulders and pulled her forward for a hug. "You take care of my son and my grandbaby, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

Brianna couldn't get out the door fast enough, and once safely inside the car and on the road toward home, she finally allowed herself to breathe.

"My family isn't that bad." Kaden said observing his wife's behavior.

She tried not to glare, but her expression evidently gave her mood away. "Kaden, between telling me I should be at home to raise my child to my job sucks to asking me about my birth control—what part of that isn't that bad?"

He drove in silence for a while, and she finally gave up expecting him to answer. "Why did you kiss me today when you were mad? Why did you wipe away my tears and kiss me?"

"Because I wanted to. You may know all the right buttons to push and let me tell you, you push them well, but you are still my best friend, and I do still care for you." He shrugged in the darkened car. "You're also one hot, sexy wife of mine, and even though we agreed to a marriage of celibacy, you didn't say anything about kissing."

Brianna looked down at her slinky little black dress, the only thing in her "before" wardrobe that would still fit her. She had only lost twenty of the thirty pounds she gained during her pregnancy, and a good ten were left all around the lower half of her body. Her size two was now a six, though her bra size went from a B to a full C. Take the good with the bad, she supposed.

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“Whatever,” she mumbled, staring through her window.

“Brianna,” Kaden reached across the consol, sliding his hand along her thigh. She jumped, then pushed him away.

“Please, Kaden. I don’t need a series of praises to raise my self image.”

“Bree, you’re beautiful.” Instead of sliding his hand back to her thigh, he slid his hand to cover hers and squeezed. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“Kaden, drop it. You don’t see what I see. You only see what I let you see.”

“So? Show me everything.”

“No way!”

“Brianna.” He took the exit ramp that led them home and stopped at a red light.

“Look, drop it okay. I’m tired, and I want to go home, take a bath, and get some sleep. We have tomorrow to ourselves, and then my mother wants us to go to her family the day after Christmas.”

“Fine.” He took the route of shortest distance to their house and parked next to her car in the garage.

Without a single word, Kaden grabbed Shiloh from the backseat and headed for the door. Brianna started unloading the toys, trying to keep her mind from repeating and

wondering about Kaden's words. Beautiful was the women he used to date. She didn't resemble them in slightest, so how did he draw up that conclusion other than being like her mother and only saying that because she was her daughter. Men didn't openly say women were ugly if they wanted to keep their balls.

Kaden slipped behind her and slid his hands along her waist. She jumped with a startled gasp, moving to the side. She dropped the toys and grabbed her chest.

"You scared me."

"Why are you so jumpy?"

"Because you scared me." She grabbed for the toys again, but Kaden stopped her turning her to face him.

"Leave them. I'll get them in the morning." He leaned forward and fully prepared herself for his kiss, though when it came it wasn't where she thought it'd be.

He pressed a hot kiss to the pulse beating at her throat, his tongue doing a small sweep, tasting her skin before sucking lightly. She tilted her head, giving him better access to press more kisses, which he did. After the day she had, the last thing on her mind was sex, yet with Kaden so close, it quickly became the first.

His hands slid to her hips, his mouth finding its way back to hers. "Do you still want to talk about the whole sex issue?"

"What about it?" She pulled his mouth back to her sealing off any answer he threatened to give. Thank goodness, he didn't try too hard.

He pulled her to him, pressing his hands into the plump flesh of her behind. His erection was hard against her stomach, his mouth doing wonderful things to hers. She

wound her arms around his neck, and he took that as a cue she wanted and needed more. He lifted her in his arms and started walking toward the door.

“Kaden, this is just a one time thing,” she said breathlessly. “And I’m not on the pill.”

He grinned, sexy and seductive. “You’re nervous.”

He had her there. The last time they did this, she could blame the alcohol, though she remembered just about everything. Now, she had nothing to excuse her behavior, especially if it turned out wrong again.

“You’re cute when you’re nervous.” His mouth sealed against hers as he kicked open her bedroom.

His mother conveniently picked out a king-sized bed for them to share, though the one night they had spent together in the house Kaden had slept in the spare bedroom while she took over the huge bed. Separate beds wasn’t something they agreed to, but sharing wasn’t either.

He laid her on the soft mattress made of expensive foam, pressing her against the bed with his body. No sense in wasting time, she thought trying to accommodate him. But all he did was kiss her, thoroughly and passionately, as if he would die by taking his mouth away from hers. He’d drank whiskey tonight so maybe he would be the one that was drunk this time.

Finally, when he tore his mouth away from hers, he sat back looking down at her. “How do you take this thing off you?”

With the look in his eyes, she knew he was seriously thinking about ripping it, so she quickly grabbed for the knot at her waist and began to undo it. She couldn’t feel self-conscious about any of this. She couldn’t. Kaden wanted sex, and she was his wife.

Some ignorant part of her said she should be the one to give him what he wanted.

“I haven’t lost all my baby weight,” she blurted her fingers trying to pull at the knotted fabric.

“You had my baby so I don’t give a damn.” He pushed her hands aside and tried tackling the knot himself. “And even if she wasn’t my baby, I still don’t give a damn.”

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Finally he pulled the fabric out of the knot and pulled the dress completely open, unveiling her satin and lace panty set. His eyes went molten in the pale light. She knew them to be desirable emerald color, with a spark of mischievousness, but right now, in the heat of passion, they were black and full of nothing but lust. No man had ever looked at her that way, not even the men she claimed she loved, not even Kaden during their first drunken romp in the sack.

“Brianna,” he breathed, kissing her mouth. “You’re so beautiful.”

Tears pricked her eyes. He was good, she gave him that much. Looks alone could seduce any woman he wanted, but his words made it more pleasurable. He knew what to say and just the right time to say it. The more he talked, the more she feared she loved him.

“Hey,” Kaden, pulled back just as the tears rolled down her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She tried smiling at him, but a sob came out. Embarrassed, she covered her face with her hand, hoping if she couldn’t see him, he couldn’t see her.

Within seconds, he rolled to his side and wrapped his arms around her. He held her tight, pressing small kisses to her face while his hands stroked her back. She felt like a fool for crying yet again in front of him. Crying was all she seemed to do lately.

Kaden didn’t say any more but held her tight and refused to let her go. She came so close to saying it. So close to telling him she loved him. It’d never be just about sex, or about the baby or about anything else ridiculously thought up in her mind. She fell in love with him the night they created Shiloh, and she still loved him now. Even

after everything, she loved him through it all.

“You want to tell me what I did to lose you?” he mumbled against her hair. “We were going pretty good until I said you were beautiful. What happened?”

She closed her eyes forbidding the L word to leave her lips. “I have too much on my mind.”

“Bree, we all have shit on our minds. Why are you nervous to be with me again?”

Because I’m afraid of falling in love with someone that will leave me in the end. She kept her comments to herself though, refusing to answer his question. Finally, he gave up waiting for a response and rolled to a sitting position on the side of the bed.

“I’m going to take a long, cold shower.” Without waiting for a response or adding more to his statement, he stalked out of the room.

She knew she screwed it up. He was now, more than ever, more sexually frustrated than all the males combined on the planet. She led him on and didn’t complete their actions. No, instead she cried like a little virgin for the fear of falling in love. Yeah, they were both sexually frustrated, though she wanted more of a commitment than a few nights with sweaty sheets and limbs entwined.

Chapter Six

Kaden lay in his bed with a hard-on. An hour of cold water plummeting against his body, and two orgasms later, he still wanted Brianna. He was hard for her and ached to feel her body surround his senses.

He rolled to his side, no position feeling comfortable with the ache between his legs. It was well past midnight, and he couldn't sleep in the condition she left him in. Merry Christmas to me.

He rolled to the other side, finally kicking the covers off because the room was so damn hot. His skin ached and felt feverish though he didn't feel sick. He wanted Brianna, and she deliberately played him only to turn him away with her tears.

He obviously hadn't been turned off by them, but she sure did put a halt on things. He couldn't stop seeing the sexy lingerie she wore underneath that piece of fabric she called a dress, and dammit if he didn't become impossibly harder.

Finally, he sat up, giving up on any sleep. He could jack off all he wanted to, but only Brianna would satisfy the ache. Dammit, she even got him hot at his parents' house, sitting so close to him, her perfume infusing in his senses. She smelled good and tasted even better.

"Kaden?" He turned to see Brianna's small body standing in his doorway.

"What?" he grumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“I can’t sleep.” She stepped into his room, though she stayed close to the doorway.

“Bree, what is it you really want?”

“You.”

A bolt of lightning couldn’t have hit him harder than that single word coming out of her mouth. He turned toward her, and she stood sheepishly in her lavender gown, clearly wearing nothing underneath.

Her nipples beaded underneath the silk, while the dark thatch of hair, shadowed the area between her thighs. He wanted her so bad he wouldn’t last long if she kept saying things like that to him.

“Brianna, come here and talk to me.” Talking was the last thing he wanted to do, but he needed to know what she thought about when he was kissing her, and how to get her mind off it.

She came around to his side of the bed and sat on the edge, prim and proper. Nothing about her seemed seductive or brazen but at least she was there.

“What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing.” She pursed her lips. “My only real experience is when we created a child, and I guess I’m scared of screwing up again.”

She was afraid of not knowing what to do and of ending up pregnant because of it? Women never ceased to amaze him. Unable to hold it back, he grinned and slid an arm around her body.

“Bree, you know exactly what to do, and I promise, this time we’ll use condoms.” If

her eyes even glanced at his lap, she'd know how well she knew what to do.

“Yeah. Right.” She played with the hem of her nightgown. “You’ve been with plenty of women. Why would you pick me?”

He wanted to strangle her, yet at the same time to pull her close and kiss away her fears. He settled for a hug, forcing her to face him eye to eye.

“Listen to me. If you don’t stop demeaning yourself I’m going to paddle your fine behind.” He kissed her, holding her cheeks in his hands. “Yes, I’ve been with plenty of women, yet none of them matter so I’m not rehashing the past. Never in my life had I ever not used a condom, until I slept with you, and you know what, I don’t regret it. I haven’t got a clue where I’d be right now if we didn’t have that baby, if I didn’t have you. I’d probably be desperate and alone.

“I used to get drunk on nights when women didn’t satisfy a need of companionship, thinking ole Jack would be my best friend.” He kissed her, taking his time into coaxing her to believe him. “I want you, Bree. Just as you are. You’re beautiful and smart and so fun to be with when you let your guard down. You’re a wonderful mother—I couldn’t ask for a better parent for my child and—” He wiped her tears. “Sweetheart, you put yourself down way too much.”

She sniffled, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. “I’m afraid it’ll be a mistake.”

He went through the list of cons in his head. “What’s the worst that could happen? You end up pregnant again? Come on, sweetheart. Shiloh needs a little brother sometime or another. I prefer it later in life, but if it happens, so be it.”

“Yeah. So be it.” She stared at him. “You want another child with me?”

Did he really say that? “If the second is anything like the first then, hell yeah, I want all my children to be with you.”

“Really? You don’t even love me, Kaden. Why would you continue to have kids with a woman you didn’t love?” She stood, pacing around the small area next to his bed.

“Who said I didn’t love you?”

“Who said you did?

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They stared at each other for a moment, and he realized their conversation going to hell in a handbasket. This was not something he expected in the list of cons had he gathered in his mind. Pregnancy he thought would be the worst, because of what she went through with Shiloh. As with all women, love always came into the relationship at the wrong possible time, every time.

“I think we made a big mistake by getting married.” Brianna said and finally made her way back to the doorway. “I guess you had it right last night. You stay on your side, and I’ll stay on mine.”

He should have gone after her, but the muscles in his legs wouldn’t move. He sat frozen to the bed, stunned out of his mind. Bree wanted love, something she knew he couldn’t give her. He didn’t fall in love. He had a good time, played around, and came back home. He’d never been in love, or even thought about being in love.

Finally, when he could move, he walked to the doorway and stared down the hall at the empty, silent house. If life could have gotten more complicated, he didn’t see how. Taking the few steps necessary to Shiloh’s room, he peeked inside to see the baby standing up in her crib. She didn’t cry—hardly ever in fact, except when Brianna left home—but stared at him with a sloppy grin on her face. He smiled back, going to the crib to pick her up, and settled in the gliding rocker in the corner of the room.

For a while, they sat quietly rocking, while Shiloh sucked on her hand and stared up at him in amazed wonder.

“I think I really screwed up things with your mother.” He told the baby, smoothing

her wild hair to her head. “I’ve never really loved anyone outside my family, but then again, I’ve always considered your momma to be part of my family.”

The baby settled in against him as if he were reading her a story. “I do love you though, how could I not?” He pecked her cheek, gaining a grin from the sweet baby. “You’re a lot like her, you know? Your smile’s the same, as well as your temperament, which is definitely a good thing. Your grandma likes ruffling your momma’s feathers, and I don’t know what I’m going to do about that. Grandpa says it’ll all blow over, but women are complicated creatures.”

He smiled down at the half-dozing baby in his arms. “So what’s your advice for me, sweetheart? I really need some. I think your momma is afraid I’m going to leave the two of you high and dry when the year is up, but you know better than that. I’d miss our popsicles for breakfast, and our sneaking cookies behind your momma’s back. Don’t tell her I gave them to you. She’d paddle my behind if she knew.”

Softly snoring in his arms, Shiloh went back to sleep. He smiled, kissed her on the forehead, and situated her back in the crib. He stood awhile rubbing her back and watching her sleep. He couldn’t have asked for a better child.

“Good night, angel. Merry Christmas.” He flipped the small lamp off, making it completely dark in her room, except for the small nightlight beside her bed.

He turned toward the door and saw Brianna standing there with a ready-made bottle in her hand, waiting.

“I thought she was hungry, but it looks like all she needed was her daddy.”

“I just rocked her back to sleep.” He stepped the side, moving past Brianna to his room.

“Kaden, wait. I’m sorry about what I said a minute ago.” She sat the bottle on the changing table and came to his room, sitting on the side of his bed. “Did you really mean what you said in there, when you were talking to Shiloh?”

“Eavesdropping?” He leaned back against his pillows, knowing full and well she heard everything.

“So what if I was?”

He suppressed a grin. “What’s your point?”

She huffed, falling back against the bed. Her breasts flopped with the movement, bringing on the ache again. This woman was definitely going to resort him to having blue balls if she kept it up.

“Why is it so hard for you to give me a straight answer? You talk to Shiloh, telling her more things in a few minutes than you’ve told me since we got married. Just give me a straight answer.”

“Fine. Did I mean it? Yes. I don’t lie to my kid. Do I want you? Yes. My balls are turning blue as we speak. Do I love you? Yes. Am I in love with you? Don’t know. You’re stubborn and aloof, and I can’t comprehend my own crap without worry about what you’re going to think or how you’ll react. Did I give Shiloh popsicles for breakfast? One time just because it was banana flavored, and she wanted some of mine. We were out of real bananas so I gave her the next best thing. And yes, we sneaked cookies behind your back more times than I can count, but don’t ruin it for her, because that’s how I get her to stop crying when you leave. I think she’s playing me now, but we’ve got a good thing going, and I’m not about to give it up.”

She stared at him as if he spoke in a foreign language, trying to comprehend what he just said. And then she grinned. “Only a guy would give a baby a popsicle for

breakfast.”

“After all that shit, complaining and otherwise, that’s what you have to say?” He pulled the covers over his boxer-clad body, and rolled to his side. “Goodnight, Bree.”

The mattress dipped slightly with her weight as she crawled up behind him. “Can I stay here? It’s almost morning anyway, so it won’t be like were actually sleeping together.”

He rolled over pulling the covers aside, waiting for her to slip beneath them. Once she situated herself next to him, she faced him, keeping her distance.

“Don’t worry about what I’m going to do or say if you have something on your mind, Kaden. I’m a big girl now, and I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe I like taking care of you.” He rolled away from her, seeming to go to sleep.

Neither knew sleep would come easy, but Kaden did suppose that Brianna would rather not be alone. After all, it was Christmas.

* * * *

The delicious smell of eggs, bacon, sausage, and biscuits permeated their way to her nostrils, taking all of three seconds before Brianna realized the food sat beside her on a tray.

Kaden’s bare feet padded down the hall, stopping at Shiloh’s doorway. He held a bottle in his hand and a burping cloth hung over his shoulder. She watched as he lifted Shiloh out of her crib, kissing her and cradling her to his chest. The poor baby was probably starved since she didn’t get her evening bottle before bedtime, but she

seemed perfectly content in her daddy's arms. And Brianna knew exactly how she felt.

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He gave her the bottle, Shiloh's small hands wrapping around the his fingers as she sucked greedily for her food. He spoke to her softly, standing in the middle of the room until he looked up and saw Brianna was awake. He leaned forward kissing the child's forehead, then started walking toward the bedroom to where Brianna sat in bed.

"Merry Christmas," she said when he came and sat beside her on the bed.

"Merry Christmas, babe. Did you sleep well?" He sat Shiloh up, over his shoulder, and started patting her back, as if it were the most natural thing to do.

"Yeah. You didn't have to make breakfast though." She popped a piece of bacon in her mouth, then handed one out for him, in which he took. "How's my baby?"

She rubbed Shiloh's back gaining her attention, and automatically she reached her arms out for her mother. Brianna smiled, taking Shiloh into her arms, kissing her briefly before situating her on her thigh.

"She's coming around. She woke up about thirty minutes ago and grinned at me." Kaden tweaked her nose and she smiled at him. "Then she reached up for me to take her."

"You're good with her." Brianna grabbed the biscuit off the plate and wrestle with Shiloh to eat it.

"Yeah well, I learned from watching you." He stood to stretch, catching Shiloh's attention. "I'm going to take a shower. You need anything else before I do?"

Brianna found herself sidetracked as well watching the fluid motions of his muscles. He yawned, barely remembering to cover his mouth as he caught her staring at him. She licked her lips unconsciously drawing out a groan from Kaden's lips.

"Please don't start, Bree. My balls are on their way to being black as it is."

"I didn't do one thing." She grabbed a sausage before Shiloh got a hold of it and popped it in her mouth.

"That's the point I've been trying to make to you. You don't have to do one damn thing to have me hard as a baseball bat."

Consequently, her gaze fell to his crotch and sure enough, he was hard. She grinned before looking back at Shiloh and kissing her. Kaden groaned, turning away from them both and began pulling clothes from his dresser.

"Uhh." Shiloh reached her arms out, trying to get Kaden's attention. When he didn't pay attention to her, she pushed away from Brianna and squealed louder.

"Someone wants her daddy." Brianna grinned when Kaden turned around and Shiloh opened and closed her hands, reaching her little arms out for him.

Like a sucker, he came over to pick her up. "You're giving Mommy up for me?"

Shiloh looked back at Brianna, then looked to Kaden. She made a satisfied baby sound before wrapping her arms around his neck. He hugged her to him, leaning his head against hers.

"I'm stunned," Kaden said, rubbing her back. "She never gives you up for anyone."

"She loves you, Kaden." She grinned eating the last of her sausage. "I think you were

right about her conning you with the cookies.”

He grinned. “What can I say? I’m a sucker.”

After everyone was bathed and dressed, they gathered around the Christmas tree to open presents. They helped Shiloh open hers, since she was more amazed with the wrapping paper than anything. Brianna got the camera and took pictures of everything.

Kaden ended up decorating both his daughter and his wife in bows since Brianna used a bow on nearly every present she wrapped until they finally came to the end of Shiloh’s huge mass of presents.

“Here.” Kaden grabbed a small gift from under the tree and handed it to Brianna. “Open it.”

He lifted Shiloh up and blew a raspberry on her belly, starting a hysterical round of the giggles from both. Brianna just stared at the gift knowing what it was before she even opened it.

“Kaden.” She finally met his eyes, and he nodded with his head.

“Open it.”

She started peeling the paper back, as if a spider or poisonous snake was going to jump out. She knew he was growing impatient with his groans and began tickling Shiloh again, keeping the giggles going. Finally, when she unwrapped the gift, she found a small velvet jewelry box.

“If your momma was any slower, we’d be sitting here until next Christmas.” He kissed Shiloh’s cheek and sat her on his thigh, with his arms around her. Even Shiloh

seemed annoyed by Brianna's slowness.

She pulled the box open and seen that what she suspected was inside the box.
“Kaden, you shouldn't have.”

She stared at the blue-tinted diamond solitaire ring, knowing full and well she'd never wear it for fearing she'd hit it against something and lose the stone. The two-carat solitaire glinted in the light, nearly blinding all those that stared. It was beautiful in its own right. She recalled telling him her wish, making the gift more special since he remembered.

“Put it on.”

“Kaden, what if I lose it?”

He groaned, situating the baby to the side of him. “Your momma is a pain in the butt.”

“I am not—” He grabbed her hand and the ring to slip it over her finger, then inspect it.

“It was my grandmother’s diamond. I had it remounted and set according to your style. White gold instead of yellow and no baguettes since you hate the things.”

He sat back, satisfied with the ring, then kissed her briefly. “That’s only half your present though. Shiloh and I got you this.”

He picked up the baby again resituating her on his thigh. He shoved another present in front of her a bigger box this time, though not by much. He grinned, nuzzling Shiloh to hide his smile.

She opened this one faster, though when seeing it too was a jewelry box, she stopped. “Kaden.”

“Just open the damn present.”

She popped the box open and saw a beautiful silver locket with her name inscribed on the front. “Oh, Kaden, it’s beautiful.”

She pulled it out of the box and slid it around her neck. “Perfect fit, huh, Shiloh. Mommy’s pretty in her new jewelry.”

Brianna smiled, looking at her child and the man holding her, seeing how they were most definitely two peas in a pod. There was no way Kaden could deny Shiloh, because right down to her feet, the little girl was the spitting image of her father.

“Okay, now for your present.” She reached for the box toward the back of the tree. It was a larger present considering she didn’t buy him jewelry, and she handed it to him, trading it for her baby.

He pulled the paper off, and opened the box. “Oh, babe, this is great.”

She smiled as he inspected the brand new leather laptop case he said he wanted the day they went shopping. Shiloh evidently wanted his present as much as she wanted the paper—or maybe it was her dad. She reached for him, grunting again, but Brianna held to her tight.

“It has an R on the front buckle and a personalized nameplate on the inside.” He came to her faster than lightning and kissed her hard and long, pressing her back into the couch behind her.

Shiloh squealed, reaching for Kaden, but he was preoccupied, teasing her mouth with his own. Brianna felt breathless when he pulled away, licking her lips and tasting his unique flavor.

“Thank you.” He smiled at her before leaning down to kiss Shiloh’s head. “You two mean the world to me.”

The phone rang interrupting their moment, and Kaden rose to answer it. Brianna hugged Shiloh to her body when she squealed for her father’s attention. She couldn’t

help but understand her need for Kaden. Brianna was starting to feel as if she, too, should scream for Kaden's attention.

"Bree, it's for you. Your mother."

She stood with Shiloh in her arms and reached for the phone as Kaden offered it to her. "Hey, Mom. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, darling. How's Shiloh?" Regina sounded happy as she spoke, making Brianna smile.

"She's perfect as usual." She smiled as Kaden made faces at the baby making her laugh. "She has a billion toys, and I'm not sure they'll all fit in her room, but she's had so much fun."

"His people bought her presents?"

"Mom, they are her family. Of course they bought her presents."

Kaden stopped playing with Shiloh and frowned at Brianna. She shook her head, handing the child to him as she continued talking to her mother.

"Oh, yes. Your arranged marriage. I trust he's keeping his hands to himself this time. You're not going to turn around and tell me tomorrow that I'm going to be a grandmother again, are you?"

Brianna closed her eyes and licked her lips, thinking about the right response and getting it past her lips. "Mom, please don't do this at Christmas. Shiloh's happy, I'm happy, please don't do this right now."

Kaden kissed his daughter, made his way around the kitchen bar to Shiloh's

highchair, and situated her in place. Brianna watched as he took out a banana popsicle, and peeled the paper back, and gave it to their daughter to eat. He chuckled when he seen her face and pulled it back, nibbling on it himself.

“Brianna, I don’t trust that boy. He left you when you needed him, after all those years you’d done nothing but be there for him through every crisis of his life. He broke your heart, sweetie. Why don’t you remember that?”

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“I do, Mother. But it is my life, and I know what I’m getting into.” Watching her, Kaden leaned against the counter, crossing his legs at his ankles. He sucked on the lollipop with a wide-eyed Shiloh holding her hands up for him, opening and closing her fingers. “What time are we supposed to get together?”

“One. It’s at Teresa’s house, remember. She doesn’t have the highest opinion of him, so you might want to warn him, or convince him to stay at home.”

“Mom!” Brianna, turned away just as Kaden slipped the popsicle between Shiloh’s lips.

“I’m just saying’s all.” Regina tried her best to sound innocent, but Brianna knew her mother too well. She knew better.

“Yeah. Everybody will be nice, or else.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you and my precious granddaughter tomorrow.”

She clicked the phone off and turned back to see Kaden standing with the last of the popsicle between his lips. She hated when he looked at her, knowing yet never saying what was going on.

“We’re supposed to be at Teresa’s at one.” She hung the phone on the receiver.

“Uh-huh.” Shiloh clutched her hands wanting more from Kaden. “Why was she asking about my family?”

“Kaden, please.”

“No, Bree. If your family has something to say, why not say it to my face instead of behind my back.” He pushed off against the counter, stepping on the trashcan to pop the top, and dumping the stick inside. “I know your family hates me. A deaf mute could tell that much by meeting us on the street. But they’re not Shiloh’s only family, and they don’t love her more. She’s just as much a Riggins as she is a Miller.”

He tried walking past her, but Brianna grabbed his arm, pulling with all her weight to stop him. “Kaden, stop. It’s Christmas. Let’s just spend today together as a family, and then tomorrow, when it, comes deal with it. Teresa doesn’t like that you weren’t there for me when I was pregnant. Actually my whole family has a problem with that.”

Kaden looked crushed. “I’m sorry. I’ve told you a billion times how sorry I am but I can’t take it back. What the hell am I suppose to do? I’m here now. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

Brianna took a deep breath. “Kaden, listen to me. They aren’t going to get past it until you prove yourself worthy of me. I accept you, Kaden, exactly the way you are with the past we share and everything. Shouldn’t it matter what I want, instead of them?”

“But you don’t know what you want,” he yelled. “You lead me along like a little puppy on a string. I’m so frustrated right now, I can’t see straight.”

Shiloh started to cry amidst the argument, and Kaden stopped, his expression softened, as he walked to the highchair to pick her up. He pulled her against him, kissing her to quiet her down.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. Daddy didn’t mean to yell.”

“Kaden,” Brianna tried talking to him again, but he brushed her off. “Kaden, stop brushing me off. What are you mad about? I had to put up with your family threatening to take my daughter away. How is that any better?”

He turned, holding the baby against his body. “Don’t try that, Brianna. I’m a lawyer, and it’s in the job description to fight dirty. Don’t you dare make me say things that will end up making you cry.”

“Like what, Kaden? We’re already fighting, because that’s the only thing we ever seem to do when alone.”

“Who’s fault is that?”

“Yours!” She turned away, hating that the holidays were going in the crapper.

He sat Shiloh in her play area and turned toward Brianna, glaring. “How the hell is it my fault?”

“Because! You get mad over stupid stuff.”

“Oh, like you don’t lead me on and then cut me off right at the last second? Might as well cut off my balls while you’re at it.”

“I don’t lead you on. You start shit, and I stop it. There’s a difference.”

“Oh, yeah?” He stepped closer pushing her back into the bar. “If I start something, are you planning on stopping it or going all the way?”

“Don’t you dare try to weasel sex out of me now.” She turned in his arms, feeling nothing but his body heat surrounding her.

“Why not? Are you wet?” He slid his hands to her thighs, pushing the skirt up to her waist as his hands slid upward. “I’ve tried slow and seductive but I think it gives you too much time to think. No thinking. No talking. Just action.”

Brianna spread her legs wider, giving him better access. She gasped when he touched her, a gentle sweep of his thumb across her folds. His gaze met and held hers for a brief second, and then he did it again, and again.

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“I know you think by guarding your body, you’re guarding your heart, but, sweetie, I’ve had both.” He kissed her, hot, deep, and wet, slowly making her senseless with need while his finger played between her legs. “I love both, and you’re not going to hold back any more. Stop being so scared or guarded or whatever.”

“Stop, Kaden.” Brianna knew her mouth said the words, but he felt so good.

“Sweetheart, you’re the one holding me.”

She looked down, seeing her nails biting deeply into his skin, though no part of his body touched hers. He withdrew his hand and rested both hands on the counter on each side of her.

“Stop busting both of our balls and just let go for a second.”

Brianna gulped air, hoping oxygen to her brain would bring back her common sense. It didn’t work. Her body burned for Kaden, and there was no turning back now.

“Fine. If you break my heart, you won’t have to worry about blue balls. You won’t have any balls.”

He grinned, sliding his hands to her hips and lifting her onto the counter. His mouth sealed against hers as his fingers once again found their way between her thighs, this time pushing her panties aside and sliding deep within her body. She pulled back, clutching harder at his shoulders, while his mouth slid lower to her breasts.

“I can’t wait, and I don’t think you really want me to.” He undid his pants, shoving

his boxers down. He reached across the counter to a candy dish and grabbed a rubber he'd hidden there quickly and deftly rolled it on to himself.

"You hid condoms in the kitchen?" Brianna grinned, staring into his eyes.

"Honey, I hid them everywhere." Connecting their mouths again, he brushed himself against her before thrusting deeply inside the slick depths of her body. "Dammit, you're so tight."

Brianna didn't respond. She urged him to pull out and thrust back again, grunts and moans sounding with every movement. The slick friction of his body sliding in and out of hers became the most wonderful rhythm.

She couldn't think of anything but the feeling he created deep within her body, within her womb, and soon her muscles clenched because of it. She braced herself on the counter, taking him deeper as she leaned back spreading her legs wider, then locked them around his ass.

"Oh, God, Kaden." The slick sounds of his body pounding into hers vibrated in the air around them, bringing her closer to the edge of bliss. And then he rubbed her sweet spot with his finger to send her flying.

She arched her back, her orgasm taking over her body. She barely felt Kaden come until his mouth found her breast and his body fell completely limp against hers.

He pulled back almost immediately, taking the rubber off and throwing it away. Brianna stared at him, dazed and confused.

"There is no way you had my baby naturally." He pulled his boxers up, leaving his jeans on the floor.

“She came out breech.” Brianna slid from the counter, though her legs were too weak to hold her weight up. She stumbled, and Kaden caught her and pulled her flush against his body, his mouth coming down on hers.

“Damn.” He shook his head, then looked around the room.

“She probably wants to play with her new toys.” She tried moving past him, but he held her arm in a vise grip.

“Will you tell me about it, about the eighteen months I’ve missed, tonight?”

Brianna licked her lips as she debated it in her mind figuring what’s the worse that could happen. The man had a right to know what went on in his daughter’s life, even if he wasn’t around.

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever you want to know.”

He pressed his lips against hers, sliding his hand to her cheek. “We’re sleeping in your bed tonight, and we’re officially making it ours.”

Brianna nodded, knowing what he meant. The only sex she had with anyone was the most amazing sex she’d ever dream about. Kaden not only knew what he was doing, he set her on fire—mind, body, and soul. And exactly what she feared happened. She was slowly falling in love with him again only this time, she didn’t know if she’d be strong enough to handle the breakup.

Chapter Seven

Kaden considered himself foolish to assume one round with Brianna would be enough to satisfy the hunger taking over his body. But now that he had had her, again, he wanted her even more.

They spent a peaceful day together, playing with Shiloh and watching movies together. Half way through Rudolph, Shiloh fell asleep, and his mind started to roam again.

Now Brianna was taking a bath and he was feeding Shiloh her nightly bottle, the baby drifting off to sleep as he rocked her. He couldn't help seeing his wife in his child though she looked like him. Shiloh had Brianna's temperament, and personality. Sweet and innocent, loving and caring—she couldn't possibly have an enemy in this world.

He set the bottle next to the rocker, and stood to place Shiloh in her crib. He rubbed her back and watched her sleep until his legs grew tired. Brianna came up behind him and folded her arms around his waist from behind. He wrapped his arm around her, kissing the top of her head as they stared at the life form they created together.

“I named her Shiloh because the name meant ‘his gift.’ She’s your gift to me.”
Brianna smiled against his bare chest, laying her head on his chest.

“Was the labor hard?”

“Oh, yeah. I had minor bleeding from a partially detached placenta, and she hadn't

gotten into position yet. She came out feet first, which only made my job harder. Halfway through the birth, I was ready for them to cut me open and pull her out.” She grinned. “But you know, I never believed the books that said you forget about the pain, because the pleasure of having a child is greater, but in a way it’s true. I haven’t forgotten the pain by any means, but I was so happy when they finally handed her to me. She was so tiny and I was afraid I’d hurt her if I did something wrong. My mother said I was incredibly anal the first six months of her life.”

Kaden tried to picture Brianna being anal, and he shook his head. It was something he couldn’t imagine. “Did you want me there?”

“Yes. Even if you weren’t her father, I missed you. You were my best friend, Kaden. We shared everything together.” She turned to face him. “But you weren’t there, and I survived without you. I can’t say it was fun, but Shiloh and I have had our good times.”

Kaden framed her face with his hands and kissed her so lightly, he barely felt her lips against his. “Let’s go to bed.”

Kaden flipped off all the lights and met Brianna in the master bedroom. She’d turned down the blankets and slid in on one side, yawning as she smoothed the sheets around her. Her silky pink nightie barely showed for the fluffy duvet as she looked up, waiting for him.

“You’re beautiful, Bree. I didn’t tell you enough today, though I thought it more times than I can count.” He crawled on the bed, sliding across the mattress with fluid grace. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“I’m hardly a big-boobed blonde babe who knows how to drive a man to his knees.” She played with the lace on the edge of the comforter trying to avoid his gaze.

“No. You’re a big-boobed brunette babe who has me begging on my knees.” When he reached her, he kissed her cheek. “But that’s not what makes you beautiful sweetheart.”

“Really?” Her tone held a hint of incredulity.

“Yeah.” He leaned back on his heels, pulling the covers from her body. He pulled her legs toward him until she lay flat on her back, and he hovered over her. “You’re beautiful when your eyes sparkle with mischief. They turn from a bluish gray to a deep indigo that is so pretty I could get lost in your eyes for hours and never be bored. You’re beautiful when you come around me, squeezing me so deep inside you while your pleasure washes over you.”

He bent forward kissing her neck and started working downward as he spoke. “You’re especially beautiful when you hold my baby in your arms, talking to her as if she understands every word you say. You were putting away groceries the other day and had some kind of conversation about the bagger boy.”

His mouth reached her cleavage and he grinned up at her. “You’re not the only one that eavesdrops.”

Her fingers ran through his hair, pulling him back to cover her mouth. “Make love to me, Kaden.”

“I’m getting there.” He sat back tugging at the hem of her nightie until she came off the mattress for him to pull it over her head. Naturally, she wore nothing underneath it.

“Don’t, Brianna. Stop it right now.” He threw the wadded clothing somewhere off in the darkness, then pulled her hands aside to reveal her breasts to him. She looked away, ashamed, he figured. “Bree, why are you embarrassed?”

“I just am.”

“Brianna, look at me.” He still held her arms, both touching the mattress on each side of her body. Finally, ever so slowly, she faced him, her indigo eyes wide. “Tell me what you don’t like about your body.”

“Everything.”

“Tell.” His voice demanded her attention and she rolled her eyes.

“I have ten pounds of baby weight I can’t get rid of. My nipples are too big, and I have stretch marks.” She met his eyes. “Are you satisfied?”

He grinned. “Ten pounds of baby weight is nothing, sweetheart. I like you soft and curvy. Do you know what that little black dress does to my libido? I wanted to pull you into a closet and fuck your brains out. And the nipples . . .” He blew across one, making it bead to a harder point than it already was. Then he lapped at it one slow lick after another making her squirm underneath him.

“I think your nipples are perfect just the way they are.” Gently, he sucked the tip of her breast into his mouth.

When Brianna arched her back, he knew he had her. She felt so good underneath him and tasted better than an ice cream cone on a hot summer day. He slid his hand to her stomach, feeling the soft skin of her body. She pressed him against her, a small moan of pleasure escaping her lips.

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“You know what?” he let her go with a soft pop, reclaiming her mouth again. “I like your body just the way it is.”

“You’re such a charmer.” She slid her fingers down his back.

“No. I’m telling the truth.” He kissed his way down her body, slowly, until he reached her navel.

Teasing her, he dipped his tongue inside the small crater while his hands busied themselves parting her thighs. She sighed, lying back against the mattress, finally giving up her modesty and going with the flow. He’d take care of her, and she knew it. She just had to let him.

He inched his way downward, kiss by kiss until his breath fanned her sensitive flesh. Her arousal was an aphrodisiac driving him insane. His mind was lost, all rational thoughts gone out the door. All was left was he and Brianna, and dammit if he didn’t care.

He lapped her once, her body jerking as he held her down. She tasted so damn good he feared he’d never get enough of her, that he’d never be able to walk away and feel the same ever again. He wasn’t kidding when he told her he wanted her to have his children. Never in a million years would he ever think those words would come out of his mouth, but they did, and he didn’t regret them.

He proceeded to drive her to the brink of pleasure, keeping her perched on the side, but never pushing her over. No. He wanted her coming around him, greedy as it may be.

“Kaden, please.” She gripped the sheets as he slid his finger deep inside her. “Oh, God. Kaden!”

So creamy and juicy. He reluctantly pulled away and shucked his boxers with lightning speed, grabbing a condom in the process. She stared at him watching as he rolled the rubber on his straining shaft and then positioned himself between her legs again.

Without preamble, he slid deep with one thrust, and she came undone around him, squeezing him so tight he had to bite his lip to keep from coming himself. She bowed off the mattress, fisting the sheets and pulling at them as she cried out in pleasure.

He pulled back and then thrust home again causing another set of rippling waves to surround him. This time she clutched his shoulders, her nails biting deep into his skin. His mouth found hers, and he started moving, matching the rhythmic thrusts of tongues.

She pulled away and kissed his neck, slipping her tongue out to taste his skin. How he lasted this long, he’d never know. Her first orgasm almost did him in, with only single penetration.

“Kaden,” she moaned, dropping her head to the side, her body growing taut as his thrusts grew harder and deeper.

He lifted her hips, changing the angle of penetration and thrust one time, and exploded. With a harsh cry, he fell on her letting her body milk his orgasm as she came a few seconds later.

She wrapped her arms around him, and tried to lock her legs at his back, but he pulled away to take care of the condom. She looked confused, and he held up one finger indicating he’d be right back. Luckily for him, his legs could still carry him.

When he came back, she smiled up at him. She looked sated and so damn small. Her arms came around him as he sank onto the mattress, and he rolled her on top of him. Yeah, even after that, he'd never get enough of this woman.

"I think I'm going to go on birth control." Brianna traced around his nipple with her finger. "But it is interesting to see where your condom hiding places are."

He chuckled, kissing her head. "I'm always prepared."

"Yeah? You were never a Boy Scout." She lifted her head and rested her chin on his chest.

"No, but my friends were. Even the girls joined the scouts." He slid his hands to her ample behind. "If I recall, my parents used to buy cookies from a certain brownie nearly every year."

"I hated Girl Scouts. My mom made me join just because Lyssa was one." She rolled her eyes. "I had to do everything she did."

"Yeah, she walked around like diva of the block while you played football with us boys in the front yard." He grinned.

"I never did pay you back for choosing Kyle over me just because he said I threw like a girl. I was so mad at you I could have knocked your teeth out."

She sat up, distracting him with the sight of her naked body on top of his as she rolled to the side. "Kyle was worse than me. At least I didn't squeal when I caught the ball."

He rolled to his side, facing her. "I stand corrected then. You are the best damn quarterback in the history of front yard football."

She glared at him. “You don’t have to be a smartass.”

He laughed, leaning forward to kiss her. “What do you want me to say? I was twelve years old.”

“A simple apology would be nice, for starters.”

He chuckled. “Fine. I’m so sorry I picked Kyle over you. I promise, if we ever play front yard football again, you will be the first person I pick. How’s that?”

He slid a finger over her stomach and played with her navel as he waited for her answer. “I suppose that’ll do. You’re too cute to stay mad at for too long.”

“Cute? Puppies are cute.”

“Are you fishing?”

“Maybe.”

She grinned. “Okay. Cute is too mild. How about pretty?” He glared at her and she laughed. “All right. Handsome. Attractive. Hot. Are those adjectives any better?”

“Now who’s the smart-ass?” he rolled over her laughing body, grabbing another condom from the nightstand.

“You mean to tell me I didn’t wear you out the last time?”

He kissed her shoulder. “Honey, I don’t think you could ever wear me out.”

He opened the packed and handed it to her. She grinned, which he didn’t know if it was a good thing or a bad thing. She mounted his thighs, rolling the condom on with deft and tempting precision.

“Maybe I should pay you back now,” she said, sliding her finger along the length of his shaft.

“You wouldn’t be that cruel.” Although he knew very well if she wanted to, she would. Look how long it took to get her in bed the first time, and they honestly didn’t even make it to the bed.

Nodding her head, she lifted her pelvis and slid him deep inside her again. “Can I tell you something?”

Kaden gripped her hips and stared up into her eyes. “You know you can tell me anything.”

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes then opened them again, leaning forward to kiss him. “I love you.”

With that she proceeded to drive him out of his mind.

* * * *

Shiloh awoke in the middle of the night screaming her head off. Brianna rolled to the side of the bed, muscles she hadn’t used in a while protesting. Sex was great, but she probably wouldn’t need any more for the next five years.

She yawned as she grabbed a robe and headed for her baby’s room. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Mommy’s here.”

She picked up the small child, rubbing Shiloh’s back as she laid her cheek against Brianna’s shoulder, still crying. She felt hot to the touch, her clothes sticking to her sweaty body. Was she sick?

She carried the whimpering child back to her bedroom where Kaden sat on the edge of the bed half-awake. “I think she’s sick.”

“Sick? What do you mean?”

“She’s hot and she’s all sweaty. I’m going to call the doctor.”

Shiloh whimpered in Brianna's arms as she reached for the phone. Kaden held his arms out to her. "Come here, sweetie."

Brianna looked at her child as she waited for someone to answer the phone service for emergencies. Shiloh didn't budge. Normally she couldn't keep her out of Kaden's arms. Now she just stared, not even attempting to move to her father.

"She won't come to me." Kaden patted her back, trying to coax her away from Brianna, but she fought him, clinging to her mother's robe.

Brianna finally got the answering service, left a message for the doctor on call to call her back, and hung up. She sat next to Kaden on the bed and tried to get Shiloh to look at her, but she wouldn't let go. She started crying even though Brianna still held her.

"Sweetie, what's wrong?" She rocked her slightly trying to calm her. "She's never been sick before, Kaden. I don't know what to do."

"Calm down. The doctor will call in a second, and he'll figure out what's wrong." He pulled on the boxers lying on the floor. "I'm going to get the thermometer that way we can tell the doctor what her temp is when he calls."

Brianna nodded, feeling helpless. "Shiloh, it's okay. Calm down, sweetie."

Rubbing her baby's clammy back, Brianna kissed her head. She didn't feel as hot any more, but whatever caused the fever still hurt her. As soon as Kaden came back, the phone rang, and he picked it up.

"Yes. Well, she'd been fine all day yesterday, but she awoke about thirty minutes ago with a fever and a dull cry." He looked toward the baby, listening to the doctor. "She's nine months old."

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Shiloh's screams grew louder and caused Kaden to step out of the room. She didn't even open her eyes she was crying so hard. Brianna cradled Shiloh to her, kissing her cheek as she whispered words of affection to her. It didn't work. Finally Kaden came back, going straight for the closet.

"The doctor said to meet him at Raleigh General." He pulled on clothing and pulled stuff out for Brianna to put on.

With Shiloh still screaming, he picked her up, propped her against his shoulder, and carried her to the other room while Brianna dressed. With as much adrenaline pumping through her body, she felt almost sick as she worried about her baby. Having her out of sight was even worse.

She pulled on her clothes and tied her hair back in a ponytail, not caring what she looked like. Once semidecent, she grabbed her purse and went to find her husband and child.

Kaden strapped Shiloh into the carseat and had the car running and ready to go by the time she got to the garage. Brianna hopped into the back and he took off like a bat out of hell.

Shiloh cried nearly the whole trip and through the doctor's examination.

"She has a double ear infection. I'm going to give you a liquid form of an antibiotic, and it's to be given twice a day with meals to prevent an upset stomach." He handed all the papers to Kaden, who talked with him a bit while Brianna gathered up their belongings.

“Okay, thanks, doc.” Kaden shook his hand, and they parted ways. “I’m going to stop at a twenty-four-hour pharmacy and get this filled so she’ll be feeling better soon.”

He stood to the side while Brianna buckled in Shiloh. The poor thing hadn’t stopped crying and wanted Brianna to hold her. Brianna’s heart broke seeing Shiloh’s little hands reaching up for her mother. She pulled back reluctantly, slamming the door.

“You okay?” Kaden’s hand slipped down her arm. “You haven’t said much.”

“I’m scared to death.” She walked around him to the other side and climbed in the backseat again with Shiloh. She wrapped her arms around the baby, praying this would be sufficient since she couldn’t technically hold her while they drove.

“Shiloh, please stop crying.” She kissed her forehead, smoothing her hair as she continued to reach with gasping cries for Brianna.

After they got the medicine, Brianna gave her the first dose immediately, hoping she’d stop crying before she made herself sick. Her face was red and blotchy tears running in rivulets, soaking her shirt. Brianna brushed them away, kissing her since she couldn’t hold her.

Finally, Shiloh quieted and dozed off in her carseat. The silence was almost as painful as the loud noise. Brianna let out a pent-up breath and closed her eyes.

When she awoke, Kaden was carrying her to their bedroom. “Where’s Shiloh?”

“Asleep.”

He sat her on her side, pulled off her shoes, and tucked her underneath the covers. He kissed her forehead, s she’d seen him do so many times to Shiloh, and cupped her cheek in his hand.

“Get some sleep, baby.”

“But,” she tried protesting but he silenced her by placing one finger against her lips.

“I’ll watch over Shiloh. Don’t worry about it.” He kissed her briefly, then left the room, turning the light off as he went.

Brianna could do nothing but close her eyes and drift into bliss.

* * * *

When Brianna awoke, it was close to ten and Kaden and Shiloh sat in the middle of the living room floor playing with a ball. She giggled and laughed as he rolled it to her. Shiloh loved this game. She did her best to throw it back to him but rolled it instead.

“She seems to be doing much better.” Brianna yawned and walked into the kitchen for a nice big mug of coffee.

“Yeah, she tried standing in her crib this morning, waiting for me to get her, and she fell over. The medicine has helped with the pain though. She’s giggled more than she’s cried this morning.”

He rolled the ball to her, and she pushed back to him, giggling. Brianna joined them, smiling at her daughter as she took a seat to watch them.

“Come on, Mommy. Don’t you want to play?” Kaden tossed the ball to Brianna, making Shiloh’s eyes grow wide.

“Hah.” She scooted behind Shiloh, opening her legs around her. She handed her the ball and helped her throw it toward Kaden. She pecked her head when it flew by him

and nearly landed in the tree. “Oops.”

“Oops, my ass,” Kaden muttered, leaning back to get it. “Shiloh and I had a good game going. Don’t ruin it with stunts like that.”

He rolled the ball to the baby who giggled when she pushed it back with her foot. Brianna sat back, watching them with a huge smile on her face. Shiloh loved playing with her daddy. Just about as much as Kaden loved playing with his baby.

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“Well, we need to start getting ready to go to Aunt Teresa’s if we’re going to be there by one.” Brianna stood, grabbing her coffee cup from the coffee table.”

“You’re not planning on taking her sick, are you? I mean we just got back from ER like five hours ago.” Kaden rolled the ball to Shiloh then looked up at Bree.

“Kaden, please don’t. She needs to see her family, and they all want to see her.” It seemed like every time they had something to do with her family, he didn’t want Shiloh around them, but when his family called, he was ready to go.

“Brianna, she’s sick. She has double ear infections and a low-grade temp. I don’t want you carting her around out in the cold.”

“You’re not going to tell me what I can and can’t do with my own child. I pushed her out of my uterus, so I think I damn well have the right to take her to see my family for Christmas.”

Brianna picked up Shiloh, ignoring Kaden’s annoyed look, and carried her to the nursery to get her ready. If she had to sit through four hours of his family gathering together for Christmas, Kaden deserved the same with her family. Fair was only fair.

Shiloh started crying because she missed playing with Kaden, and Brianna did her best to ignore it. They’d go, get back and she’d be perfectly fine in the comforts of her home. She dressed her in a red velvet dress and put a little bow in her hair. She’d be fine.

She carried her back to the living room where she put her in the playpen and started

down the hall to get herself ready. Kaden was in the shower, door wide open so she could see everything. He made her so mad most of the time, and so hot the rest.

She stared a bit longer than necessary, until he caught her looking. He scowled, slid the shower door open, and grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist.

“Where’s Shiloh?”

“Playpen.” She took her stuff into the bathroom, closing the door in his face when he turned around to say something else.

The last thing she needed to deal with was Kaden’s bad behavior. After she showered and got ready, she opened the door to see Shiloh playing on their bed while Kaden got dressed.

“Bree, why can’t she just stay home? I gave her, her medicine, but it’s going to take a day or two until she’s back to normal again.” Kaden buttoned his royal blue shirt, leaving half of them undone to show his chest.

“Because Kaden. All you want is for her to be around your family and not mine. Well, I’m sorry my family isn’t as rich and snotty as yours, but they love her and have done nothing but be there for her ever since she was conceived. We’re going to my family’s Christmas gathering. End of discussion.”

Brianna grabbed clothes off the rack, oblivious to Kaden playing with Shiloh on the bed. She dressed, choosing a red sweater to go along with her faded jeans. She combed her hair and put a minimal amount of makeup.

“All right. Are you guys ready?”

Kaden grunted, holding Shiloh in his arms. She laid her head against his chest

sucking on her hand. Brianna could tell he was pissed at her right now. That he wouldn't look at her said it all. Normally she couldn't get his eyes off of her, and now he was giving her the cold shoulder.

They walked to the car silently, Brianna with Shiloh's bag and her purse and Kaden with the baby wrapped in his arms. He strapped her safely in the carseat and slid behind the wheel. Brianna climbed in beside him, unable to take the cold shoulder any longer.

"Kaden, stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Being this way. If we were expected to be at your family and she was sick you'd still be going. Why is mine different?"

"One—I wouldn't cart my child out sick and in the cold for anything but to see the doctor. Two—Why are you picking fights with me? You're constantly bringing up the past or you're reminding me how much you hate my family. I get the picture, Bree. You don't have to keep shoving it in my face when you don't get your way. And last, I never once thought of your family lesser than mine. Not in any way, so you can stop throwing that in my face while you're at it."

Merging with traffic, he pulled onto the interstate. Shiloh slept soundly in the backseat making it clear she was feeling all that well. Yeah, she may have been playing ball with Kaden in the living room, but that didn't mean she was well.

"Fine, you win." Brianna crossed her arms staring out at the passing cars.

"Win what?"

“Our fight. The one I obviously am trying to pick with you.”

He reached over and slid his hand along her thigh. “Let’s just make it through Christmas.”

They arrived at Teresa’s thirty minutes before they were supposed to eat. All were happy to see her and Shiloh, but excluded Kaden as if he were a leper. Shiloh stuck to him like bubble gum, never going too far and, when she wanted to go somewhere, making sure Kaden was right there with her.

“Well, what do you know?” Teresa mumbled nudging her head toward the living room as Kaden sat with Shiloh in his lap, rocking her. “He’s not so fearful now, is he?”

“Teresa, quit it. Kaden is a great father, and Shiloh loves him to death.” Brianna grabbed a piece of turkey and stuffed it in her mouth. “She’s actually turning out to be a daddy’s girl.”

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“Yeah, and he’s going to break that little girl’s heart when he decides your arranged marriage isn’t something he wants to be apart of any more.”

“You know, you could at least be nice to him. He’s still the same Kaden you all used to love. He’s grown up a lot.” Brianna pushed her sleeves up and began mashing the potatoes. “We had to go to ER last night.”

“What? Why?” Regina and Teresa dropped their spatulas and waited for her response.

“Shiloh had a temperature, and we didn’t know why. She cried two hours straight with pain, and the doctor said she had double ear infections. That’s why she’s not her usual self today. Kaden tried to get me to keep her home, but I didn’t want her to miss Christmas.”

“Oh, Brianna, that poor baby.” Teresa went to the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. “Kaden, you can lay her in Jessie’s crib if you want. Brianna said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Uh, okay. Where’s it at?” He stood holding his little girl close to him.

“Right down the hall. Last room at the end.”

Brianna wiped her hands on a dishtowel. “I’ll show you.”

They walked in silence, Brianna leading the way. “Your family hates me.”

“They do not. They did, but I told them about how you took care of Shiloh last night, and they all think your Superman now.”

She watched as he laid Shiloh in the crib, patting her back so she’d stay asleep. Finally, when he was satisfied she’d be okay, he turned, and Brianna wrapped her arms around him. She held him for a second before speaking.

“I’m sorry, Kaden. I was just scared last night because she’d never done that before. Thank you for being there for me, for her. I’m sorry I’m bitchy and keep picking fights with you.”

His arms came around her, pulling her to him, tight. “Brianna, there’s no place else I’d rather be than with you and that little girl. The good, bad, and ugly, I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

She nodded, smiling up at him. “I promise we’ll leave after lunch. Shiloh would rest better in her own bed, or in ours.”

He kissed her nose. “Let’s go.”

True to her word, right after lunch Brianna bid her goodbyes while Kaden got Shiloh ready. Max, her cousin, helped load their presents in the car. Amazingly, the kid probably wouldn’t need toys for a few years. It’d take her at least that long to play with all the ones she received just this Christmas.

After everyone hugged them goodbye, they drove off.

Chapter Eight

As the first of the year rolled around, things started getting back to normal. Kaden worked until all hours of the night on a really big case his father had given him. Brianna went back to work and started Shiloh in a childcare facility recommended and paid for by Blair. Regina still kept her on the weekends she and Kaden had to work, but not as often as she had before.

Now that Brianna only worked one eight-hour shift at a time, she was able to have a somewhat decent life and an actual relationship with her daughter. She pulled up at the Academy for Baby Geniuses, unable to wait any longer to see Shiloh.

“Can I help you?” a lady dressed in a formal suit asked as she entered the door.

“I’m here to pick up Shiloh Riggins.” She heard Shiloh crying behind the closed doors and made her way toward the sound.

“Ma’am, you can’t go back there.”

“My child is crying. Why is my child crying?”

“Just one minute, ma’am.”

The minute turned into ten as the lady waited for her assistants to bring Shiloh to the front of the building. Shiloh’s eyes were blood red from tears, and she reached for Brianna as soon as she saw her standing there waiting. Tears fell on her cheeks as she hugged her momma tight.

“Why is she crying?”

The assistant looked at the director and smiled politely. “Shiloh wanted a toy another little boy had.”

Brianna clenched her teeth. “My child looks as if she’s been crying for hours. She doesn’t cry for hours over some little toy.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but that’s what happened. Have a nice day.” The assistant turned and headed back through the door.

Brianna kissed Shiloh, glaring at the director. Something happened, and if she ever found out what, there’d be hell to pay for hurting her baby.

She carried Shiloh to the car, situating her in the back and closed the door. She’d been on her feet long enough. It was time to go home, relax, and have fun with Shiloh.

She pulled in the drive and parked her Mazda in the garage. She had spotted an oil leak at work and needed to ask Kaden to look at it. He knew more about cars than she did.

She carried Shiloh into the house, hitting the answering machine as she sat her stuff down. Shiloh hugged her arms around Brianna’s neck as she listened to the various messages play, nothing too important.

“What do you say we get a popsicle and watch a movie?” She grabbed the banana-flavored popsicle from the freezer and settled them both on the couch. Shiloh started crying again, upset about something.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” she pulled her up seeing a faint red spot on her T-shirt.

“What the...?”

She pulled Shiloh’s shirt up and a purple bruise with a set of teeth marks sat on her arm. Brianna’s temper raged, as she touched the sore spot. That’s what those women were hiding. They didn’t want to tell her some little kid bit her child. Immediately, Brianna stripped Shiloh’s cloths off, checking for any other marks that may be hidden. Sure enough, two more bite marks were on her, one on her other arm, and the other on her leg.

She grabbed the phone and dialed the childcare facility, but no one answered and she didn’t want to leave a message. So she hung up and dialed Kaden at work.

“Riggins and Riggins Attorneys at Law. How may I help you?” the lady asked when she answered the phone.

“Is Kaden Riggins available?”

“Just one moment please. May I tell him who’s calling?”

“Brianna.”

She waited, listening to crappy music while the lady took her sweet time getting Kaden on the phone. Finally he picked up, sounding more stressed than she’d ever heard him.

“Bree?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“What do you need, because I’m really busy?”

So much for “Hi, darling how are you?” “I took Shiloh to that new childcare facility today, the one your mother recommended and is paying for. And she came home with three bite marks.”

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“Someone bit her?”

“Three times. She’s still whimpering in my arms right now.”

“Did you ask them about it?”

“She was crying when I went to pick her up, and I asked them then, and the assistant said she wanted a toy another child had. The director wouldn’t comment, and when I came home and found them, I tried calling them back, but no one answered.”

“Shit. Uh, is she okay? If the skin’s broken, you need to clean the wound out with soap and water—which isn’t going to be fun, but it’s better than alcohol.”

Brianna groaned. “One bled onto her shirt. It’s the one I accidentally brushed and made her cry. All three are bruised though.”

“All right. I’m going to be in a three-hour meeting so I don’t know when I’ll be able to talk to you again, but if you need me dial my cell. I’ll call you when I get out, okay?”

“Okay. I love you.” She clicked off, not even bothering to wait for him to reply. She knew he wouldn’t anyway.

She took Shiloh to her bathroom, filling the Jacuzzi tub up and adding her favorite bubble bath. She stripped her of her remaining diaper, sat her in the warm water, and grabbed some of her bath toys for her to play with.

Brianna bathed her first, taking special care with the bite marks, and then sat on one of the Jacuzzi's steps watching her play. She splashed bubbles making cute baby noises when she splattered them all over the tub. Brianna grinned, rubbing Shiloh's untamed curls. She would stay in the bathtub for hours, if Brianna would let her. She was born for the water, and Kaden already vowed to take her out on the fishing boat when she got a little older.

Brianna thought about where they'd be when Shiloh turned five. Kaden never promised to stay with her after the year they had pledged together was up, but he also didn't say he'd leave her high and dry either. She wanted him to stay with her, honestly. Not for Shiloh's sake, so much now, but because she loved him. She loved the stubborn, hardheaded sexy man who called her on every bluff and who held her when she was scared. She hated thinking about him leaving and hated it even more that all her family would be there saying the dreaded "I told you so".

Kaden always said he'd never get married, never have kids, yet he'd done both with her. She wasn't stupid enough to believe if they didn't have a kid first, that they would have ended up married. He probably wouldn't have even looked at her twice as a lover or girlfriend. No, she was his best friend, his confidant and the only one he trusted with even the deepest of dark secrets. She smiled thinking about how much trouble he'd have been in if she told on him so many years ago.

When the water turned cold, Brianna grabbed the fluffy pink towel and wrapped her protesting daughter in it. She kissed her cheek, making her giggle as she began drying her off. The phone rang, and she drained the water, wrapped Shiloh in her arms, and headed to the bedroom to answer it.

"Hello?" She sat Shiloh on the bed and smiled when she crawled away from her, naked, to the other side of the king-size bed.

"Brianna, this is Blair. Greg called me about the childcare facility incident. Is Shiloh

all right?” Blair’s tone was nothing but a concerned grandparent checking up on her grandchild.

“Yes. She has three bite marks that have developed into purple bruises. Two on her arms and one on her leg. She seems fine though. I just got through giving her a bath, and she’s happy and giggling. I don’t think she liked that place too much, not that I could blame her. The women acted all secretive and snooty.”

“Well, I’m so sorry, Brianna. I’ll call the director first thing in the morning and give her a piece of my mind.” Bree suppressed a chuckle.

After a little small talk, they hung up and Brianna went to the closet looking for something to change into herself. She settled with a pink terry cloth jogging outfit and white spaghetti strap tank top. Anything was better than her stiff uniform.

“Come on, munchkin. Daddy won’t like you sitting your naked behind on his pillow.” She held out her arms and Shiloh looked up at her, emerald green eyes bright and wide.

“Da-dy.”

Brianna stared at her. “What did you say?”

“Da-dy,” she repeated pointing.

Brianna’s eyes went to the picture on the dresser of Kaden and her at their high school graduation. Tears filled her eyes as Shiloh repeated it over and over.

“Yes. That’s daddy.” She picked the baby up, kissing her cheek as she pointed and repeated her newfound word. “Do you miss daddy?”

“Da-dy.”

Brianna carried Shiloh to her room, finding a pair of soft pajamas for her to sleep in. She fixed her diaper and pulled on her clothing all the while Shiloh repeated “da-dy” over and over, throwing her hands up each time.

“Yes. Yes. You want to call Daddy and tell him?” Brianna looked at the clock. It’d only been an hour since she called him the first time, and he said his meeting was to last three. She debated, staring at her child as she clapped her hands.

“We’ll tell him tonight when he comes home. In the meantime, let’s get that popsicle we never ate and watch a movie.”

Two hours later, Brianna tucked her daughter into her crib, and flipped out the lights. After watching Finding Nemo for the millionth time, she clicked it off once Shiloh fell asleep in her arms. She didn’t stop repeating her new word, and smiled every time she said it.

Brianna’s stomach growled, reminding her of the two meals she skipped today. She never ate food in the morning, and she was too busy to take a lunch. But she needed dinner. She pulled open the refrigerator and cringed at her choices. She also needed to go to the grocery store.

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Checking the lunchmeat, she made a ham and cheese sandwich heavy on the salad dressing and settled at the bar with a Coke at hand. She was expecting Kaden to call, but wouldn't be surprised if he waited until he was on the road home. Speaking to him at the office was near impossible.

"Boo." Two fingers poked into her sides, making her jump three inches off the bar stool. Kaden laughed when she turned around and glared at him, ready to tell him off. "Miss me?"

"Before or after you nearly gave me a heart attack?"

He grinned taking a sip of her drink. "Before."

"Yes."

"After?"

"No."

They both laughed as he settled onto one of the stools next to her, eating the food on her plate. She watched him eat was left of her half-eaten sandwich and shook her head.

"I would have made you one, you know."

He shrugged. "Takes too much time. I didn't get lunch today."

“Me either.” She grabbed a bag of potato chips and chomped on them. “I thought you said you’d call?”

“I was going to, but I got caught up. How’s Shiloh?” His expression turned serious as he waited with the last bite of her sandwich halfway to his lips.

“She’s fine. I gave her a bath, and she played in the bubbles until the water turned cold and her skin looked like a prune.” Brianna grabbed her soda and took a drink. “Your mother called and said she’d take care of it. But I don’t want Shiloh going back to that place. She didn’t like it, and I didn’t like it.”

“Well, she’s not going then.” He took the dirty dishes to the sink and came back to the bar, leaning in front of Brianna. “Is there another place you can take her?”

“My mom’s. It’s not that big of deal.” She folded the bag up and clipped it. “Oh, guess what?”

“What?”

“Shiloh said her first word today.”

Kaden’s eyes lit up with pure parental pride. “What was it?”

“Daddy. She even pointed to our graduation picture and said it.”

“God, I love that kid so much.” He grinned, moving around the counter to kiss Brianna soundly on her lips. “You look hot in that outfit.”

He moved past her toward the hallway. “Where are you going?”

“To kiss Daddy’s girl goodnight.” He grinned. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back to take care

of her mommy too.”

* * * *

Kaden hated family law. From neglected children to divorces, he hated seeing the pain and suffering of those who were innocent. Aside from criminal law, which he only took because he believed everyone had a right to a fair and speedy trial, family law almost always broke one of the two parties hearts, or if he wasn't careful, it broke the lawyer's heart.

Right now, it was the latter. Maria Gonzales's granddaughter had been tossed from orphanage to orphanage, from foster home to foster home—all in the five years she'd lived on this earth. Now the grandmother came up from Cuba looking to gain custody of the child, but only if she would be granted United States citizenship. She didn't want to be forced to take her granddaughter back to a place where the future was not guaranteed.

“Counselor, what have you to say?”

“My client wishes to be granted legal custody of her granddaughter, Your Honor. And a special request of citizenship since she is an illegal alien from Cuba.” Kaden responded.

“Citizenship must go through immigration, counselor. You know that.” The judge glanced at the papers on her desk. “Hearing denied for guardianship, unless your client agrees to take her granddaughter back to Cuba?”

Maria shook her head, and the judge's gavel fell.

“Mister! Mister!” a little girl came up to him, pulling on his pant leg, while a social worker tried her best to keep the child away from him. “You're going to help my

grandmother, right. You're going to let me go home with her?"

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The small child had olive skin with big brown eyes and two braided strands of hair on each side of her head. A front tooth was missing, and when she smiled, she poked her tongue in the hole. Her clothing was nothing more than rags, which surprised him since foster parents were paid to take care of the children they housed.

“Mister, please.” The social worker finally got control over the child and hauled her out of the courtroom. Kaden looked over at Maria, who sat with her family.

“I’ll do everything I can.”

With that, he left his clients to be with their friends and headed back to the office. Something about the way that little girl looked at him reminded him of his own daughter. Although Shiloh was nowhere near five years old, it was the same look of innocence in her eyes that disturbed him. If he didn’t help her grandmother, she wouldn’t have a family. How could he live with himself if he allowed that?

He pulled into the office parking lot and saw Brianna’s beat-up Mazda sitting close to the back. Just thinking about her made him smile and seeing her would make his day go a hell of a lot easier.

When he walked in, he scanned the waiting area looking for her, but found no one. “Tiff, is my wife here?”

Tiffany had been his father’s secretary for nine years and knew their family quite well. “Um, yeah. She’s here somewhere.”

The bathroom door opened, and Brianna stepped out in a royal blue sweats with a

white V-neck top. Her cleavage showed, making his body temperature rise. She looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine.

“Oh. Hey.” She smiled at him, though he stared back. “I know you’re busy, but I just need to talk to you for a second.”

“Tiff, hold all my calls and appointments.” He opened the door that lead back to his office.

Brianna’s eyebrows furrowed, but she didn’t question him, just walked past him to his office. Neither said anything until Kaden closed the door behind them, locking them into his home away from home.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” He dropped his briefcase and pulled her into his arms.

He breathed in her scent, pressing his face against her neck as he tightened his arms around her. Brianna was exactly what he needed right now. Her in his arms. Her heart beating next to his.

“Kaden, what happened?”

He pulled back only to press his lips against hers. “I love you, Brianna.”

“What?”

He kissed her, lifting her in his arms. “I love you. I’m sorry it took so long for me to say it, but I’ve felt it for a long time.” He walked to his chair and sat, pulling her in his lap. “I had a really bad day in court.”

He told her what happened including the part about the little girl, and she sympathized with his emotions. “Kaden, you’ll do whatever you can, but it won’t be

your fault if it doesn't work out. I know you'll do your best."

He nodded. "I just seen a lot of Shiloh in her. They look nothing alike and differ more than not, but I seen my little girl in that little girl."

"You're a great person, you know that? No offense, but most lawyers are stuffy, and they would have blown off a child like that. But you didn't." She kissed him, threading her fingers through his hair. "I love you, Kaden. I possibly have all my life."

He kissed her again, a hungry kiss of promise for what was to come tonight when he came home. She tasted so damn good, and felt so good. "What was it you came for?"

"Oh. I took my car to the mechanic, and he said it's going to cost more to fix it than the car is actually worth. He said I'd be better off buying a new one instead of repairing the one I have."

"You drove sixty miles to tell me that?"

"No." She kissed him. "I drove sixty miles to the mechanic and stopped by since I was here, to tell you that."

He chuckled. "What kind of car do you want?"

"I don't know. Something easy to cart a baby around in. Something good on gas. You're the car guy. Any suggestions?"

"Volvo?"

"Too expensive."

He scoffed. “What have I told you about that phrase?”

“Kaden.”

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“It’s a safe vehicle. Very good on gas. The SUV is great for babies. Has the room without being too bulky. It fits you to a tee.” He rubbed her arms smiling. She had serious money issues.

“Kaden.” She huffed a breath. “I can’t afford that.”

“You aren’t paying for it. We are paying for it.” Kaden pressed his lips to hers. “We’re married, babe. You and I became a we the day that legal document was filed. December fourteenth, as I recall.”

“Yeah but that was an arrangement. Are we really a married couple or are we just playing the parts?”

Her question cut him down. She thought what they shared was just a joke? A game of house between two adults? He just told her he loved her for crying out loud, and she had the nerve to ask him if they were just playing the parts.

“Kaden, I didn’t mean anything by it. I just . . .” She blew out a breath. “I really don’t want to start a fight with you right now.”

“What do you want me to do to prove to you that I’m not going anywhere?”

“I don’t know. Stay the day after we scheduled our divorce.” She slid from his lap. “Kaden, you know as well as anyone I’m an all-or-nothing girl. Brett didn’t give me his all, and I’m thankful because now I have Shiloh, but I don’t need a man to make me happy. Life may be harder, but I’ll be okay. I guess what I’m saying is I don’t want you to feel tied down.”

Kaden crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair to watch Brianna as she paced around the room. She was so scared of offending him she didn't dare say what was on her mind. He knew he'd get pissed at Brianna, there was hardly any subject they didn't disagree about but they fit together. They fit perfectly together as if made especially for each other.

"Brianna, stop talking crazy. I told you I loved you, and I meant it. With all my being, I meant it. Why would I give you and Shiloh up for a lonely house and an unfulfilling job?" He leaned forward on his desk watching as she turned around to face him. "I love you, Brianna Lynn Miller-Riggens. And I'm not going anywhere. You've got to trust me on that."

"My name's Brianna Riggens. No hyphen." She smiled at him when he rolled his eyes.

Here was his chance. "How soon do you want to have another kid?"

Her eyes widened, but she gained control of her surprise before she thought he noticed. "Let's wait until Shiloh's at least out of diapers."

"Sounds good to me. I want to be there for everything."

"Yeah. You can deliver it while you're at it." She grinned. "Well, I've taken up a lot of your time. I need to get going anyway. It's my one day off, and I promised to take Shiloh to the park. Kristy is supposed to meet me there with Jessie and Marsha."

"I might not be home tonight. If I stay late, I'll probably crash at the apartment."

"Call if you aren't. Otherwise, I'll wait up for you." She bent over his desk and kissed him sweetly with her bubblegum-flavored lips.

“Fine. Love you.”

“I love you, too.”

* * * *

Kaden stumbled into his apartment at around three in the morning after spending most of the night looking through legal books to try and help his current case. So far he had found nothing.

He closed and locked the door behind him, not bothering to turn on the overhead lights. He was tired and missed seeing his family, and he really wanted to go home and stay there, locked away with Brianna and Shiloh.

“It’s about time you came home.” A familiar voice called to him as he kicked off his shoes in the foyer.

“Bethany, what the hell are you doing here?” Kaden rounded the corner to see the gorgeous, leggy blonde, who was also his ex-fiancée, sitting on the couch half naked in a barely-there baby doll. “How did you get in my apartment?”

“Bribed the doorman.” She stood, wearing black five-inch stilettos. “I talked to your mother, and I was worried about you. Being married to the dull Brianna has to be a rag on your sex life. I mean, I thought you vowed to never marry anyone after I broke up with you?”

“Get out, Bethany.” He pointed toward the door, but she stood still, propping her hands on her hips.

“I need a place to stay, Kaden. My boyfriend kicked me out, and I’m in town for a month doing a photo shoot.”

“A hotel wouldn’t work?”

“Not when there isn’t a reason I can’t stay with you.”

“You can stay here one night pending you leave me the hell alone. But that’s it. You’re out of here in the morning.”

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“Oh, I bet I can convince you to let me stay longer.” She came to him and slid her arms underneath his suit jacket.

He grabbed her elbows and roughly pushed her away. “I said, leave me the hell alone.”

Bethany had a conniving way about her. She had weaseled a diamond ring and an engagement out of him, and then he turned around and found her in bed doing another. He hadn’t love her. Not like he loved Brianna, but he had cared. She had give him companionship, and they had been seen as the perfect couple. Everyone wanted to be them.

Now he saw her for what she was, nothing but a pretty face with nothing to offer anyone. Honestly, she was so different from Brianna he felt foolish to even call her an ex. Stupid and foolish is what he was, what their relationship was.

He closed the door behind him after he entered his bedroom. He really wanted to talk to Brianna, if only to hear her voice. He knew she has work tomorrow, and he’d talked to her earlier. But he couldn’t help it. He needed her right now.

He picked up the phone and dialed their number. She answered on the third ring. “Hey, babe.”

“Kaden? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just got in and missed you. I wanted to hear your voice.” He sat back against his pillows hating his bed, the bed he’d once favored so much.

“You just got in? At . . . three?”

“Yeah. I spent the night looking through all my law books trying to find an answer, but I came up with nothing.” The look in that little girl’s eyes haunted him.

“Oh, Kaden. I’m sure you’ll find something. Have you asked your dad about it? Maybe he can point you in the right direction.”

“He’s too busy with five other cases. That’s actually why I took this case. He wanted me to help him out.” He huffed a breath and leaned back against the soft pillows, missing Brianna’s warm body.

“Well, I know you’ll find something.” He loved her encouragement, the way she tried to make the best out of bad situations. “You need rest though, sweetie. You’ve been up since five-thirty this morning. Get some sleep, and then start looking again with fresh eyes.”

“I miss you.”

“You saw me earlier today.”

“So? I still miss you.”

“Get some sleep, and you’ll see me soon enough. Don’t forget we have that party to go to this weekend. Your mother called me a billion times wanting my opinion on this and that.” He could practically see her eyes roll, and smiled. Ever since the whole daycare thing, Blair Riggins has made Brianna her best friend. “Anyway. It’s a formal thing so you’ll have to get your tux.”

“It’s at my parents’ house.”

“Yeah, she told me that. I have to go tomorrow—well, today after work and pick out a dress. Any preferences?”

He grinned. “I’m pretty sure the kind of dress I’d prefer wouldn’t be the kind you’d wear in public.”

“Smart-ass. I was thinking blue, maybe a halter?”

“Is it easy to get out of?”

“Ugh. You have a one-track mind, you know that?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll surprise you. Kristy, my mother, and your mother are all making an afternoon of it. I may need a glass or two of wine when the day is done.”

“Or me. I tend to have a knack for making you forget everything.”

She sighed. “No denying that. Get some sleep, baby. I’ll see you tonight. Have a good day at work, okay?”

Kaden closed his eyes, picturing his wife alone in their bed, looking absolutely beautiful. He knew she wouldn’t be naked, since she only slept naked with him by her side, but he could imagine which silky nightie she wore. Lavender, probably, since it was her favorite. With a lace bodice that crossed over her breasts, stopping just at her waist. The damn thing was knee length, but looked sexy as hell when she wore it.

“Okay. Kiss Shiloh for me.”

“I will.”

They hung up the phone, and Kaden settled in his bed, hugging a very cold pillow that felt nothing like Brianna. He replayed their conversation over in his head. He needed his tux for his parents’ New Year’s party and hoped like hell Brianna didn’t plan on buying a damn dress that would threaten his libido before the stroke of midnight. But if she did, they’d be calling it a short night, to ring in the new year right.

Chapter Nine

Blair Riggins went all out for the spectacular party. A three-course meal had been planned, and guests had been invited, mostly lawyer friends of theirs and people from the country club Blair belonged to. Nevertheless, over two hundred guests were coming to their house to ring in the new year.

Brianna made sure her mother had everything Shiloh would need since she'd be spending the night with Regina and then drove like a bat out of hell to get home and get ready before Kaden got there. He too had been recruited by his mother to pick up last-minute items and to arrange last-minute things.

She pulled in the drive, forgetting about the mail and parked her car in the garage. If she didn't get dressed before Kaden did, then they'd be lucky to walk out the door and make it to the party on time.

She grinned, stripping as she ran to their bedroom. Her mother and his agreed along with Kristy that her dress would definitely surprise him. She just hoped he liked it.

Leaving a mess of clothes on the floor, she jumped in the shower. She'd pick them up later. After washing her hair and body, removing the remnants of the restaurant from her, she grabbed a hot pink towel and screamed when Kaden walked in the bathroom.

His eyes widened, though he didn't take them off her naked body. "Scare you?"

"Stop doing that!"

He chuckled, leaning against the vanity. She wrapped the towel around her and tried to calm her racing heart. He was a large man who took up a lot of space, and with him being so close, she had to remind herself to breathe again.

“I’m not going to bite you.” The grin turned sly. “Unless you want me to.”

“Stop. Go out there,” she said, pointing to their bedroom. “And get dressed.”

“What? No ‘hi honey’ today?”

“Fine. Hi, honey. Go get dressed.” She grinned, knowing he wasn’t going anywhere but closer to her. “Kaden, I’m serious.”

He crossed his arms over his black and silver T-shirt with the Chinese symbol for “fuck you” on the front. It was a very rare occasion that she seen him out of his suits, but she liked him in denim just as well.

“Come here.” He held his hands out, and she shrank against the wall.

“No way. I just took a shower. You’re not touching me.” She grinned holding the towel closer to her body.

“I just want to kiss you.” He motioned with his hand for her to come closer.

“Yeah. Right. You don’t mean on the mouth.”

He grinned. “What a dirty mind my wife has.”

He pushed off the vanity and trapped her against the wall next to the toilet. She had no options of escape. His body heat surrounded her, the feel of him seducing her, and he hadn’t done one damn thing yet. She was the weak one. She wanted him now

possibly more than he wanted her.

“You’re getting wet, sweetheart. I can smell it.” He leaned down, brushing a kiss against her shoulder.

“Kaden.” His name was a plea when she reached up for him and wrapped her arms around his neck. The towel was history, falling to the floor with one simple tug.

He kissed his way to her mouth, keeping his hands firmly against the wall. She held on to him, fisting his shirt with both hands. They hadn’t had much time together during the last week, at least not alone. When he came in from work, he was worn out, and when she came home, she dealt with the baby. But now . . . now they could make up for time lost.

“Kaden, please.” She slid her hands down to his jeans, sliding beneath the waistband and past his boxers.

“I can never take my time with you, can I?” He kissed her lips and slid his hands to his zipper. Once he shoved his jeans and boxers to his ankles, he grabbed a condom from the potpourri dish and handed it to her.

She rolled it on quickly, gaining a moan or two from Kaden as he kept his hands inactive against the wall, watching her. As soon as she pulled back satisfied, she met his eyes.

“You’re getting pretty good at that.”

“Shut up and fuck me.”

He closed his mouth over hers, slid his hands to her backside, and lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and with one smooth thrust, he was sheathed

within her body.

His passive motions soon became active as their bodies slammed against the bathroom wall, sweat breaking out across their skin. Brianna didn't know how this man had such an affect on her, but she loved that he did. She loved everything about him.

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She couldn't hold back her orgasm even if her life had depended on it. It literally came from nowhere and would have had the power to knock her down, had she been standing. Kaden stared into her eyes letting her body milk his, fighting his own urge to come, then giving up.

Sometime later, Kaden pulled away from the wall and sat on the toilet to dispose of the condom. Brianna clung to him, keeping him as close as she could.

"I'm taking my time with you tonight, wild woman, and you're going to let me."

She kissed his shoulder, pressing her face against him. "You're not going to last that long."

"Why?"

"Wait until you see my dress." She sat up, smiling. "That's why I tried my damndest to get home before you and get dressed. Hence, all the clothing thrown everywhere."

"Put it on."

She stood, grabbing her black lace thong and pulled it on. "You need to take a shower."

"I will." He kicked his clothing off, watching as she dressed.

She pulled the black strapless dress out, careful not to rip the gauzy material covering the satin lining. It was the only dress she found that was loose and comfortable,

something she could stand wearing for half the night.

She undid the zipper and stepped into it. Kaden took the hint and came to her to zip the back up. The bust pushed her breasts high, giving her a decent amount of cleavage without making her look like a whore. The A-line design fell to the floor, because of the matching five-inch stiletto heels Blair had picked out. Together the dress looked beautiful, and turning to see what Kaden thought, he agreed.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Not to sleazy?”

“Nothing you could ever wear would make you look sleazy.” He kissed her. “You’re beautiful, baby.”

She smiled. “I need to fix my hair and do my makeup, so you need to get moving.”

“Hey, are we coming home or staying at my parents’ tonight?”

“Home.”

She wasn’t about to have sex with her husband in his parents’ house. It was too weird and awkward, and Blair checked in with her enough as it was. All she needed was her mother-in-law opening the bedroom door right in the middle of things.

She did her makeup while Kaden took his shower, singing a wonderful rendition of Billy Squire’s The Stroke. With a few improvisations, he had her laughing so hard she nearly poked her eye out twice with the mascara wand.

He dressed while she did her hair, then came back into the bathroom, kissed her shoulder and began working on his hair. It was so unusual for them to be in the

bathroom at the same time since he woke before she did, and was dressed and ready for work by the time she got up to make coffee. It was kind of nice getting ready together.

“Hair up or down?” She wadded the curly strands in the form of an up-do, turning toward him, then dropped them so he could see her hair down.

“Up.” He squirted gel in his hands and combed them through his hair making it stick out all over the place. He washed his hands and then began working a different product into his hair.

“Do you know any of the people coming to this party?” Brianna clipped her hair up in several different places creatively forming a decent up-do.

“Yeah. My friends are coming—the guys you met at the restaurant that first night. Derek supposedly has a new girlfriend, so this will be interesting.” He washed his hands again, drying them on the hot pink towel she had laid next to the sink. “Kyle’s coming. Some friends of ours from Charlotte. So yeah, I know the people there. Why?” He turned toward her rolling his sleeves down.

“I’m going to feel out of place, aren’t I?”

“No. You know Kyle. I haven’t heard if Jason and Kendra are coming, but if they do, you’ll know them. Ben and Jonathan are bringing their girlfriends, and then there’s my family. You know tons of people too.”

Brianna huffed, getting frustrated with the bobby pin that wouldn’t quite make her hair lie right. “If you stick me with Kyle all night, I’ll save you the trouble and cut your balls off right now.”

He laughed, only to get a mean glare from her. “I’m sticking you with me all night,

how about that?”

“Yeah, whatever.” She finally pulled the misplaced bobby pin from her mess of curls and huffed, looking at her hair in the mirror.

“And after the party we’ll come home and start a little party of our own.”

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She pulled her hair to the side, hoping to push it in the direction she wanted it to go and slid the bobby pin in. “Fine. How does my damn hair look?”

He frowned, coming in front of her to inspect the damage. He fiddled with the pins, pulling and yanking until he was satisfied with the results. He turned her around and both sides were perfect, just the way she wanted them.

“How’d you do that?”

“Magic. Come on. Get your cute little ass out here so we can go.” He swatted her behind and stepped over the mess of clothes heading into the bedroom.

After taking one last look in the mirror, she followed him, stopping short when she seen he held a black necklace box in his hands. So far, the only necklace she wore was the locket he gave her at Christmas, holding both Shiloh and his picture inside. But the sexy grin on his face said he was up to something.

“I knew you’d never agree if I asked you, so I didn’t and went for it myself.” He motioned for her to sit on the bed, and she did, wondering what he was up to.

“Now, I had the jeweler pick out a sapphire blue necklace thinking your dress would be blue, but . . . I think this necklace is going to go perfect with that dress. Better actually.”

He came to her opening the black velvet box to show her the most beautiful diamond and sapphire necklace she’d ever seen. Cut in marquis form, little diamonds and sapphires alternated around a huge sapphire set as a center stone. It was beautiful, and

worth more than she could care about.

“That costs more than—”

“Don’t, Brianna. It’s a rental, and you’re going to wear it, along with the diamond earrings I purchased.” He pulled out another box and handed it to her.

Taking a deep breath, she opened it and gasped at the teardrop diamonds set as dangle-form earrings. He purchased these? For her? She looked up at him, and he smiled as he undid the necklace from its case.

“You bought these?”

He scoffed, leaning over her to clasp the necklace around her neck. “Why do you think you don’t deserve nice things?”

“I’ve never owned a diamond before, Kaden. You give me this beautiful ring for Christmas. And now these earrings. Not to mention letting me wear this necklace. It’s overwhelming.”

He squatted in front of her, sliding his arms around her thighs. “You’re a beautiful woman, Brianna. You deserve beautiful things. Now put the earrings in and finish getting dressed.”

She smiled sheepishly as she put the earrings in her ears. “It’s not my fault we’re late. You ravished me in the bathroom.”

Dreading the first time of wearing a pair of new stilettos, she grabbed her new shoes. If she could make it for a few hours, she’d be doing great. She slid them on her bare feet while Kaden slipped on his tux jacket.

“I ravished you? Were you not the one that said, ‘Fuck me, Kaden’?” He stuffed his wallet into the pocket as he continued talking. “Clearly that’s your fault because I mean, how could a guy resist?”

He spritzed on his cologne finally and turned around to watch her finish up dressing. “Oh, whatever. If you hadn’t have come in there in the first place, I wouldn’t have said it.”

She stood, a little wobbly at first in her new shoes, putting her up to Kaden’s chin now. She’d never worn heels this tall in her life. A few inches sure, but five? She felt like a hooker going to prom.

“You keep saying it and playing dress up will be such a waste.” He kissed her, sliding his hands to her waist. “Are you ready?”

“Let me spray some perfume, brush my teeth, and change my purse, and yeah, I’ll be ready to go.” She turned doing her best not to break her neck at the new and unusual height.

“If we make it there on time it’ll be a miracle.” Kaden sat on the bed waiting for her to finish.

After spritzing his favorite smelling perfume on, she brushed her teeth and grabbed her purse to exchange the vital stuff. Her wallet, driver’s license, and lip gloss all fit into the small satin bag, and that was about all that could fit. Once done, she stuffed it under her arm, grabbed the matching shawl, and looked over at Kaden’s raised eyebrow.

“Ready?”

He stood. “If three things are all you need, then why do you carry all that other junk

in your purse with you?”

“Well, some things I need at certain times but not all the time. Hence, tampons or gum or lotion. Depending on the mood and circumstance. It’s easier to carry it with you all the time instead of taking the chance of forgetting it when you need it.”

He shook his head as she thrust her purse into his arms so she could fix the shawl around her shoulders. Once satisfied, she took the purse back and took her husband’s arm. He held the car door open for her like a perfect gentleman. Once situated inside, he went around to the driver’s seat and climbed behind the wheel.

“Have I told you that I love you today?” he asked backing out of the garage.

“Yes. When Shiloh was crying this morning and you didn’t want to get out of bed. I told you I’d get her, and you said, ‘Thanks, babe, I love you.’”

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He grinned, grabbing her hand and placing their interlocked fingers on his thigh. “I did enjoy sleeping in that extra twenty minutes.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“What if I say it now? Would that make me look to soft?”

“As long as it’s before the party I suppose your softness will be just between us.”

“I do love you, Bree.”

“Yeah, well you can prove it to me tonight.” She pulled his hand to her strawberry glossed lips, kissing it. “I love you, Kaden Riggins. More than you’ll ever know.”

* * * *

Three hours into the party, Brianna couldn’t avoid Kyle any longer. He spotted her and of course asked Kaden if she was here. Like the good husband he was, he nodded and pointed to her with a huge smile on his face. She tried ducking behind a fake plant, but Kyle started her way, getting to her side before she could find a better hiding spot.

“There you are.” Kyle pulled her to him for a hug, sloshing her fruit cocktail all over her hand.

“Hello, Kyle.” She tried pulling away but his grip tightened around her.

“Kaden told me about your marriage.” He pulled back with a smile. “Congratulations. How’s that cute bundle of joy?”

“You know about Shiloh?”

“Of course.” He waved her off as if she was foolish to ask. “My mother is best friends with Blair. You know that.”

Brianna nodded, tipping her strawberry daiquiri to her lips and swallowing the alcohol. Kyle was her friend. The five musketeers as their parents used to say. Kaden, Jason, Ben, Jonathan, and Kyle—Brianna wasn’t an official member, though she did hang out with them, mainly because Ben and Jonathan used her to get to her friends. But nevertheless they were all friends. Still are.

“So, great party, huh? Kaden said Jason was here with his wife Kendra. I haven’t seen him though.” Kyle looked around seeking Kaden out.

“Well there are close to two hundred people here. He may be lost in the crowd.” Or avoiding you, she added silently.

“Yeah, you’re right. You always were right about things like that.” He tossed back the contents of his own glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “So you have a picture of that cute little doodle bug?”

She grinned. To give him one compliment, Kyle was great with kids. Probably came from being a kid himself, but he loved them, and they loved him.

She pulled the picture of Shiloh at Christmas that Kaden had taken. “She’s her daddy made over.”

“Hey, hot stuff.” Jason came up behind her wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

He pecked her cheek and smiled at her. “Greg told me you and that asswipe I call my friend tied the damn knot. How the hell did that happen?”

Kendra smiled, standing to Jason’s side. She always was a quite girl, if Brianna could remember correctly. “One too many drinks.”

He chuckled, pulling her tighter against him. “Don’t look now, but here comes two other losers we used to call friends.”

Ben and Jonathan came up, each kissing Brianna on the cheek and saying hello to Kendra. Then a vast amount of profanities was exchanged between the men. Poor Kendra looked offended. Ben wrapped his arm around her, pushing Jason back to his wife.

“Now, tell me why the hell you really married that dickhead.” Ben cradled her to his side, protectively, like a brother.

“Because I love him.” She grinned up at him.

“Have you had one too many hurricanes tonight?” Jason grinned, wrapping his arm around his wife.

“Damn. I can’t believe you two got married,” Jonathan commented.

“Leave my poor wife alone.” Kaden cut through the crowd, rescuing Brianna from their friends. Ben stepped back as if Brianna was a live wire, and Kaden wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Dude, I’m still trying to get over the fact you two had sex.” Kyle held the picture up of Shiloh. “She’s a cutie though, isn’t she?”

The men mumbled their agreements each staring at the picture as they passed it around. When it came to Brianna, she stuffed it back in her wallet.

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“How can something that cute,” Ben said, pointing to Brianna’s purse, then to Kaden, “come from that?”

“She gets it from her momma.” Kaden replied and kissed Bree’s temple.

“Well, I will admit, Bree is hot, but that baby looks like you, and she’s cute. No fucking way could you deny her.” Jason tipped his beer back, taking a long drag.

Brianna smiled. “Leave him alone.”

“Or what?” Ben said, grinning ear to ear.

“Or I’ll kick your ass.”

“Brianna,” Blair called from behind them.

“Hide me!” She ducked in front of Kaden who protectively wrapped his arms around her body.

“I think she can still see you,” Kyle said singsong, rocking on his heels. The other guys laughed.

“Brianna, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

Feeling defeated, she stepped back from Kaden, who smiled just like the rest of them. “Some husband you are.”

The grin only widened.

“Hey, Bree, if you had married me, I would have protected you.” Jonathan wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “In fact, we wouldn’t even come to things like this. We’d be at home—“

“Okay, enough of the visual.” Brianna held up a hand. She shoved her glass into Kaden’s hand. “You fill this up, and if I’m not back in thirty minutes, you’d better be heading up a search party.”

“And if I don’t?”

“It’s just you and your hand tonight.”

She walked away with her head held high as all their friends laughed and ooh-ed at her comment. Kaden shook his head, staring after her as she went to where Blair stood with a very official looking man.

“Oh, Brianna. This is Judge Parker.” Blair looped her arm in Brianna’s and smiled at the man. “Judge Parker, this is my daughter-in-law Brianna. She married my eldest, Kaden.”

Brianna stuck out her hand. “It’s a pleasure.”

The judge smiled, though he didn’t take her hand. Feeling like a loser, Brianna dropped it wishing Kaden would come back with her drink at hand.

“Well, thank you for the invite, Mrs. Riggins, but I must get home to my wife. Tell your husband I’ll see him in court Monday.”

The judge left the two women standing there, and Blair looked utterly baffled. “What

an ass.”

Brianna chuckled. “Who is he?”

“The asshole Greg has to go before Monday. He’s the new family court judge in Raleigh.”

“Is he the one handling Kaden’s case?”

“Oh, I forgot about that. Probably. They said he’s taking over a lot of the other judges’ responsibilities. He’s hardcore, they say, but fair. Just what this town needs.” She rolled her eyes and led her to the food table.

After picking up more than enough food for one person to eat, she turned around and found herself in Kaden’s arms.

“Saving your ass, I see.” She took a bite of a cream puff.

“You look like you need this.” He handed her the drink, kissing her forehead. “What were you doing talking to Judge Perkins?”

“Your mom wanted to introduce me. He’s a prick.” She took a drink of the slushy liquid handing it back to her husband. “Is he the one you’re going before?”

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“Yep. The new family court judge. Supposed to be hardcore.”

“Well, he’s an ass. Wouldn’t even shake my hand.” Brianna grabbed the last cream puff and offered it to Kaden. When he refused, she stuffed it in her mouth and licked her fingers.

“The guys want us to join them in the gazebo.” He shrugged. “Jason had to take Kendra home so it’s just the five of us.”

“Yeah, I don’t think she likes us all that well.”

“How someone like her ended up with Jason will forever be a mystery.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on.”

He led her to the gazebo out back and met up with their friends who were talking about the football games they used to play. Brianna shivered as she sat down and scooted closer to share Kaden’s body heat. Being a true gentleman, he took off his jacket and slipped it around her shoulders, holding her plate of food while she stuffed her arms in the sleeves.

“Oh, whatever, Kyle. You didn’t have the balls to catch the ball. Brianna caught more balls than you, and she has boobs.” Ben shook his head leaning back against the wood of the gazebo. “Very nice, by the way.”

“Leave my boobs out of this, Chandler.” She turned to Kyle. “But he is right. You squealed every time the ball hit you.”

“So. Kaden picked me over you.” Kyle tried to defend himself, but it didn’t work.

“Ah, that was before he nailed her.” Ben replied. “I bet you he wouldn’t think twice about picking her, would ya, Riggins?”

“Guys, she’s already busted my balls enough about that. Don’t give her any more ammo.” His arm tightened around her. “But I would pick her first, not only because I’ve nailed her, but she has a damn good arm. And each one of you know I’m telling the truth.”

“Thanks, baby.” She kissed him gaining groans from the others.

“Kaden? Are you over there?”

“Oh fuck.” Ben said just as Bethany rounded the corner.

“There you are. You’re mom wanted me to come get you. Something about working the bar.” She smiled at the men, totally ignoring Brianna.

“Go home, Bethany.” Kaden said, trying to avoid Brianna’s gaze.

“Not likely. Blair invited me, so I came. Just because we aren’t fucking anymore doesn’t mean I can’t be friends with your mother.”

Brianna stared in the pale light at the other woman’s short dress and thick makeup. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail of sorts. She still looked the same, after all these years, and she was still after Kaden. Wow.

Brianna stood. “Um, excuse me.”

Kaden finally worked up enough courage to look at her, and she turned her head

away from him and walked away. She didn't make it very far before an arm came around her shoulders. It wasn't Kaden as she suspected, but Ben.

"Is she still pining after him?"

"Appears that way." Brianna walked to the side garden and took a seat before Blair's luxurious water fountain, which was lit by four lights underneath the water. Ben took a seat next to her, not saying a word.

"You know I would have never even considered marrying him if it weren't for Shiloh. His grandfather Tim died and arranged in his will that he be married or no member of his family gains their inheritance, and Shiloh stood to gain a lot. I didn't do it for the money, but so my daughter would know a great-grandfather's memory. He gave her the ranch in Texas, the one he loved so much." Brianna wiped a tear from her cheek. "So I married him. We agreed to keep it short—only a year. Sometimes I wonder if he really cares. Sometimes I think, you know, he only sees me as a mistake. That he doesn't care for me and is only with me for one of the million reasons possible. He told me he loved me for the first time ever just a few days ago. He says it often, but I don't know. When he looked at Bethany, I could see the memories flood his face."

Ben pulled her to him in a tight hug. "If I know one thing about my best friend is that Kaden doesn't say he loves anyone if he doesn't mean it. He might show it, but he'll never say it unless it's a true emotion he's feeling. He never even told Bethany he loved her that I know, and if he did, it's in the past, Bree. Yeah, you may have agreed to the year thing, but I can tell you make him happy. Hell, you make us all happy. Even when we were kids, he treated you like his wife, actually proclaiming to ask you before he made a decision about anything. And that shit was minor. He's smart, and he knows a good thing when he sees it. You're a good thing, Bree. A damn good thing he'd be fucking stupid to let go."

She sniffled, trying to keep from crying. “I’m going to tell him you said he was smart.”

“Don’t make me kick your sweet ass.” As if to make his point, he swatted her behind.

“Bree?” Kaden called, walking toward them. “Brianna, where are you?”

She pulled back, wiping her eyes. Ben gave her an encouraging smile before tipping his beer to his lips.

“Brianna!”

“I’m over here.” She licked her lips wishing she had her lip gloss.

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Kaden rounded the corner stopping short when he saw Ben sitting next to her. “What’s going on?”

“I’m leaving.” Ben stood, patting Brianna’s shoulder before he took off back to the house.

Once he was out of earshot, Kaden turned on her. “What the hell were you doing back here with him?”

“Oh, would you keep your voice down? I wanted some fresh air, and Ben didn’t want me to be alone. He’s like a damn leech.” She shoved her hands in his coat pockets trying to keep warm. How he stood here without a jacket, was beyond her. She froze just staring at him.

“Brianna, I didn’t know she was here. I talked to Mom, and she said she came with a lawyer friend they invited. She didn’t invite her.” Kaden sat beside her, propping his elbows on his knees.

“How much longer until we can go home?”

“Two hours.” Kaden’s watch shined in the moonlight. “We can leave now if you want. Truthfully, I really don’t want to stay any longer.”

“Will you answer something for me? Honestly?” Brianna folded her hands in her lap, waiting for him to answer.

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

She paused, took a deep breath then paused again, looking for courage to get the words past her lips. She wanted to know, and felt she deserved to know. “Did you love Bethany?”

He blew out a harsh breath. “I cared for Bethany. We spent four years together, all throughout law school she was my girl. But I don’t really think I was in love with her. We had a connection from the start, and her parents liked my parents so there was the family thing. Her father was a judge, and my father was his best friend. Still is in fact, but I felt then and see more clearly now that that relationship was more forced than anything. Her family wanted her to have a husband and were convinced her that I’d be the best match.

“I never fell in love with her though. She did her own thing, I did mine. Sometimes we’d meet up together, often not. And this lasted nearly half the length of our relationship. She wasn’t ready to get married, and quite frankly, neither was I. So that’s when I came home and found her in my bed with another guy. She didn’t even have the decency to stop when I asked her what the hell was going on. She completed her orgasm and then climbed off him to argue with me. I should have expected it, but I guess I was caught up in all the fairy-tale crap I’d seen in my family. Kristy getting married and having kids. Kevin finding a wife in Julia. I just wasn’t ready for it. I wanted to be, but I wasn’t.”

Brianna slid her hand along his thigh to his hand. “So you came to my place got drunk and got me pregnant.”

“That wasn’t intentional.” He turned her hand over and rubbed her knuckles with his fingers. “I wanted someone I knew would love me for me. Bethany used me. She wanted money, fame, and glory. I came to your house because I knew you’d understand and wouldn’t say, ‘I told you so,’ even though you were thinking it. But you broke up with Brett the same night, and both our good intentions got sidetracked.”

Brianna laid her head on his shoulder. "I didn't break up with Brett. He broke up with me because I wouldn't sleep with him."

"Why did you save yourself for so long?"

Brianna never thought about it. "I guess I just wasn't ready. Or maybe I didn't feel a sexual attraction towards Brett. I mean, he liked to gag me every time we kissed for sticking his tongue down my throat. It was awful. Maybe subconsciously, I knew that sex with him would be awful as well."

Kaden's fingers made lazy circles around each of her knuckles going to the end only to start back again. He leaned his head against hers as they sat together in silence under the pale moonlight.

"I'm glad it was with you, Kaden," Brianna finally said, nothing more than a whisper.

"I love you, Bree. I know you felt used when I got you pregnant and left you for the dogs, but that wasn't how it was for me. I never doubted the baby was mine. I doubted myself more than anything."

Brianna knew this. She didn't see it then, but being around Kaden, and getting to know him better she saw it. From what he told her about Bethany, she knew it.

"Did you ever tell Bethany you loved her?"

"Nope. You're the first and only." He pulled back and kissed her forehead. "I'm really glad you're my wife, Bree. I never thought an arranged marriage would suit me, but damn it if my grandfather didn't know what he was talking about."

She smiled. "I wish Shiloh could've met him."

“Me too. Did I ever tell you he had a picture of her? My dad gave me a box of his stuff from the office, and he had a picture of her—one like the hospital took in his belongings. I never knew that until I saw it.”

Brianna saw the confusion in his face. “He came to visit me. In the hospital. Tim stopped by to see the baby, and I gave him the picture. He was proud, you know, of you and the baby. He never held her, or got to see her other than through the nursery window, but I could see the love. Shiloh was definitely loved by more people than I can count before she even made her grand entrance in to this world.”

He cupped the back of her head and pulled her to his mouth. She tasted the salt of his tears, though they fell silently as he thought about his beloved grandfather and his daughter. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him tighter to her. The kiss went from sweet and desperate to hot and steamy within a second.

“I love you,” Brianna said, kissing his lips. “I’m proud of you too, because you’re truly an amazing person.”

“Can we go home now?”

Brianna smiled holding his arm up in the light. “Not too much longer until midnight, then we can go home.”

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He pulled her to him, pressing his face into her cleavage. “And when we go home, I get you all to myself, right?”

She smiled down at him. “All to yourself.”

He let her go. “Damn, I don’t think I’ve ever wished to leave alcohol and friends as much as I have tonight.”

He stood, slipping his hand underneath his own jacket pulling her body close to his as they started walking back to the house. Kaden was perfect, in every sense of the word, for her. If she took Ben’s words to heart, she’d be fucking stupid to let him go.

“Before we go back in there, what did you and Ben talk about?”

She smiled. “He gave me a pep talk, and actually complimented you on how smart you were for picking me and that you’d be quote ‘fucking stupid, to let me go.’”

He kissed her hair, breathing her scent in. “He’s right. That’s why I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Chapter Ten

After weeks of searching for an answer, Kaden had to face the court again, and he hated being unprepared. His case was basically no different than the last time he came before a judge, and if what Brianna said about this one was true, he really dreaded it.

She had called him earlier to wish him good luck, and boy, did he need it. He'd worked his ass off trying to figure out this case, spending nights away from his family and with an uninvited house guest. Once he had time, she'd be out on her ass faster than he could say: Go. But he came in tired, locked himself away in his room, and studied until he passed out on his bed.

For the most part, she never bothered him. She was too busy partying and came in at all hours of the night. She tried to get in his bed a couple of times, but he didn't allow it so she gave up. She had plenty of other men she could play around with. She didn't need him.

He stood on the steps of the court house, waiting for his client. If he didn't get her, her grandchild, she'd be shipped back to Cuba and the child will be tossed about ignored and discarded like an old dish rag. He'd seen too many of the cases his father handled and knew it to be true. He hated family law, which is why he had gone into criminal law instead.

"Mister! Mister!" the young child shouted from a distance away from him, securely placed at a social workers side. "She's gone! You have to help my grandmother! The bad people took her back to Cuba!"

Kaden looked at his watch and pulled out his cell phone to call Tiffani at the office. He spoke after she answered. "I need you to pull up immigration files on my client."

He waited while she typed in a series of things then said, "Immigration shipped her back. Her visa expired yesterday."

"Fuck!" he shut the cell phone and climbed the steps to the courthouse. This little girl didn't have a chance if he didn't do something now.

Once inside the courtroom the Honorable Judge Ryan Parker stood before him, catching his eye and making him cringe. Yeah, he could tell his wife hit the money on the head when she insisted he was a prick. He didn't say two words but he could tell.

Case after case went by, until finally they called Kaden's case. He stepped forward along with the social worker handling the little girl's case and waited for the judge to enter back into the courtroom.

"This is adoption case 34560." He looked over at Kaden and the empty space next to him. "Counselor, where is your client?"

"Her visa wasn't supposed to expire until two weeks after this hearing, but Immigration forced her back to Cuba this morning." Kaden knew it was a weak argument, because if he didn't have the grandmother, he didn't have the case.

"And how can this little girl be adopted if there is no one here to adopt her?" The judge looked at the files, then took off his glasses, and threw them to the side. "You're wasting everyone's time, counselor. Especially mine."

"I'd like to file a motion to bring her back and reschedule the hearing for the adoption. The grandmother wants the little girl. I think it's only fair that family should come before the state."

He looked down at the files reading the child's information. "It says here mother is dead and father is in jail. Grandmother is illegal. If she were to gain custody, I suppose she wanted the right to stay in America too, huh? Counselor, let me get one thing straight. When you come in my courtroom, you have all your ducks in a row. You have your client by your side, and all the paperwork filled out. You don't sit there acting like a rookie to this and expect me to give you leniency. Motion for grandmother, denied. As for case 34560, dismissed." He banged the gavel, and the room fell silent.

"No!" The little girl shouted at the judge. "No! I don't want to go back there! I want to be with my grandmother! Please, mister! Please! Tell him to do something!"

Judge Parker looked at Kaden expecting him to quiet the girl down. Kaden just stared at the little girl as she rattled on through her tears of how she wanted to be with her grandmother.

"Get the whiny kid out of my court room," Judge Parker said, standing to move to his chambers.

Before either Kaden or the social worker could stop her, she took off toward the judge. "I hate you, you evil man! You just like them! You hate us and you're just like them!"

She pounded her little fists into his legs. Two bailiffs came over and dragged the child away crying, kicking and screaming at Judge Parker. Everyone stood silently watching the child, and Kaden turned to see a bit of sympathy cross his face. He met Kaden's eyes, turned quickly, and left the room.

So much for winning this case.

* * * *

Stopping by the apartment to clean up his mess, he ran into Bethany who seemed to be packing her belongings. It was unusual to see her at this time of the day, nevertheless he really didn't care.

"I laid your key on the counter. My dad said I could stay in the lake house in the mountains so I'll be leaving." She shuffled her bags next to the doorway. "You look like you lost your best friend. What's wrong?"

Kaden stuffed the key into his pocket. "I lost my case today."

She frowned. "You never lose a case."

"Yeah, well, I did this one." He grabbed a bottle of Irish whiskey and poured a generous amount of it in a glass. "So I'm going to get drunk and pack all my shit up and go home to my wife and kid."

"You really love her, don't you?" Bethany stepped in front of him taking a drink from the glass.

He stared, biting his lip as their eyes met. "Yes, I do."

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“Wow. I’d never thought I’d see the day when you’d admit something as big as that.” She took another drink from his glass and slid it back to him. “You didn’t even admit that much to me.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t love you the way I love her.” He tossed back the remnants of the liquor, already feeling the effects. He didn’t get lunch because court, and with it being two in the afternoon, he really needed something to eat before he passed out drunk.

“I hear the baby’s really cute. Your mom was talking about her to some old guy and said she looked like you.”

“Bethany, I thought you were leaving?” He grabbed some saltine crackers from the cabinet and ate a few.

“I am. The limo’s not suppose to be here until three.” She smiled. “So that gives us an hour to get drunk and drown all our sorrows out with alcohol.”

“You have sorrows?”

“Sure. I don’t admit it to everyone, but they’re there.” She huffed a breath. “Cheating on you is one of them.”

Kaden nearly fell out in the floor. Either the whiskey was doing its job, and he was imagining things, or Bethany was admitting she was wrong. Either way, he really needed to sit down. He poured himself another glass, figuring that would be his limit.

“Yeah, well, no harm, no foul.” He carried the drink to his room, along with the crackers, and tried sorting through the mess over the last month or so he created. Law books were everywhere, as well as towels and clothing. The place definitely looked lived in that was for sure.

Bethany followed him inside his bedroom. “Since I’m packed, I can help you if you want.”

“Whatever. Stack the books up by the bedroom door. I’ll get the laundry.” Somehow keeping his head on work and drinking even more alcohol, he thought he and Bethany made a pretty good team.

Somehow.

* * * *

Brianna took her lunch break around three, since the lunch crowd died down and finally gave her a break to gather her thoughts and breathe for a second. Kaden’s case was at twelve, and she couldn’t stop worry about it, about him. She called his cell and left a very corny message, hoping he’d call her when he got out, but how long did these things normally take?

She sat outside at one of the picnic tables, eating the chicken fingers she had Mac, the cook, fix for her. She had skipped breakfast again, though it wasn’t unusual, and the chicken tasted so good.

“Hey.” Lindsay came up beside her with her own plate of food and took the seat in front of her. “Whatcha doing out here alone?”

“Waiting for my husband to call.” She sipped her iced tea and stared at her friend.

As if on cue, her phone rang, and she excused herself to answer it.

“Brianna? This is Greg, sorry to call you. I know you must be working.”

Greg? What was he calling for? “It’s no trouble. I was actually waiting for your son to call. Is everything all right?”

“Well, he lost his case today and never made it back to the office. Tiffani said he was really mad when she talked to him, and I’m worried about him. Do you know where he may have gone, or could be doing? We’ve tried his cell, but he’s not answering.”

Brianna’s heart sank as she stood to clear the mess she made. “Yeah. I know where he could be. Don’t worry. I’ll find him.”

Greg breathed a relieved sigh. “Thanks, doll. I figured if anyone knew him, it’d be you. He’s my own son, and I’ve tried all the places I thought he’d be. Maybe you know of some that I don’t.”

After ending their conversation with a quick goodbye, Brianna explained to Lindsay she needed to take off for the rest of the day. Lindsay said she’d take care of it and promised to cover her tables. She needed the extra cash anyway.

Brianna ran to the new Volvo Kaden had picked out for her and headed from the restaurant to the expressway. She knew exactly where he was, and that would be at the apartment. He’d put it up for sale after they got reacquainted but had taken it off the market when his father gave him this case. Nobody but she knew he still had the place.

Making decent time, she stuck to the speed limit. All she needed was a ticket on her way to the city. She tried to keep calm, knowing he was fine. He had to be fine. If he hadn’t gone back to the office, he had to have a good reason. After all, he had been

staying at the apartment an awful lot. He probably just went to clean up the mess she knew he made.

She pulled in the drive some time later, seeing in fact his car was there. A pent-up breath escaped her lips as she killed the engine and made her way to the front door. Using her key, she pushed the door open.

Pink luggage was the first thing she noticed, and it wasn't hers. Kaden hadn't bothered mentioning having a houseguest either. She pushed the door open farther, and the smell of alcohol so strong she felt she was behind the bar at the restaurant. He'd definitely been drinking.

Instead of calling his name, she wound her way around the mess of books and laundry, going toward his bedroom, stopping short when she spotted him in bed, asleep. His suit lay neatly on a nearby chair, and he was passed out across the bed in his boxers. Well, at least that numbed the fear of him having a houseguest she didn't know about.

And then Bethany rounded the corner wearing only a pine-green towel and began digging through one of her hot pink bags looking for something.

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“What the hell is going on?”

Bethany jumped as if she'd been shot at. “Brianna, um, hey. What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I needed a place to stay since my boyfriend kicked me out, and Kaden was kind enough to lend me his spare bed.” She looked over at Kaden, then down at herself. “Oh, shit. This isn't what it looks like.”

Brianna narrowed her eyes. “It never is.”

She walked over to the bed to wake Kaden, who mumbled something rolling over to his back. He opened his eyes to Bethany in a towel then moved them to Brianna's.

Fed up with him and her, Brianna screamed, “What the hell is going on?”

“Jeez, dammit. Stop yelling.” He covered his ears, stuffing his face underneath a pillow.

Brianna huffed. “Fine. You want him. You can have him. I'm done.”

She turned on her heel and left the room with what little dignity she had left. She didn't give a rat's ass if he drowned in his liquor. She was through caring about him when obviously he didn't care about her.

* * * *

Around nine o'clock, she finally got Shiloh settled for bed. She didn't know if it was because Kaden wasn't around or what, but Shiloh was restless and whiny. Brianna knew the feeling. She flipped off all the lights making her way to the kitchen to clean up the dinner dishes.

She hadn't been scrubbing on the pots too long before Kaden walked in. He looked like a mess with his clothes disorderly and his hair sticking out everywhere. She still smelled the whiskey on him so that meant he didn't bathe.

"You're making me nauseous," she said and meant it.

"Bethany told me what happened. Nothing happened, I swear."

Brianna huffed flicking the water on to rinse the pot. "Yeah, well, I'm tired of you swearing nothing happened. You didn't feel the need to tell me you were having a houseguest all those nights when you stayed at the apartment 'working.' What the hell am I suppose to think?"

He thumped his forehead against the counter. "You're supposed to trust me."

"You do not get to turn this around on me, Kaden." She threw the pot across the room. It clanged loudly on the tiled floor as it rolled away. "Your father called me at work worried about you. You didn't have the decency to tell your family where you'd be or who the hell you'd be with. I was scared to death something had happened to you. He told me you lost your case, and I knew how much it meant to you."

She shook her head. "But you obviously didn't give a shit about your family. You know I was supportive while you worked on this looking hard to find something to help that family out. I've been nothing but supportive of you throughout our whole

relationship, and what have I got for it? A drunk husband banging his ex. Wow!”

He now sat up, his eyes still glazed over. “I wasn’t banging Bethany. I came home, locked myself in my room, and went to sleep or studied my ass off. I haven’t had sex since New Year’s and that was with you. As far as what happened today, I started drinking, she joined me, and we cleaned up the place together. I didn’t have anything to eat all day, and the alcohol went straight to my head. I passed out before I even finished the second glass, and Bethany helped me to bed. I didn’t sleep with her, and the only reason she was in a towel was because she too got drunk and threw up all over herself.”

“Yeah, well, call your father and tell him you’re okay. Then go take a shower, and sleep it off.” She went back to washing the dishes, wondering if what he said was the way it happened. The last time he got drunk like that was with her, and they made a baby. How could she trust him around Bethany? After all, he hadn’t been forced to marry her. He had chosen her of his own free will. That had to account for something.

“Brianna, you’ve got to believe me.”

“I don’t have to do anything. This relationship is clearly not working, and I think it’d be best to end things now. Save us a year’s worth of ups and downs.” She slung water onto the dish drainer. “Tell your father that while you’re at it.”

He stood, pushing himself up using the counter. “Fine. I love you, Brianna. Nothing will ever change that.”

She had held it together at the apartment. She had held it together on the drive home. She had held it together in front of Shiloh, and she had held it together while confronting him. Now with him saying those three words, she couldn’t do it anymore. She picked up the pots from the soapy water and flung them across the room at him.

“You don’t know what love is!” she screamed at him, sobs overcoming her. She slid to the floor, her body shaking as the tears started flowing down her cheeks.

He didn’t know and didn’t care. Instead of replying, he simply turned and left the room, with his wife crying as she leaned against the kitchen cabinets. He didn’t even try to move when she threw stuff at him. He simply stared, tears rolling down his cheeks, each one ripping at her heart as it fell. She hated hurting people, but most of all she hated hurting inside.

* * * *

Kaden showered and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He still felt like shit, though supposed without Brianna in his life, he always would. He screwed up big time, though he didn’t really know what he did. Keeping Bethany’s presence in his life had definitely been a wrong. The look on Brianna’s face New Year’s Eve should have told him that much, but he couldn’t bear to tell her the truth. Maybe he didn’t feel guilty, though they really didn’t do anything.

He called his dad and told him what an ass he’d been. And Greg’s only advice was to do whatever it took to fix it. Right now, Brianna wanted him gone, and the only thing he could do was grant her, her wish.

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He walked back into the kitchen and saw her still sitting on the floor in the same position he'd left her. She tried hiding her tears from him and stood to clean up the mess she'd made. Her butt was wet from the puddle she sat in, and there was a spot on her thigh as well. She wore a yellow terry cloth jogging suit so the spots didn't show that much, not that she seemed to care.

He came up beside her, wanting to touch her, to pull her into his arms and make her forget. But he knew she wouldn't like that. He grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured himself some coffee she'd made for him.

"Your daughter hasn't seen you in a week, so kiss her goodnight and go to bed," Brianna said keeping her back to him.

Against his good judgment, he walked up to her and pulled her into his arms. She struggled, just as he knew she would but finally calmed, standing stiff as a statue in his arms.

"I love you, Brianna. I'm still half drunk and a stupid bastard, but I know as sure as my name that you're the one I love. I'm sorry if I made your life a living hell over the past few months, but I'm willing to change it if you'll let me. I don't want to move out away from you because you're what makes my life worth living. I wake up to your pretty face and think about you all day only to come home to your sweet body and dream about you all night long. Your smile is what gets me most, sweetheart. It makes me feel like the luckiest guy on the face of the earth. I do know what love is Brianna. Love is you."

He turned her around seeing how she closed her eyes as the tears fell down her

cheeks. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her so close to him he didn't know where he ended and she began. After a little while she returned the embrace and they clung together in the middle of the kitchen for what seemed like hours.

When he finally pulled away, he brushed a kiss across her lips and wiped her tears away. Even with red eyes, blotchy skin, and a snotty nose, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He loved her and always had. Even talking to his friends about the past they knew it, before he even had to tell them. They saw him look at her in a way he looked at no other woman. When she was around, his eyes were only on her.

"Go kiss Shiloh while I clean up this mess." She wrapped her hands around his wrists as they framed her face. "Then make your bed in the spare bedroom."

His heart broke all over again as she pushed his hands away from her and started working on the dishes again. "After all I just said you're still pissed at me?"

"A few words aren't going to change the circumstances, Kaden. If you thought that, then you're a dumbass." She washed the plates and stacked them on the dish drainer.

"What the hell did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, Kaden. You keep proclaiming your innocence. You didn't do one fucking thing." She threw the flatware at the dish drainer not really caring where they went.

"You know what, Bree. I think you're the one acting like a dumbass right now. I may be a criminal lawyer, but I've had my fair share of divorce cases. If I were cheating on you, I sure as hell wouldn't do it in the one place you know about."

She turned around and narrowed her eyes. "Why go someplace else when she was conveniently waiting for you when you got back? Probably waited for you naked in

bed and everything. What'd she do, give you a shoulder to cry on?"

"This is unbelievable. You don't trust me one fucking bit."

"What reason have you given me to? You hid your ex-fiancée in your spare apartment and got drunk with her only to pass out half naked across your bed with her standing wrapped in a towel in your room. Not to mention I was scared shitless about you, and you didn't even have the decency to call me. No, you went straight to her and expect me to believe nothing happened. Only a damn fool would believe nothing happened."

She turned around wiping her hands on the dishtowel. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed. I'm tired of arguing with you about this."

"I didn't choose her over you, Brianna."

"Whatever." She flipped off the kitchen light and headed down the hall to their bedroom.

Frustrated, Kaden went the opposite way to their daughter's room, seeing her standing in her crib, sucking her thumb. "Da-dy."

"Yeah, sweetheart. I'm here." He walked to the crib and picked up the baby, cradling her to him. "I've missed you so much."

She laid her head against him, seeming content to in her father's arms. He sat down in the rocker and glided back and forth as he watched her fall back to sleep. Brianna had told him she picked up two new words, though she still didn't say momma. She stuck with daddy, which he supposed drove Brianna insane.

He leaned back in the rocker, trying to figure out what to do next. She was right about

the whole trust thing. He never gave her a reason to trust him, yet he automatically assumed she did. Whoever thought being married made life easier was a damn fool. He was a damn fool.

After rocking Shiloh back to sleep, he placed her in her crib again and covered her with a blanket.

“She’s missed you, you know.” Brianna leaned against the doorway in her lavender nightie. “She kept staring at the door waiting for you to come home.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve missed her too.” He rubbed her back, leaning over the crib to watch her sleep.

“Kaden, I don’t know what to do.” Leaning against the doorframe, she crossed her arms over her chest. “How do we fix this?”

He kissed Shiloh one more time and turned around to face her. Pushing her out of the room and down the hall away from Shiloh, he directed her toward their bedroom.

“You’ve got to trust me, Brianna.” Once inside their room, he closed the door, ushered her to the bed, and began stripping. “I’m going to be around people you don’t like, women you hate, and you can’t blow up at me about every single case. Yes, I should have told you she was staying at the apartment, and I should have called. But what’s done is done. I didn’t call, and I’m sorry I made you worry about me.” Clad in his boxers, he kneeled in front of her. “I swear to you nothing happened. I know how it looks, and I know how you feel because I felt it too. I’ve been the one cheated on, and I would never put you through that.”

“I’m tired. I just want to go to bed.”

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“Brianna.” He pulled her hands to his lips.

“Just get some sleep. We’ll talk about it more in the morning.”

She crawled toward her pillows, sliding her legs underneath the covers. She tucked the edges around her waist and then stared at him. He figured that was his cue to go, so he turned.

“Kaden, get in the bed.” She folded down his side and patted the empty space next to her.

“I thought you wanted me in the spare?” He crawled over her to his side of the bed.

“I was angry. I want you here, where you belong.” She kissed his cheek. “Tell me about court in the morning, okay.”

Okay, he thought as she rolled to turn out the light. Somehow they ended up in the middle of the bed, with his arm over her hip and hers over his. She rested her head against his chest as he tucked her into his body. Somehow, he’d find a way to make it better.

Chapter Eleven

Brianna knew the moment Kaden walked in the kitchen those same old feelings would flood her good judgment and senses. He wore only his boxers, which wasn't such a surprise. His hair was a mess and sleep filled his eyes. Sexy didn't even begin to describe him.

She poured a glass of water and handed him two tablets. He gratefully accepted both, downed the pills, and drank the water before laying his head against the cool counter.

"Where's Shiloh?" he mumbled.

"Still sleeping. How's your hangover?"

"Not good." Gripping his glass with both hands, he raised his head.

"I've been thinking. Are you well enough to hear my thoughts?"

She smiled at him, and he nodded. "If we want to keep this marriage, we're both going to have to work our asses off to fix the already screwed-up parts. Starting with how we got married. I don't want an arrangement. I want a wedding complete with all our family, guaranteed to be a day of fun and celebration."

"Fine with me." He stood, walked around the bar. He grabbed three ice cubes to add to his water, and put the glass to his forehead.

"That's not all. I want you to give up the alcohol." She waited for his reaction, for his

protests, and got neither. He closed his eyes, and she figured him to be asleep, but he finally opened them, and she continued. “I also want to quit my job to be with Shiloh. They have this new program at the Y, a mommy-and-me program around ten, and it last four hours, three days a week. They offer you lunch and a fun-filled day with your kid. I miss being with her and doing simple stuff like that. I figure once she’s in school, I’ll go back to working somewhere, but I want to be at home with her for the first four years.”

He sat the glass down and pushed his palms into his eyes. “I told you that you could do that before we got married.”

Brianna leaned against the counter, chilled in her skimpy nightie. “Yes, I know but I want to do it now. It’s not that I didn’t want to then, it’s more that I couldn’t do it. I want us to make a commitment to each other in front of everybody that we’ll be faithful and devoted to each other. That we love each other more than anything in the world. I do love you, Kaden. I believe you love me too, but I’m scared that once that year is up, you’ll just take off like you did when I was pregnant and leave me high and dry.”

“Bree,” he reached for her hands.

“No, I know better now. I talked to some people and thought through it on my own. I want to make it work with you. I don’t want to fight, or to bicker, or to get jealous every time I see you with another woman.” She huffed a breath. “Bethany called. She told me virtually the same story you told me with an added twist. She’s moving to her parents’ cabin and told me that I should take care of you. She said you told her that you loved me. That, in the four years of your relationship with her, she never once saw the fire that lit up your eyes when you talked about her the way it did when you talked about me.”

He pulled her around the bar and situated her between his legs. He kissed her cheek

before she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him.

“I believe you and trust you, Kaden.” She pulled back to kiss him. “Just please do not house any women in your apartment without telling me first.”

He smiled. “Agreed. I have a request of my own though.”

“What?”

“One night a week is spent just for us.” He kissed her chest, tightening his hold on her. “Just for us to do stuff together, whatever it may be. No kids, no parents, no friends—just us alone doing whatever the hell we want.”

“That sounds great.” She kissed the top of his head giggling when nuzzled her cleavage.

“You smell good.” His tongue darted into the valley between her breasts. “And taste even better.”

“Behave.” He didn’t listen, but instead continued doing what he was doing.

“Your nipples are hard.” His hot breath fanned across her lace-covered breasts.

“Kaden, stop. I want to talk to you.”

“Talk fast.” His tongue dipped beneath the lace to lick the sensitive tip of her breast.

“Kaden.” She groaned, making him huff a breath and raise his eyes to hers.

“What happened in court?”

She knew virtually nothing about the case and only knew what he'd told her several nights ago when he first accepted it. With the new asshole for a judge, she didn't expect the case to go over well, but knew her husband would work his ass off to try and win it.

He licked his lips, linking his fingers at the small of her back. "They shipped the grandmother back to Cuba even though her visa hadn't expired. I put in a motion to bring the grandmother back, but it was denied. The case was dismissed."

She ran her fingers through his wild hair. "It wasn't your fault. Maybe the grandmother can get another visa or something and come back to try to get the little girl again."

“Yeah.”

“Kaden, there was nothing you could do about it. The grandmother was illegal, the granddaughter was a citizen. Baby, I don’t know much about law but the government pretty much made their mind up about that.”

He rested his chin on her cleavage. “The little girl attacked Judge Parker.”

“Oh, no. He didn’t hold her in contempt, did he?”

Shaking his head, Kaden chuckled. “You were right about him. He told the social workers to get the whiny child out of his courtroom. Then she ran past everyone and started pounding her fists into his legs saying, ‘I hate you, you’re just like them.’”

Brianna knew he was having trouble dealing with the loss of the case. As far as she knew, Kaden had never lost a case before, and dammit if this had to be his first one. He was truly a great guy, both inside the courtroom and at home with his family. One of the many reasons she loved him.

Shiloh’s wails broke the silence as Brianna and Kaden’s eyes connected. She rolled her eyes and stepped the side. “She’ll want to see her ‘da-dy,’ not me.”

He grinned. “She loves her mommy too.”

He stood, pecking the top of her head before heading for the hall to get his daughter. Shortly after he left, he returned with their sweet little girl tucked into his side. She wrapped her arm around his neck, sucking on her thumb as she watched Brianna

closely.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Brianna said rubbing her back. “Are you hungry?”

“Ball,” Shiloh replied gaining a chuckle from Kaden.

“You’re just like your daddy, you know? Play, play, play, play, play.” Brianna chuckled, kissed her daughter’s cheek, and went to get breakfast started.

“Da-dy. Ball.” Shiloh repeated before turning her body in his arms.

“You know, why don’t you and Mommy play with the ball, and let Daddy fix breakfast?” Kaden glanced over at Brianna who stopped and stared at him. “Mommy has one hell of an arm.”

“Hell,” Shiloh repeated making Brianna’s eyes widen.

“No. No. That’s a bad word.” Kaden grinned even as he tried correcting his daughter. “Mommy will spank both you and me if you say that one.”

He handed her over to Brianna, kissing his wife as he did. “You are such a sucker.”

“What?” he asked as he went to the fridge, pulling eggs, bacon, and sausage out, then went to the necessary cabinets to gain the kitchen utensils to cook them.

She situated Shiloh before her grabbing the ball and rolling it to her, while keeping in Kaden’s sight. “Our child has you wrapped around her small little fingers.

He grinned, as he turned on the stove and began to cook. “So does her mommy.”

* * * *

Later that day, Judge Parker called, announcing his acceptance of the motion for getting the grandmother back in the country. The trial was set for later in the summer after everything from their wedding died down.

“Hey,” Kaden said, coming up behind Brianna while she poured laundry detergent in the washing machine. Shiloh was down for her afternoon nap, and Kaden would have loved nothing more than to spend this free time with his wife.

“Hey.” She mixed the powder in the laundry and stirred it around until suds filled the washer, then grabbed the load of towels she was doing and stuffed them inside.

He watched the precision and determination she had as she stuffed them in there being careful not to over fill the capacity of the washer. The longer he stood there the hotter he got. Brianna was a sexy woman dressed in jeans that had seen better days, sporting holes in the knees and his shirt that was black and silver with the Chinese symbol on the front—he knew his libido would shoot through the roof.

“You’re hot, you know that?” he stayed in the doorway one hand propped up on the doorframe. “You’re making me hot just watching you.”

“You say I make you hot by just breathing.” She giggled a soft feminine sound that shot straight to his groin. “Get control of your libido, stud.”

“Why?” He watched as she pushed the top down and turned. She leaned back against the washer, then hoisted herself upon it.

“Because it’s all you think about.” She smiled swinging her legs off the side.

Kaden stepped closer to her, taking long strides until he stood between her legs. She spread them wider to accommodate him. He slid his hands up her thighs until they rested on each side of her butt.

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“You’re all I think about.” He leaned forward, kissing her deeply, as if they’d never kissed before.

Her lips were soft and coated in her favorite gloss, a strawberry flavor that went straight to his brain worse than a glass of whiskey on an empty stomach. Opening her mouth wider, she moaned and sucked his tongue deeper. He couldn’t take it anymore. He wanted her, and he wanted her now.

He slid his hands to her rear and scooted her off the washer. She gasped, laughing as she locked her arms and legs around him, smiling around his kiss. He started walking to their bedroom, squeezing her rear. If he had his way, they’d never come out of this damn room for as long as they lived.

He kicked the door open, going straight to the bed and laying her against it, his body hovering over hers. This was how it was suppose to be until the end of time. Yeah, quick wild rampages were nice if the mood struck, but Brianna deserved more. She deserved to be shown how much he loved her. Sex between them wasn’t sex. It was love, and he’d prove it to her right now.

He pulled back, looking down into her lustful and content gaze. She was perfect in every way. He smiled just to see her smile back, and she did. Her smiles warmed his heart like the sunshine on a hot summer day. He loved seeing her happy, making her happy.

“You look scared,” she commented.

“Nah. Just contemplating my next move.” He kicked off his shoes, then pulled off

hers.

“Since when have you had to contemplate what to do during sex?” She lay perfectly still watching his every move.

He reached for her socks, pulling them off her feet, then answered. “It’s not that kind of contemplation.”

After he’d taken care of that, he crawled over her, stopping when he was perfectly able to press his lips against her neck. She smiled, giving him access and sliding her hands across his back.

“What kind of contemplation is it?” She slid her hands to into his waistband and tried to cup him behind.

He trailed kisses along her neck until his face was right in hers, his lips an inch above hers. “What makes you happy?”

“I’m pretty sure anything you do will make me happy.” She slid her hands up his back grabbing his tee. With the swift move of a woman on a mission, she flipped their positions and was now poised above him. “Sit up.”

He pushed up, liking her new sudden chance at taking control. She’d never shown any interest before, and he just figured she didn’t want the hassle. Now she was straddling his thighs and giving him orders.

She tugged the shirt over his head, throwing it behind her, carelessly to the floor. His blood already boiled from wanting her, but taking their time was fun. The slow seduction, the soft caresses. Her hands all over him. He laid back, gripping her denim clad thighs. For now, she could do whatever she wanted.

“You want to know a secret?” Her thumbs stroked his nipples while she leaned over him, lightly biting at his lower lip.

He could barely think, yet he wanted to know more. He nodded his head thinking it'd be something light or unimportant. Something that could have waited until his brain was working completely again, and his skin cooled drastically.

“I want you to come in my mouth.” She covered his mouth with her own, thrusting her sweet little tongue inside and sucking his in a mimicking motion of her words.

“Whoa, babe.” Kaden pulled away, gasping for breath. At some point, his hands slid to her backside, and he pushed her groin against his and let out a sound of pleasure. “That’s great and all, but I definitely want more than a blowjob.”

She grinned. “Who said that’ll be it?”

Her mouth mimicked his earlier motions, kissing his neck, sliding across his hot skin, nipping lightly with her teeth. She soothed the slight pain with the soft, silky caress of her wet tongue and a groan escaped from his lips.

She worked her way downward, knowing exactly how to touch and kiss and caress without him even telling her. Expertly her body slid down his, and he missed touching her. He missed feeling her near him. Her mouth played around his navel, trailing hot wet kisses across his skin.

“Bree, baby.” His breaths were coming in shallow pants.

“Shh.” She slid his belt through the buckle and from the loops, then unsnapped his jeans and pulled down the zipper. She took special ease lowering it over his bulging erection. “Lift up.”

He did, pushing his body up with weak arms. Every bit of his strength came went to self-control. He wasn't a teenager on a sex high looking to get laid with the first skirt that walked by. He was a grown man, who had his fair share of blowjobs and sexual experiences in his life, and he didn't really need to remind himself to keep in control.

But Brianna's hand wrapped around him, and all that bullshit went out the window. "You know, I've touched you plenty of times, but I never realized how soft you were."

She slid her hand up his shaft, then back down. Kaden bit his lip, trying to keep in control but Brianna knew the right amount of pressure, at just the right speed. He'd never be able to look at her in the same way again.

"You have to promise to let me touch you more often." She grinned, bending over as she fisted the root and slid the tip of him between her lips.

His vision blurred. A sound came from him, though everything was muted to his ears. All he felt was her mouth around him, her fist sliding gently up his length, then back down. She teased him, the little wench, circling the tip with her tongue and then sucking as much as she could take inside her mouth.

"Brianna, I can't take much more." She slid her free hand up his thigh, creating a working rhythm that had him straining, gripping the sheets around them to keep from coming. And she didn't let up. If anything, she went faster, her head bobbing, her fist sliding up and down his spit-slippery shaft. And dammit if he didn't look down at her, at his penis going between her lips, and shoot like a geyser at Yellowstone National Park.

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He cried out as spasms of his come poured into her mouth. He'd never come so hard in his life, though with Brianna, every damn one of his orgasms surprised him. In the past, they'd been so predictable, yet now, with her, each one was better than the last.

To his surprise, she didn't gag. She slid his half-hard member from her lips, and laid her head against his thigh, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Neither said anything. Brianna stroked his thigh while he lay limp against the mattress.

"Tell me something," Kaden said, reaching for Brianna's hand and slowly pulling her up his body. "I had it all planned out that I was going to seduce you and give you the ultimate pleasure of your life, and yet you flipped me on my back and had your way with me. How the hell did that happen?"

She grinned tucking her head against his chest. "Your turn's coming up. When you get hard again, I'm all ready for you."

As if magic, he sprang to life, having an interest in her words. He wanted her naked, and in his arms, underneath him and by his side where she belonged.

His hands went to her shirt and slipped it over her head with her help. To his surprise, she wasn't wearing a bra underneath. Mocking her earlier move, he flicked her shirt to the side, not caring where it went. He kicked off the jeans and boxers around his ankles and rolled her underneath him, locking his lips against hers.

Mingled with the damn strawberry lip gloss she loved, he tasted himself on her tongue. He had to be inside her, even though he wanted to take it slow. He slid his hands to her waistband, never moving his lips from hers as he slid his hands beneath

the coverings to the warm, womanly skin. She didn't have any panties on either, and that drove his already loco mind out of this world.

He pulled back only to shuck her jeans from her legs, then crawled over her pressing his hot mouth against her center. Her mouth tasted sensational, but between her thighs tasted divine. He could stay here forever and never come up for anything. He locked his arms around her legs when she cried out and tried to buck him off her. She was so close and so slippery, he couldn't help but know how she felt.

When she came, she screamed. Her back arched off the mattress as her sweet little body pulsed around his tongue. God, she was beautiful when she came. He let her ride it out, slowly taking her down with soft, long licks until she closed her eyes and remained still on the bed before him. She looked like an angel sleeping.

"I didn't know I would come like that," she said finally opening her eyes and fisting her hands through his hair to pull him down to her mouth. "Please, Kaden. I want you in me now."

"I'd be happy to accommodate." With one smooth thrust, he pushed inside her all the way to the hilt.

Her body still vibrated from her orgasm, and he could tell by the way she locked her legs around him pulling him to her, she wanted more, she needed more.

He pulled back, then drove home again, working for each thrust as she raised her hips high and widened for him. The angle of penetration was perfect for her. Her lips parted, eyes closed, nails scraping down his back—she'd be coming in a second if he didn't slow the pace down, but he couldn't no matter how hard he tried.

He thrust over and over, getting off on her nails biting into his back. She squeezed her inner muscles around him, small moans coming from her parted lips. He bent down to

kiss her, trailing kisses from her mouth to breast, licking the rosy tip before sucking it into his mouth. God, this woman went to his head.

“Oh, God, Kaden . . .” She screamed again, this time louder than the first. She convulsed around his shaft, making him helpless in conceding to his own pleasure.

He gave a harsh shout gave all he had as he poured his pleasure into her. She milked him until he felt drained, collapsing on top of a weak Brianna.

“We didn’t use a condom.” Brianna spoke after a long pause, her voice almost a whisper.

His breathing finally returned to normal. “Does that bother you?”

“Are we ready for another kid?”

Kaden rolled them across the bed until Brianna lay sprawled out on top of him. Their bodies were still joined, their limbs too weak to move.

“I’m not totally against it.” Kaden kissed her hair, pushing it out of her face.

“Well if we’re having a kid, we’re making rules right now.”

He grinned. “We may be having a kid, and we may not. What kind of rules do you want?”

“You come to every doctor appointment with me.”

He nodded. “I would anyway.”

“And when I’m in delivery, you’ll be the one holding my hand even though I’ll be

screaming how much I hate you and how you'll never have sex again. I think with Shiloh I even threw in something about cutting off your balls." She shrugged. "It made the doctor laugh."

He cringed. "You know I'll be there."

"And when you see our child, you have to promise not to cry, because I cried with Shiloh. I really don't want to cry with this one."

He loved Brianna with all his heart. "You know I'll be there with you for everything, but I won't promise you that." He pulled her to him, kissing her again.

"You suck."

He grinned. "You're beautiful."

"Yeah, yeah." She rocked her hips, making his limp penis come to life. "You keep saying that."

He let her take the lead this time, loving her every second, more than the last. Brianna was his life, and he couldn't imagine it without her. Although they may have not planned their relationship the conventional way, they accepted it and explored it, and it turned out to be love. He didn't think he could love her more than he did in this moment, but knew as each second passed, he did. She was his wife, his lover, his rock, and his best friend. She'd always be there for him to fall on when he needed to be boosted up, and be there for him with loving and accepting arms. Nothing was fake with Brianna. Nothing about her even resembled the other women he'd had relationships with. She was the real deal, and every day he'd thank his lucky stars for that one drunken night that got them to this place—the place of winning over her heart.

Epilogue

“Momma, Riley won’t leave my Barbie’s alone!” Shiloh ran into the living room holding up a headless Barbie as evidence.

Seven years of marriage, and the days never grew old. Brianna untangled herself from Kaden as they sat on the couch and turned to her daughter.

“Riley, why do you keep ripping off Shiloh’s Barbie’s heads?”

“They’re ugly and stupid,” Riley replied like a good brother would.

“Are not!” Shiloh shot back.

“Are too.” Riley smiled with the same smile as Kaden when he was up to no good.

Shiloh may look like her father, but she had Brianna’s personality. She had the same interests as Brianna, and in many ways had the same opinion about things. They hadn’t been so lucky with Riley. He looked like Brianna but had Kaden’s personality, which only made life interesting.

She smiled at her son, shaking her head at him, then turned to Kaden. “He’s your son.”

Kaden rolled his eyes and stood. “Riley, apologize to your sister.”

“Sorry.” Mimicking his father, Riley rolled his eyes.

“Daddy, he doesn’t mean it.”

“Yes, he does.” He looked at Riley, who gave him an evil grin. “Go get your baseball and glove, and we’ll play catch outside in the yard.”

He took off for his room, Shiloh following close behind closing her door as she went inside her own room. Brianna couldn’t help smiling as he turned slowly shaking his head at her. God help them if they had another one.

“You wanted more than one kid,” she proclaimed. “I love them both, but we aren’t having another one.”

“You’d better hope that birth control works then.” He bent forward pressing his lips against hers.

“Ewww,” Riley groaned from the doorway.

Kaden pulled back and stared into her eyes. “He’s going to be trouble at sixteen.”

Nodding her head, she laughed. Kaden grinned and finally turned to give their son his undivided attention.

“Son, one day you’ll learn kissing girls isn’t gross at all.” Kaden replied, lifting his son over his shoulder, “and when you do, every parent on the block is going to have a shotgun out waiting.”

“Yeah, but it ain’t going to be any time soon,” Riley replied.

Kaden started tickling him into a frightful round of the giggles walking around the house until they were out of Brianna’s sight. Shiloh came out of her room shortly afterward, dressed up as a princess and carrying the necessary gear to make her mother one too.

“Momma, why are boys gross?”

She grinned. “Well, like all things in life, most of the time it gets worse before it gets better. One day your brother will turn into a handsome man and get married to a beautiful lady. Just as you’ll marry a handsome man after you turn into a beautiful lady.”

“I ain’t getting married.” Shiloh said pouring fake tea in her mother’s glass at their tea party.

“Yeah, I said that too, once upon a time ago.” Brianna grinned as Riley tackled her husband in the backyard. “But I wouldn’t give up the life I had now for anything.”

The End