



This is Effortless (Checkmate Duet 4)

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Young Adult

Description: Courtney Bishop is as sugary sweet as her famous blueberry muffins.

Southern belle at heart, Cali girl by choice.

She barged into my life and easily became my best friend. All was great as roommates and just friends, but then I fell for the girl who could chop firewood, deliver baby calves, and bail hay without breaking a sweat. She's the perfect mixture of sugar and spice, and I love her.

Being more than friends and trying to build our future isn't as easy as it sounds. Moving forward and creating memories is all I want for us, but when the past continues to come back and haunt me, I'm not so sure she'll stay for the ride.

Loving her is easy, but losing her will break me. Burning passion combined with an undeniable chemistry constantly pushes and pulls us together. In the end, I'll prove we're worth the fight, even when the game is far from over.

Checkmate, Sweetheart.

This is book 2 in the Drew & Courtney duet and must be read in order. Suggested for mature readers only.

Total Pages (Source): 93

CHAPTER ONE

DREW

My blood is boiling and I need to control myself before I blow. I've never been this angry in my entire life. Mia is staring up at me with her wide, bright eyes, hoping to manipulate and control me yet again. It's not going to happen this time. It's not going to happen ever.

"You kidnapped my girlfriend. Have you lost your fucking mind?" I inch closer to her face, making sure she knows I'm not playing around. "And you what? Dyed your hair blonde to match hers?" I can barely stand looking at her as it is and now she's changed her appearance to fool me.

"I didn't touch her, Drew." She stands up on her tippy-toes, making our faces even closer so they barely touch. I take a small step back. "I even used a keycard to get in," she explains, reaching in her back pocket and waving the key in front of my face. "And people color their hair all the time. I decided it was time for a change," she claims.

As soon as I realized Mia was the one on top of me, I pushed her off and found my clothes. I made her dress and almost kicked her out before I remembered I needed her for information.

"Fuck the technicalities." Livid, I grab the keycard out of her hand and toss it behind me. "Tell me where she is. Now."

“Drew, baby,” she coos in a fake sweet tone, wrapping her hand around my bicep. “I needed to get you away from her so I could talk to you about us for five seconds without her around.”

I jerk my arm and fling her hand off me. “There is no us, you psycho. You tell me where she is or I’ll have you arrested for kidnapping,” I threaten with full intention of following through if she doesn’t answer me.

“I promise you, Drew. I didn’t touch her.”

“But you know who did.” I grip her arm and yank her body against mine. “You’re playing games with the wrong person, Mia. I will haul your ass over my shoulder and personally deliver you to the LVPD. You want to play the easy way or the hard way?” I grit my teeth so hard, she jumps. “Either way, you’re going to tell me where the fuck my girlfriend is.”

Her body shivers and I watch as her throat moves. She’s never seen me like this before. Hell, I’ve never seen me like this before. At least not since before entering the academy.

“Fine,” she finally hisses. “I’ll tell you everything I know. After that, you let me go.”

I force out a laugh. “You’re really trying to negotiate at a time like this?”

“Unless your plan is to keep me here against my will, you won’t be the only one facing charges,” she fires back. This fucking bitch.

“You tell me what you know and then I’ll decide if I’ll let you go or not.”

“I had a friend help me. Once I took the key and got inside, he grabbed her and left. I don’t know where he took her.”

“Bullshit. Where is she?”

“I just told you everything I know!” She starts wiggling out of my grip, and I squeeze even tighter. “Drew, let me go!”

“Scream all you want, Mia. The faster the cops get here, the better for me anyway.”

“Fuck you, Drew Fisher!” she spits in my face. “I was the best thing that ever happened to you!”

I laugh, bobbing my head. “I can’t tell whether you’re just that full of yourself and delirious or if you truly have a mental health concern.” I loosen my grip and she eventually pulls herself away.

“The best thing to ever happen to me was when I finally saw you for what you are. I wasted years on you and you come back to fuck my life up even more. So, no, fuck you, Mia Montgomery. You better have a fancy lawyer on retainer, because I’m going to make sure you go behind bars for this little arrangement you planned. If one fucking hair on her head—one fucking thread of hair—on her is hurt, you will pay.”

“That sounds like a threat, Officer Fisher. You sure you don’t want to watch yourself and retract those words before that gets you in trouble?”

The smug bitch is smiling.

“I’m done playing charades. Security footage will tell me exactly where she is and whoever is letting you puppet master them won’t be able to protect you any more than themselves.” I take a step toward the door, ready to brush past her and get the hell out of here.

“Hold up.” She puts a hand up, stepping in front of me and blocking me from the

door. “You sure that’s the smart thing to do? I mean, you basically just threatened me if I didn’t tell you answers to questions I don’t know. Then threatened me with lawsuits and jail time and God knows what else could be deciphered by the little temper tantrum you had.”

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“What the hell are you talking about?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see she reaches in her other back pocket and lifts a small black device. A fucking voice recorder.

“Don’t even try to take it from me,” she warns. “It automatically uploads to the iCloud and with just a few little swipes, it’ll email directly to the LVPD and your chief.”

“And they’ll hear everything you just admitted to knowing. Smart plan,” I fire right back.

“Oh, did I forget to mention a little detail? It’ll only send the recorded parts of your voice. All that’ll matter is that an off-duty officer was making threats to an innocent civilian.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” Her lips spread into an evil smile. “Are you willing to risk it though? Your career?”

I grind my teeth and brush a hand through my hair. I’m ready to blow. “You’re far from innocent.”

She glides her tongue over the top of her lip, making sure to keep eye contact with me. “But who will they believe?” she taunts.

“The fact that my ex-girlfriend followed me and my girlfriend to Vegas and then kidnapped her while we were sleeping is a far-fetched story to be lying about. It’ll take less than ten minutes to get access to security cameras to prove your involvement and that you’re the one up to no good.”

“But the thought will already be in their heads,” she remarks. “They won’t know you’re the honest one right away. The fact that they’ll second-guess you will be enough to make them wonder about you and your capabilities as an officer. Is that something you’re willing to risk?”

It takes me less than a second to respond. “For Courtney? I’d risk everything.”

COURTNEY

If the pounding in my head is any indication, I had one too many shots last night. However, waking up next to Drew in Vegas was worth every sip. Seeing him finally relax and smile again lets me know this trip was a good idea.

As soon as I turn over and stretch my arm out against the cold sheets, I know something is off. I peel my eyes open and see I’m alone. The room looks identical to ours, but without even checking the room number, I know something isn’t right. We had suitcases out from me trying on three different outfits before we left. I had shoes left on the floor and I know for certain we had a pile of towels on the chair. This room is spotless.

“What the fuck?” I mutter to myself. It looks like housekeeping came in overnight and all but bleached the walls.

Pushing the covers off, I stand up and check myself over, patting up and down my body. I’m still in my dress, which isn’t all that odd considering how exhausted I felt. I think back to last night when we were sitting at the hotel bar downstairs. We’d drank

most of the night and when we called it quits, we used the elevator and went back up to our room. I vaguely remember tossing my shoes off and passing out, but it's a little fuzzy. My head had felt foggy and my eyelids heavy. It's the last thing I remember before waking up.

Walking over to the window, I rip open the drapes. The sun beams in so brightly, I have to squint until my eyes adjust. Lights from the strip are still on, but you can't see them unless you really look at them. Cars are cruising down the road and groups of people are walking down the sidewalk. Feeling relief and knowing I'm still in Vegas gives me hope.

As I look down, watching over everything, I remember feeling like I saw someone I recognized last night. Obviously a little drunk and wound up, I for sure thought I was seeing things, but now I'm not so sure. Where the hell am I, and where the hell is Drew?

Walking back over to the bed, I search for my phone with little hope I actually had it on me. With no sign of it anywhere, I decide I'll just call the front desk and ask who the room is registered to.

"How may I help you?"

"Hi, um yeah. I was wondering, this might sound like a crazy question—well, maybe not, since it's Vegas after all—but, could you tell me whose name this room is registered in?"

"Yes, no problem, ma'am." I hear her typing. "It's registered under Courtney Bishop."

"What?" I gasp.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Ms. Bishop?” she asks sweetly. I’m too stunned to reply, so I just hang up the phone and stumble back onto the bed.

Trying to put the pieces together, I lie down flat and replay the night repeatedly, trying to remember the familiar person I saw at the bar.

It was a man. He was wearing a black hoodie or black coat. The hood was pulled down over his forehead, but I remember his eyes. They were in thin slits as he watched us, until he saw me looking at him, and then he bowed his head and stalked off.

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It could've been a woman, I guess. Hair pulled back or something, but I can't shake the feeling that it was a guy.

Unable to take it any longer, I decide I'd rather walk out of here a barefoot hot mess than wait to see who's coming back for me. I'd been awake for less than ten minutes, so chances are, whoever is behind this could return any minute.

Before I can leave, a knock comes from the door and startles me.

I swallow, unable to move.

"Room service," I hear a man shout with a rough voice from the other side.

Confused as hell, but also a little relieved it's a staff member, I rush to the door and whip it open. A man in a tailored uniform pushes a tray inside and asks where I want it.

"I didn't order any room service," I tell him, wondering how crazy I'd sound if I told him this wasn't even my room. I feel like I'm living in the Twilight Zone.

He pushes the cart in farther and places the tray on the end of the bed and then picks up a black server book. Opening it up, he lifts the receipt and reads it over aloud.

"Room 2509 at ten a.m.," he reads. "Two eggs over-easy with a side of bacon."

I shake my head, more confused than before. I need to get the hell out of here.

“Okay, thanks,” is all I can think of to say. He sets the book down and starts to head out.

“My pleasure. Make sure to eat that before it gets cold.” He smirks and for some reason it sends a chilling shiver down my spine.

How in the hell did I book a room and order room service all while being out cold? The answer is I didn’t.

I rush back to the phone and dial nine with the area code followed by Drew’s number. With every number I press, my hand shakes a little more. I’m relieved when he answers on the first ring.

“Courtney?”

“Oh my God!” I nearly cry. “Drew.”

“Sweetheart, where are you? Are you okay?” His voice is panicked and rushed.

“Yes, I-I think so. I’m in room 2509. Do you know why I’m here? Or how I got here?”

“I’ll explain everything when I get there. Don’t move. I’m coming.”

“Okay.”

I hang up and rub my hands up and down my arms. Needing to distract myself, I lift the silver lid from the platter on the tray. I gasp when I see what’s underneath it. The lid slips from my fingers and falls to the floor causing a loud metal clank to echo throughout the room.

I take a step closer and see the two eggs on top of the plate and a slice of bacon lined at the bottom, curved down into the shape of a frown. The eggs on top are the eyes and in the middle is a grape for the nose.

However, the breakfast made into a sad face isn't the most disturbing part.

There's red sauce dripping underneath the eggs as if the eyes are crying. It trails all the way down past the grape nose and to the corners of the bacon lips.

"What the hell?" I study it and wonder if this is supposed to be some kind of sick joke. Needing to cover it back up, I pick the lid back up, and that's when I notice a white envelope taped inside.

I peel it off and see my name written across it. Courtney.

I knew this wasn't just a coincidence.

My hands shake as I rip it open. Whoever put me in here wanted to make sure I saw this.

Inside is a white piece of paper and as soon as I flip it over, I see her handwriting.

Steal my man from me again and I'll make sure those tears of blood are coming from your eyes instead. You've been warned.

I read it over twice just to make sure I read it correctly. Looking over my shoulder, I look around the room, consciously worried that she could be in here somewhere watching me. I need to get the hell out of here. I can't wait for Drew anymore.

CHAPTER TWO

DREW

As soon as I step off the elevator, I see Courtney frantically running down the hall without any shoes on. “Thank God,” I mutter to myself.

I pick up my pace until she falls into my arms as tears stream down her face. Wrapping my arms around her and pulling her tight against my chest, I can feel her shaking. I pull back and look at her. “Court, are you okay? You’re not hurt?”

I search her face as her mouth falls open and closes again. Her lack of words begins to tear through me.

“Talk to me, please,” I whisper.

“I feel like I can’t breathe. I need air.” She’s having an anxiety attack and can’t calm down.

“Take a deep breath,” I tell her. “I’m here, sweetheart.”

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She does as I say, and I watch her inhale deeply and exhale slowly. She squeezes her eyes shut and repeats it twice more.

“Mia’s here,” she says between jagged breaths. “She set this whole thing up.”

“I know,” I tell her. She pinches her brows together, and I know she’s confused.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, wanting to get her off this floor. “Talk somewhere private,” I explain.

She turns and looks behind her, paranoia on her face, and I can understand where she’s coming from. Fuck, I know exactly how she feels. I grab her hand and pull her to the elevator. Reaching over, she pushes the button for the ground floor.

“Let me give you my shoes,” I say, bending over and taking them off. She slips her bare feet inside and although they are way too big, she doesn’t complain. I walk through the lobby with my hand in hers wearing only socks on my feet. It’s Vegas, but I have a feeling that this shit isn’t staying here. No, this nightmare will be following us home.

We step outside and the brightness of the sun is almost too much. I shield my eyes and watch as Courtney sucks in deep gulps like it’s the first time she’s ever breathed air.

“I’m so fucking scared,” she admits, her voice cracking as she smooths her hair back on her head.

I grab her hands and kiss her forehead, wanting her to know I'm here.

"She threatened me; threatened to hurt me."

"What? How?" I rush out. "That'll never happen. I won't allow that to ever happen," I try to assure her, but she scoffs.

"At this point, I don't know if you can even stop her, Drew. What the hell happened last night? How'd she even get to us?" She's beginning to unravel so I hold her tighter.

"Mia happened." I sigh. "I'll tell you what I know later. Not here."

People are staring at us as they walk by, and I know we don't look normal—not even for Vegas. Courtney's nose is red and she's visibly upset. I have no shoes on and the more upset she gets, the louder her cries become.

"Let's go up to the room and talk." I give her a smile, trying to coax her from the middle of the sidewalk but she's looking at the hotel like it's a dungeon. Truthfully, it kind of is.

"I don't want to go back in there," she states, vigorously shaking her head at me.

"I'll be with you and won't let you out of my sight. I'll protect you, sweetheart," I promise. Noticing her tense shoulders and the uncertain look in her eyes, I offer another idea. "Let's just grab our stuff and we can get the hell out of here."

"Our flight isn't for a few more days," she reminds me.

"I don't care. We'll rent a car and drive. We can cancel the tickets. Whatever it takes."

She wraps her arms tightly around my waist. “I was so scared and confused. I thought something really bad had happened.”

I let out a ragged breath as I intertwine Courtney’s blonde hair around my fingers, and then I remember the cold dark eyes I looked into this morning. I don’t know how I’m going to tell her about Mia being in bed with me. Like a continuing nightmare, my mind is filled with the sound of gunshots and memories of Mia.

“Drew?” Courtney is staring at me, and I realize I zoned out, again. “Did you hear me?” she asks softly.

I blink away the thoughts and stare into her clear blue eyes, the color of the ocean, and she pulls me back. She always pulls me back. I shake my head when she asks again.

“I like your plan of renting a car. I can pack fast. It’ll be just the two of us, alone—no hustle and bustle and bright lights.” She forces a smile, knowing I was lost in my thoughts again. It’s something that’s happened a lot over the last week, which makes Mia’s little act fucking sickening. I’m going through a lot and this is just the cherry on top of a shit sundae.

I wrap my arm around Courtney and hold her tight to my body. As we enter the hotel, I instantly go into recon mode, memorizing everyone’s faces, noticing the distant sounds and sudden movements. Mia is still here and she’s probably watching us at this very moment. The elevator closes, and I turn and grab Courtney’s face between my hands and kiss her. It’s a sad kiss that’s full of emotion.

“I love you so much,” I tell her and she whispers it back against my mouth.

We walk into the room and the crumpled sheets on the bed make me sick to my stomach. Everything is exactly how we left it, except the memories of us have been

replaced by Mia. Just being in the room makes me nauseous because I swear the faint smell of her perfume still lingers. Courtney doesn't wait and shimmies out of her clothes and changes into something else. Then she begins grabbing clothes and toiletries and placing them into her suitcase. I follow her lead, and it takes all of five minutes for her to have everything packed.

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“You weren’t lying when you said you could pack fast,” I say, trying to make a joke.

“I just feel like I’m being watched and it’s creepy as fuck. Ready?” She looks around the room, and I see her eyeing the long curtains by the window. I don’t hesitate and walk over to them and pull them away to show her nothing is there. I open the closet, which is empty, go to the bathroom and search around, and check the entire suite. She relaxes slightly, but continues toward the door. After packing my suitcase, I follow her, which honestly couldn’t come sooner. I’m just as happy as she is to be leaving.

We rent a car and when we sit inside she lets out a deep breath that I swear she’s been holding since she woke up in a strange room. I place my hand on her thigh and she places her hand on top of mine.

“Thank you,” she mumbles. She turns and looks at me, her head resting against the seat, finally looking relieved.

“You don’t have to thank me. I was just as scared and confused as you were this morning. I feared the worst.” I have a feeling this is only the beginning, but I don’t say that aloud.

“Before we leave, we have to go to the LVPD and file a police report. Actually, we need to go right now.”

“Okay,” she says meekly and I can tell she’s reliving every moment.

Mia can try to sabotage my relationship with Courtney, but it won’t change anything. As I glance over at Courtney, I know nothing could ever stop the way I feel about

her. Not Mia, not even death itself.

COURTNEY

My head is pounding at the same rhythm as my heart, and I feel like I drank a truckload of vodka. All day I've tried hard to remember every step of what happened last night but after we left the bar and went to the room, my mind goes blank. I've heard about blackouts when people drink too much, but this was something entirely different and it terrifies me. If Mia is capable of carrying out something of this magnitude, what else will she do? Her unpredictability is horrifying and after last night, I have no doubt in my mind she would hurt me. When I remember the note and what it said, I gasp for air. The anxiety of it all is almost too much.

I can't say filing the police report made me feel any better. It still seems like a blur so I had to go over the scenario a few times to make sure I had every detail. To make it quicker, Drew and I filed our reports separately. I know we'll need to talk about it in detail together, but just the thought of replaying it again makes me tense.

The next few days were supposed to be about us—about Drew finding his normal—and now we've been slung into a clusterfuck of drama. I feel relief as I stare at the side mirror of the car and watch the Vegas Skyline disappear.

We're gone. We're safe. I smile as we pull out onto Interstate 15 and head toward California. That's all I can think right now as Drew's hand rests on my thigh.

"We need to talk about what all happened," Drew says and pulls me out of my thoughts.

"I know. But right now, I just want to forget about it."

"Forgetting about it won't make it go away," he says sweetly, but the truth still stings.

“Would you think I was crazy if I said I wanted to get blood work taken? I want to know what’s in my bloodstream right now.”

Drew searches my face and I can see that he’s gone into cop mode. “Absolutely not. When we get back to Sacramento, we both go.”

“Couples who get tested together, stay together?” I laugh, though it’s not a laughing matter.

“I’m so sorry, Court.”

I look at him, but he keeps his eyes on the road. There’s pain on his face, and I hate that he’s blaming himself or that maybe he feels some sort of guilt.

“This isn’t your fault. There’s only one person who’s responsible for this, okay? We were having a good time and it was ruined by a psycho bitch.”

For moments, silence fills the car and I think we’re both dissecting last night and how it was orchestrated so flawlessly. How was I moved to a different hotel room without anyone noticing? I understand it’s Vegas, but I was unconscious. I have so many questions that I’m not sure I’ll ever get answers to. God, I’m so glad to be leaving.

“Thank you.” Drew interlocks his fingers with mine. “You always keep me grounded.”

My stomach begins to growl and the sounds fills the car. We both start laughing. “Is that a hint?” He lifts an eyebrow.

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“I think it was a demand.”

We stop at a diner that looks like it came straight out of the nineteen-fifties. Once we’re out of the car, I watch Drew as he searches around the parking lot.

“What?” I ask.

“Just making sure we weren’t followed.” He wraps his muscular arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer to him as we walk inside.

When we sit, an older lady brings water and we order coffee and breakfast platters. I lean forward and search his face. “Do you think we were being followed?” My paranoia is at a level ten.

“No, but I can never be too careful.”

“You’re not going all detective on me right now, are you?” I give him a wink and sip my coffee. He smiles. And I can’t help but think how much I love the way his entire face lights up. I love the way he looks at me. Though we’ve been together for months now, it still seems like a dream that he’s mine. Drew finishes his coffee and scoots the empty cup to the edge of the table for a refill.

“Drew...” He looks up at me and I try to find the words as he stares into my eyes. “I’m really scared.”

“I know, sweetheart. We’re going to get through this.”

His words comfort me, but they almost aren't enough. "I want to file a restraining order against her. I keep thinking about going home and her being in my room or something. It's freaking me out."

"A restraining order is a must. She no longer has a key to the house. I took it from her when she decided to use it the last time."

"But how do you know she didn't make a copy?" My mind is running a million miles per minute.

He lets out a deep breath. "I don't. But I think we should get the locks changed, install security cameras, whatever it takes for you—for us—to feel safe." His words allow me to breathe easier. "We could always get you a gun, since you apparently know how to use ten different types."

"Jackson is going to get it for that." I smile. "The truth is having a gun makes it more dangerous for me. What if someone breaks in and overpowers me and takes my gun and uses it against me?"

Drew goes silent and I think I've said too much. "Hey," I say, "don't go there."

He nods and my stomach growls. Just as our waitress fills our cups with more coffee, our food is delivered, and I couldn't be happier because I'm starving.

I try to change the subject and talk about anything and everything. "Mom invited us to come back and visit before Benita's baby shower. Apparently, there's a huge bake sale going down and she'll be baking her special muffins. But I told her that it might be impossible with work."

"Well, I hope she'll mail us some. I need to test your recipe against hers." The corners of his lips curl up into a cocky smirk.

“Nice try, Deputy. But I can promise you won’t be able to tell the difference between the two.”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that.” He shoves scrambled eggs into his mouth as I spread blueberry jelly on my toast. Once we’re finished eating, I feel human again. We sit there for a while, and after four cups of coffee, I’m still not ready to leave. I want to stay here—safe—as if nothing happened.

“Court?” Drew stands and grabs the check and places money on the table before we head out. Once we’re outside, walking toward the car, Drew stops and turns to me. “How would you feel if we didn’t go home right away?”

I stand and look at him like he’s my saving grace.

“When we get tired we’ll stop. If there’s something you want to see, we’ll pull over. We’re not on anyone’s clock, and I don’t want my time to end with you just yet.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and squeeze. “I love that idea.”

He bends down and kisses me. I get lost in his soft lips as he slips his tongue inside my mouth. “God, I missed your lips.”

“Well, there’s a lot more where that came from.”

We climb into the car and I’m so happy we aren’t rushing home that I can’t hide the smile on my face. There’s too much anxiety with going home, and the longer we can stay away from it all, the better. This is the perfect distraction.

CHAPTER THREE

DREW

We end up stopping at a little bed and breakfast outside of Bakersfield about four hours into our drive. It's the perfect sanctuary for what we need tonight. I know we need to discuss all the facts of what we know and what all happened so we can go to the courthouse tomorrow and file a temporary restraining order.

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“This is so charming,” Courtney says, glancing around the room once I unlock it. “It’s like walking through a time capsule.” Which is something we could really use right now.

“Yeah, back to the floral and wallpaper ages.” I chuckle, pulling our suitcases inside.

“It’s perfect. Just what we need,” she states, and her shoulders visibly relax.

After setting our suitcases aside, I grab her hand and sit us down on the bed. A loud creak echoes throughout the room as soon as we do.

“Oh my God.” She laughs, bouncing her hips against the mattress again. “I’m guessing it gets pretty loud around here at night.”

I smirk, agreeing with her. “Or perhaps they hope it discourages couples instead.”

“Then why even have a bed and breakfast? What do you think people come to these things for in the first place?”

“Yeah, you’re right. They probably aren’t coming here to read the Bible and sleep.”

“Although, sleep sounds pretty good right now.” She lays her head on my shoulder, and I wrap my arm around her. We need to talk before we get back home, but after everything she’s been through the last twelve hours, she should get some good rest.

“Let’s take a nap and then we can get some food. What do you think?” I ask.

“That sounds perfect.” She yawns and then chuckles. “My body agrees, apparently.”

“Good.” I place a kiss on her forehead. “Let’s see how much noise this bed can make.”

She hits a palm against my chest, pretending to be offended. “Drew!”

“What?” I laugh. “I wasn’t implying that. You’re the one with your mind in the gutter. I was saying how much noise it makes just getting into the bed.”

She looks up at me and rolls her eyes. “Right. Sure you were.”

I flash a sly smile at her. I love that she knows me so well. Maybe too well.

It’s nearly eight o’clock when I wake up, realizing we’ve overslept our nap and are bordering on sleeping through the night hours. I don’t want to wake her, so as carefully and quietly as possible, I slide my arm out from under her and cover her back up. The bed creaks just as I push off and I freeze on my feet, hoping it doesn’t startle her.

I look over my shoulder and see her eyes are still shut and she’s breathing softly. I slide my pants back on and stuff my feet into my shoes. The closest place to grab food is a good fifteen minutes away, so hopefully she stays asleep until I get back.

Kissing the top of her forehead, I tighten the covers up around her and tiptoe out of the room. Once I make it to the rental car, I look around the parking lot, checking for any suspicious vehicles. Nothing looks out of place so I unlock the car and hop in. I head back on the interstate and find a roadside diner. I place a to-go order and head back to the B&B. Courtney hasn’t called, which means she’s still sleeping peacefully.

Once I arrive back, I grab our food and head back to our room. I listen for any

movement, but it's just as quiet as it was when I left. Knowing I'll have to wake her up to eat, I mentally prepare myself for what we need to talk about. Neither of us can remember what happened once we got to our room, but she needs to know about Mia so she can piece it together in her mind and we can file the restraining order with details of exactly what happened to the both of us.

Quietly, I open the door and see all the lights are on. I know for a fact I didn't leave them on, which means Courtney is awake. I expected a call from her, but perhaps she just woke up as I was getting back.

"Court?" I say softly, shutting the door behind me, not wanting to startle her. I check the bed and see that the covers are ripped off where she was sleeping. "Court? Where are you?"

I start to panic as I think of where she could be. There's no way she'd leave the room without me, especially at night, yet she hadn't called when she woke up either.

"Baby?" I say a little louder. I step inside farther and start searching. Behind the bathroom door, in the bathtub, and behind the curtains. What the fuck?

I'm about to call her cell when I hear a noise come from the closet. I rush over and whip the door open and Courtney swings, barely missing my face with the back of a lamp. Determination was in her eyes, and I honestly feel sorry for anyone who would have gotten the tail end of that. Any professional baseball player would've been proud because she put all her weight into it.

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“Courtney! You almost killed me.”

“I-I’m sorry.” She sucks in a deep breath, relieved to see me.

“I called your name several times. I was starting to get worried.” I rub my hands up and down her arms that are prickled with goosebumps and take the lamp from her hand.

“I didn’t hear you,” she says truthfully, searching my face, then continues, “I woke up in a panic and it all replayed in my mind again. You weren’t here. The room was bare. The silence was eating me alive. I went into fight or flight mode...”

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry. I just left to get us some food. I was sure you’d stay asleep.”

“I went to use the bathroom and when I turned the lights on, it flickered and made a loud noise.”

“The bulb burnt out,” I explain, realizing the same when I tried to turn on the lights when I was looking for her.

“Then just as I was done using the bathroom, a loud knock came from the door and I panicked. It all came rushing back, and I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t catch my breath and when a second knock came, I grabbed the lamp and went into the closet and hid. Every bad scenario played out within seconds. I figured if it were you, you’d call my name out or call me on my cell. And if whoever was on the other side of the door got inside and opened the closet, they were going to get killed by that lamp.”

I smile, but I'm still concerned. "So, you didn't answer the door?"

"No! The last time I did that, Mia ordered a special delivery in the form of a breakfast and threats."

I shake my head, unsure of what she's talking about. "Let's get you out of here and we can talk. Tell me what all happened."

She runs her fingers through her hair and nods. "Okay."

Helping her to the bed, I grab our bag of food and hand her one. "There weren't a ton of great options, so I ordered us sandwiches."

"That's fine. I don't have a big appetite right now anyway." She plays with the lid, but doesn't flip it open.

"Something wrong?" I ask, pinching my brows together.

Her throat moves, swallowing down her words as she shakes her head.

"Courtney," I mutter, tilting her chin toward me. She looks up at me. "Tell me what happened when you woke up this morning. I need to know."

She blinks, lowering her eyes to the floor. "There was a knock on the door of the hotel room and when I opened it, a guy from room service was standing there with a tray of food. He said it had been scheduled to be delivered to that room. Once he left, I opened the lid of the platter and saw it. She somehow planned the whole thing out."

"What was inside?" I ask, urging her to continue although I know it's hard for her. I need to know everything.

“Two eggs and a piece of bacon formed a frowning face. Then drops of red hot sauce were under the eggs as if the eyes were crying out blood.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, roughly brushing a hand through my hair.

“There was a note, too.”

My jaw tightens once she tells me what it said.

“Fuck,” I hiss. “She’s lost her fucking mind.”

“You’re just now realizing that?” The bitterness in her tone doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Yeah, well. She’s never pulled a stunt like this before. I didn’t realize how far she’d go to get me back.”

“She’s doing everything she can to break us apart,” Courtney states, her words sad and low.

“Sweetheart, that’ll never ever fucking happen. I promise you that.” I cup her cheeks and pull her mouth to mine. “I love you.”

She smiles against my lips. “I love you, too.” She gives me another kiss. “I just want to push her down a set of spiraling stairs that all have loose nails in the boards.”

I chuckle, shaking my head at her. “I wouldn’t put it past you, babe. You aren’t one to take anyone’s shit.”

“Yeah and that bitch is such a coward she starts messing with me only when I’m unconscious. Can’t even play the game when I can actually fight back,” she hisses, and I know she’s getting worked up again. “But just knowing she’s capable of this

kind of shit freaks me the hell out.”

“I know, but no matter what she tries, she’ll never get what she truly wants in the end.”

“Wait,” she pauses. “How’d you know Mia was here?”

“Huh?” My jaw flexes. I forgot I hadn’t mentioned it to her yet.

“In the hallway of the hotel room, you said you knew she was here. I hadn’t even known she was until after the tray of food arrived. So, how did you know?” I can see she’s trying to put it all together in her head and I hate that I have to add to it. Especially that part.

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“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, but it’s not going to be easy to hear.”

“Drew, you’re freaking me out. Just tell me,” she urges.

“She was in the bed when I woke up this morning.” Her eyes bulge out of her head and I can feel the anger radiating off her already. “I thought she was you.”

“What?”

“She dyed her hair blonde and her face was buried in the covers. Once I realized it was her, I pushed her out of the bed and told her to tell me where you were. When she wouldn’t, I kicked her ass out and threatened to call the police if she didn’t tell me where you were. She claimed she wasn’t the one who carried you out and that she had a keycard to the room, so she technically didn’t break in. Once I knew she wasn’t going to tell me shit, I made her leave.”

“Holy shit, Drew.”

I can tell her mind is racing a million miles an hour, which I don’t blame her for. I should’ve told her right away, but she was in a fragile state and I couldn’t risk her lashing out even more.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “It was a living nightmare waking up to her. If you hadn’t called me when you did, I was about to trail every inch of Vegas looking for you.”

Her chest begins to rise and fall in deep breaths as she takes it all in.

“She had help,” I explain. “I don’t know who the hell it was, but I’m going to find out. As soon as we’re back and we file the temporary restraining order, I’m going to have Logan make some calls to get the video surveillance so we can press charges. We aren’t going down without a fight. Do you hear me? I won’t let her win.”

She swallows, processing everything I’ve just told her and I know it’s a lot to take in. This whole fucking day has been a lot to take in.

“Sweetheart?” I say, trying to grab her attention back to me. “Say something, babe.”

“I-I don’t know. The fact that she was so easily able to find us in Vegas—of all cities—drug us or something, get into our room, and sleep next to you is psycho level five-thousand. I mean, who the fuck in their right mind plans something like that out?”

“She has some issues, I won’t deny that, but I swear she’s never shown me this side to her in the three years we were together. Either she’d been really good at hiding it or she’s having some kind of psychotic breakdown.”

“That’s even more terrifying to think about,” Courtney says.

COURTNEY

I finally settle down enough for us to eat our food that Drew brought back. It’s mostly cold, but I’m so hungry I eat it anyway. Being with him makes me feel safe, but I can’t help thinking of what’s going to happen when he goes back to work and I’m left at the house all alone. His swing shift hours have him working till three in the morning, sometimes later if he’s on overtime.

“In case I have to tell this to Logan or a judge, I want you to hear it from me first.” Drew sets his empty to-go container down and turns, looking at me. “Mia has a pretty

rough past and it's never really come up in our relationship for me to be concerned about it, but now I'm thinking there might be a connection."

The seriousness of his words has my heart racing once again.

"Mia isn't an only child. She had a sister named Madelyn. She was only ten months older than Mia and they were super close. When Maddie was sixteen, she took her own life and Mia's the one who found her."

"Oh my God," I gasp. "I had no idea."

"She didn't want anyone to know, so I never said anything to anyone." Considering the mess she's created now, there's no way I'm keeping this to myself anymore. "As you can imagine, Mia took it pretty hard. Her parents were already tied down to their commitments and jobs more than their children, so when Maddie died, Mia had very little emotional support and felt abandoned by her sister. She began spiraling out of control and her parents thought if they threw more money at her, she'd be happy and stay out of trouble."

"Jesus," I mutter. "They created a monster, basically."

"Yeah," he sighs. "One with extreme attachment and relationship issues."

"So, I guess they never got her the help she clearly needed."

"Nope. As long as she kept getting her bank account padded, Mia promised to stay out of trouble, which in return, if she did get into trouble, she just used money to get out of it. A cycle that has given her no real sense of reality."

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“I know it doesn’t really matter, but did she ever tell you why her sister...?” I feel bad for even asking, so I don’t finish my question.

He shakes his head, knowing where I was leading anyway. “They found a suicide note in one of her journals, but apart from it saying she was depressed, they hadn’t known anything was wrong. Mia said she never suspected she had depression and that’s part of the reason she took it so hard. She hadn’t seen it coming at all.”

“So, you think all of this could be the reason?” I ask, trying to piece some of it together.

“I think her little games of playing puppet master with me and our relationship made her feel in control of something. Once she realized I wasn’t going to let her manipulate and play me anymore, she felt that abandonment all over again. She was more attached to the idea of her and me more than actually being with me. She craved control, and once I took it away from her, all those past feelings must’ve swooped back in, knowing she couldn’t get what she wanted.”

I nod in agreement. “She’s having some kind of episode,” I state. “You guys breaking up triggered those feelings from her past. She feels that you abandoned her just like her sister did, and now I’m the only person in her way of getting what she wants.”

Which means she’d probably stop at nothing to make that happen.

“We’ve been broken up for months,” he says. “Something had to have triggered it all of a sudden.”

“When’s her sister’s birthday?” I ask. “Or the day she passed away? Those are usually pretty significant to someone in mourning.”

“I don’t know her birthday, but I know the date of her death.” I see his eyes piecing something together. He grabs his phone out of his pocket and pulls up the calendar. “It was three days ago.”

CHAPTER FOUR

DREW

There are a hundred new questions swirling around in my mind, and I don’t even know where to begin with sorting them out. All that matters right now is keeping Courtney safe and making sure she stays safe. I want her to feel safe too, but I know that’s not going to happen until we file the restraining order and a report. Mia is clearly unpredictable and unstable right now.

Courtney and I spent the rest of the night talking and lying in bed together until we both fall asleep around two in the morning. The curtains do nothing to shield the sun beaming inside and wakes us up at eight. We both shower and dress and get back on the road to find somewhere to eat breakfast. I know we said we didn’t want to rush back, but the urgency to get home and unwind from everything is more crucial at the moment.

If Mia is having a psychotic meltdown, she’s going to need more help than I anticipated. A restraining order might be the one thing that sets her off the deep end.

“Sweetheart?” I whisper, shaking her leg as she sleeps in the passenger seat. After breakfast, I drove the rest of the way to Sacramento and halfway there, she fell asleep. “We’re almost home.”

She groans and slowly opens her eyes, taking in our surroundings. She breathes a sigh of relief when she sees the house in front of us. “Thank God,” she mutters. “Home sweet home.”

“I didn’t know people really said that,” I say with a low laugh.

“Of course they do,” she tells me, the corner of her lips tilting up. “Maybe it’s a Southern thing.”

“I think that to myself about you at least ninety percent of the time.” I chuckle, turning to look into her sweet blue eyes. “It’s one of the many things I love about you.”

She squeezes my hand that’s still resting on her thigh and puckers her lips into a kiss. “I love you, too. I’m sorry this trip didn’t turn out like we’d expected. I know this was the last thing you needed added onto your plate right now.”

I’ve been trying to push the images of that night on duty out of my mind since we left, and I hate that being back home has those memories flooding back in.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I don’t want you to worry about a thing. I’ll take care of this and we can go back to how things were before they—”

“Erupted like a volcano of fiery ash?” she fills in for me.

I shift the car into park and switch off the car. “Yeah, exactly.” I turn and face her, gripping my other hand over our intertwined fingers. “We’re going to get through this,” I reassure her. “I know things have been rough lately, but there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect you.”

“I know. You don’t have to worry. I’m not going anywhere.” She smiles, and I cup

her chin and bring her lips to mine. They're soft and warm and tastes like every bit of Courtney.

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I bring our luggage inside and set it down before following her into the kitchen.

“I’m surprised after that breakfast you ordered, you’d even be hungry again this week,” I tease. She’s reaching for her stash of muffins in the fridge and I know it’s because she’s stressing out and trying to control it.

“I’m not really.” She stuffs a mini muffin into her mouth and begins chewing. She cringes at how cold it is, but it doesn’t take long for her to devour it and swallow it down. “I’m just making room for all the muffins I’m going to end up baking this week.”

She shrugs, knowing I’ll know exactly what she means.

“You know that I love your muffins, sweetheart, but perhaps you should find another way to channel all that stressed energy,” I tell her, taking a step toward her and closing the gap between us. I grab the Ziploc baggie out of her hand and set it down on the counter behind her. “Perhaps something a little more pleasurable?” I arch a brow, waiting to see if she gets what I’m saying.

She stares up at me with wide eyes and a small grin on her lips. I wrap a hand around her neck and pull her mouth to mine, taking her in for a greedy and hot kiss. She clings to me immediately, wrapping her arms around my waist and holding me tight against her. She needs this as much as I do.

I lower my hands down to her ass and cup her cheeks, lifting her feet off the floor. She wraps her legs around me, and I shift our bodies out of the kitchen and down the hall. Once I lay her down on my bed, I remove my shirt and unbutton my jeans. She

watches intently, studying my every move and keeping her eyes locked on me.

So beautiful, so perfect, and so mine.

Sliding my hands up her thighs, I start clawing at her jeans until they're pulled down to her ankles and she kicks them the rest of the way off. She reaches for her shirt and I watch as she lifts it over her head and quickly unsnaps her bra, just as eager and greedy as I am. I lean over her body and kiss right below her ear, pressing my lips along her neck and jawline. Her throat vibrates in a low groan in response and she wraps her legs back around my waist, pulling me down against her.

Courtney grabs my face and lowers it to her mouth, matching the pace and neediness of our bodies. The hardness of my cock presses against her panties and I shift my body to one side to pull my boxer shorts down. My dick springs free and she palms it, wrapping her fingers roughly around my shaft and pumping me before I even have time to slide off her panties.

"My girl has no patience today," I say with a grin.

"Not when it comes to you." She smiles back, keeping her eyes locked on mine. This past week hasn't been an easy one for either of us, but it's comforting to know we can find solace in each other.

I finger her panties and push them to the side before I rip them from her body. She's wet and the way her body responds to me never gets old. She's undeniably aroused and the only thing that could stop me from being inside her would be the devil himself.

"Spread your legs wider," I demand. She releases me and obliges. Kneeling between her thighs, I watch as she bends her knees to her chest. "So fucking perfect."

I lean over her and take her mouth in a heated kiss as I slowly slide inside her. Her body immediately accepts me and soon I'm driving every fucking inch into her. The way her tight pussy squeezes my cock makes me grow hungrier, and I can't stop all the feelings that surface when it comes to Courtney. She's everything perfect and beautiful, and I still can't believe how far we've come after all this time.

I slide out and back inside her, making her yelp at the surprise force.

"Drew!"

I smirk. "Yeah, baby?"

Her head falls back as she laughs. "Why do you always try to break me? Can't you ever just make slow, sweet love?" I know she's mocking me by the tone of her voice and the way she's arching her brows, yet I decide to show her exactly what slow and sweet would be like with her.

"My intentions are to always make it slow and sweet..." I slow my rhythm, almost painfully slow as I slide out and let the tip rest directly on her clit. "But the moment I feel how tight and wet you are, I lose all control."

"Maybe you're the one who needs to be handcuffed." She's trying to be tough, but I can see the eagerness in her body language. She's arching her back and clawing at my arms for me to push back inside her. "Okay, I surrender. Stop torturing me!" she begs.

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“No, no,” I tease. “You want slow and sweet and that’s exactly what I’m going to deliver.”

“I changed my mind. Fuck me like a horny jackrabbit.”

“Oh my God, Court,” I say, dropping my head and laughing. “How do you make something so weird sound so sexy at the same time?”

She blushes then smiles proudly. “It’s a gift.”

“You have many gifts, sweetheart, but patience is definitely not one of them.” I wrap my hand around my shaft and tease her clit some more.

“Yes, we’ve already established that. Now are you going to give me what I want or am I going to have to take it?” she threatens, arching her hips up again.

I smirk at her greediness and push back deep inside her. She clings to my arms and hangs on tightly as I give her exactly what she’s asked for. “Better?” I ask with a devilish grin.

“Mm-hmm...” she whimpers, her lids squeezed tight against her cheeks. Her hands move to the headboard for support as I increase the pace.

She’s tightening around me and I know she’s close. Instead of letting her ride it out, I flip us over so she’s on top of me. “Drew!” she shrieks at the sudden movement. “I hate when you do that without a warning!” she scolds me, but I know she secretly loves it.

“I love watching you when you come, sweetheart. I couldn’t resist.” I grip her hips and thrust up inside her. “You look amazing on top. I love the way your tits bounce and how tight you feel when you finally come all over me.”

“Jesus, Drew,” she whispers, sliding her pussy down on me. “Why do you always make something so filthy sound so sexy at the same time?”

I smirk. “It’s a gift.”

She leans down and presses her lips to mine. I wrap a hand around her neck and keep her mouth on mine as I continue thrusting inside her—hard and deep. She breathes heavily as she rides out her release.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” I whisper against her swollen lips. “You make it feel too good.”

“You make me come so hard,” she confesses, her voice raspy and low, and it’s the sexiest fucking thing she’s ever said. I can’t control it any longer, especially after that, and release inside her moments later. With a loud groan and a fist twisted in her hair, I feel her pussy tighten around me again, and I’m completely done.

Her body collapses on top of my chest as we both try and steady our breathing. I stroke her hair slowly and hold her tightly against me. God, I love her.

I bring her to the side of me and hold her in my arms. She rests an arm over my chest and wraps a leg around mine. We lie like this for long moments, our bodies clinging to each other, enjoying the sanctuary of our safe place.

“I don’t want you to go back to work,” she says softly. “I hate when you work the swing shift.”

Rubbing a hand along her arm, I soothe away the goosebumps. “I know, sweetheart. I

hate being away from you, too. But I do love coming home in the early morning and climbing into bed with you. You're all snuggled under the covers and warm. It's my favorite part of the whole day," I admit with a smile. "But I still prefer you in my bed."

"Your bed always smells like you and then I miss you even more," she pouts.

I chuckle. "You should just sleep in my bed permanently and then it'd start to smell more like you, too."

"Like hot, sweaty sex?" She arches her brow, knowing exactly where I was leading.

"Exactly."

"Then my room would be all alone and feel neglected."

"We could turn it into something else?" I suggest, having thought this for a while. There's no reason we need two bedrooms anymore. "Maybe a workout room where you could practice all your yoga moves."

She looks up at me and rolls her eyes. "You just want me prancing around in a sports bra."

"I'd prefer you in no bra at all, but I was thinking more along the lines of how flexible and strong you'd get." I flash her a cheeky smile and she playfully swats me on the chest.

"Always with the ulterior motives."

"It's like you know me so well or something." I press a soft kiss on her nose.

“Drew Fisher, I knew you and all your quirks long before I fell in love with you.”

I immediately smile at her words, and then just to mess with her, I say, “I fell in love with you despite all your weird hillbilly quirks.”

“You’re so going to pay for that!” she squeals, climbing back on top of me and capturing my wrists with her hands. “Hands up, Deputy. You’re going to pay for that.”

I smile up at her and give in to her playful demands. “Yes, ma’am,” I mock in an overly thick Southern accent. “Show me your best.”

COURTNEY

Somehow time slipped through my fingers, and before we both knew it, days of being alone with Drew had passed and he was due back at work. As much as I wanted to, I didn't have the heart to ask him to stay with me. I'm a big girl, and I need to put on my big girl panties, but it doesn't change the fact that I feel like I'm being watched every hour of the day. I hate that we're on different schedules. When he leaves for the day, I feel like my security blanket has been swiftly yanked away, causing the panic to ripple through me.

As soon as we returned from Vegas, we filed a temporary restraining order, but I know it's not like a magical force field that will keep Mia away. It's just a piece of paper with legal consequences, but when people are already living in an alternative reality, what does that really mean? Doesn't mean it'll stop her, but the more paperwork that's documented, the better. Or that's what Drew's told me. However, I've watched too many episodes of CSI to not be paranoid.

As soon as I hear the front door creak closed, my eyes bolt open. It's almost four in the morning and I want to slide off my bed and hide underneath it with the small crafting scissors I left by my nightstand. But instead, I take a deep breath, count to ten, and remind myself it's just Drew coming home after his shift. I'm trying to be rational, but I decide to grab the scissors just in case.

The bedroom door slowly opens and I can feel my heart pounding in my ears as I hold the scissors so tight it hurts. I sit up in bed quickly, ready to attack, and Drew jumps.

“You scared me!” I say, flicking on the lamp.

“You scared me!” He laughs.

I let out a breath and place the scissors down. Drew looks at them then back at me.
“Court.”

“I don’t want to hear it. I have to protect myself!” I tell him matter-of-factly.

“Those scissors barely cut paper.” He chuckles, then sits next to me on the bed and wraps his arms around me. The hint of his cologne still lingers on his chest and I’m lost in the smell of him. “I put in a request to switch from swing shift to day. We had a few guys retire and the shifts are open. I’m not sure if it’s going to happen, and it will be a while before it does, but I want you to know I’m trying. It killed me to leave today, knowing you’d be here alone.”

I search his face and can’t help but perk up at the thought of him having normal hours. His tongue brushes over his bottom lip and I lean over and kiss him. I just want to stay like this forever, with his arms securely around me.

“Thank you,” I say and reposition myself under the blankets as the adrenaline rush begins to fade.

He removes his belt and unbuttons his shirt. The warm glow from the lamp covers his body that I can’t help but admire. “For what?”

“For caring about me.”

Drew crawls under the blankets and pulls me into his arms. “It’s way past care at this point, Court. I don’t think I can live without you.” As soon as his lips crash against mine, a small moan escapes my lips, but exhaustion covers me. When we pull apart, I

yawn.

“You need sleep. It’s after four and you have to be up in two hours.” Drew tucks a strand of hair behind my ear as I groan and plop down on the pillow. His muscular body fits perfectly against mine and soon I’m finding myself falling back asleep, until my alarm screams at me to get up. It’s only Tuesday and as I drag myself to work, it feels more like a second Monday.

“Oh, you were almost late, Bishop,” Travis says mockingly as he glances down at his watch.

I narrow my eyes at him and the smirk he’s wearing. “Not today, King.”

He flashes me a wink and my shoulders relax. I know Drew told him about what happened in Vegas, but he’s smart enough to not bring it up right now. I could’ve taken a short leave, but I need to find my normal again, and sitting at home thinking about it isn’t what I want.

I walk into the office and find tons of paperwork stacked on my desk, and I’m almost afraid to open my email next. My duties at King Marketing have shifted over the years and Travis has included me in overseeing a few high-stake accounts, which I love because it makes every day different and interesting.

As I’m sorting through the hundreds of emails I’ve received over the last week, Jayden peeks his head in with a smile. “So, did what happen in Vegas stay in Vegas?”

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I look up at him as he walks in and sets a cup of coffee down on my desk. He doesn't know what happened, but no one here does except Travis.

"I wish it did," I say more to myself, and immediately put on a fake smile to change the subject.

Unsure of how to respond, he clears his throat and continues. "I sent you an email last week about the Bradford Corporation. I know you're busy, but can you move me up the list, pretty please?" He gives me a boyish grin, and I smile back at him with a nod.

"I guess, Jayden. Now stop sucking up!" I tease.

He holds his hands out and takes two steps back with a smile. "I'm not, swear!" He leaves with a wink just as Travis enters and shuts my door.

"If you need to leave, I'm okay with it." He sits down in the chair in front of my desk.

"As much as you're a pain in my ass, and it's a very tempting offer, I need to be here today," I joke with him and an evil grin crosses his face.

"Good. And thanks. Viola just lost a bet." He stands with a growing smile.

"Dammit. I've told her to text me when you guys make these stupid bets so I can make sure you lose." I laugh as he walks to the door. "Oh, hey. What did you guys bet this time?"

He turns and looks at me over his shoulder with a smoldering expression. “You don’t want to know.”

I gag in response.

Once Travis leaves, I instantly dig for my phone in the bottom of my purse and send her a text.

C: Please tell me you didn’t bet butt sex again.

V: So, you’re going to take the rest of the day off, right?

C: LOLA! I told Travis I was staying.

V: WELL GREAT!!!

C: Stop placing bets with him! Or at least give me a hint beforehand!

V: Well, I wanted to win fair and square! I guess I’ll learn my lesson one of these days.

I smile, knowing damn well she won’t.

C: HA! Always playing games. Love you, Lola, but I need to get back to work.

V: Want to do dinner tonight? Me + You + Kayla + Margaritas?

C: I would LOVE THAT!

Every day I’m so thankful Viola is my best friend. There are times that I don’t know how I could get on without her. I always wished for a sister, and though we may not

be blood related, she's the closest thing I have to one. And right now, I need her more than ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

DREW

I wake up gasping with my heart racing. Images of the night from the accident swirl together with Mia and it forces me out of sleep. For the past couple weeks, I haven't rested, and now that I'm back at work, I find myself thinking about all of it even more. Not a minute passes before I'm reminded of what happened. The only time the thoughts seem to diminish is when I'm with Courtney. She's my saving grace. I could take another week off, but it's important that I get back to my routine. Tyler was more than ready for me to return yesterday.

I roll over and look at the clock and see it's only ten. Courtney's smell still lingers on the pillow, and I lie there for a minute thinking about her. I never knew I could feel so deeply about someone and have the feelings returned with such intensity. I have a few hours before I have to get ready for work, so I get dressed for the gym and grab my bag, but when I head out the door, I immediately stop. Mia is leaning against her car in the driveway, waiting for me.

"Baby..." She pushes off the car with a beaming smile.

"Mia, you shouldn't be here. You need to leave."

"Drew, I need you."

As I look at her, with blonde hair, the memories of what she did come rushing back in full force and it brings me to a dangerous level of rage. Long streaks of mascara are on her cheeks and her eyes are as wild as her hair. It's hard for me to look at her as a

blonde. It's hard for me to look at her at all. I glance down at her hand and there's a piece of paper gripped tightly in her fingers.

"Why did you do this to me? To us? A temporary restraining order?" She takes a step forward—and I try not to set her off—because after Vegas, I truly don't know what she's capable of.

"All I have to do is make one call. You'll get arrested. You're forcing me to do this." I pull my phone from my pocket.

"I dare you," she threatens.

I begin to dial the number to the station and she screams obscenities at me before getting in her car. As she reverses, she rolls down the window and looks into my eyes. "This isn't over, Drew."

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She speeds down the street, tires squealing, and I'm shocked she had the nerve to come here like this. It's obvious to me now that she thinks she's above the law—the law I swore to protect with my life. Naively enough, I believed the temporary restraining order would have kept her away, but I was foolish in thinking that. If I have to have her arrested for violating a court order document, I will. Enough is e-fucking-nough, but I have a feeling this has only just begun.

I sit in my truck and compile my thoughts before I head to the gym. Once I'm there, I run as hard as I can and it's just me and the music. Highway to Hell plays on repeat and somehow it seems more fitting today than usual. I spend a good hour running and lifting weights and before I head home, I text Courtney.

D: Hey, sweetheart! Just wanted to tell you I was thinking about you.

C: Aww! Well, I was just thinking about you, too.

D: Yeah?

C: Uh-huh. It was totally inappropriate, too.

D: Tease!

I head home, take a shower and get dressed for work. I feel anxious about leaving Courtney alone knowing Mia is on the loose, as crazy as that sounds. If I could take her to work with me, I would. She'd hate it, but at least I'd know she was safe.

I can't help feeling like I'm living in some kind of twisted twilight zone.

After I leave Courtney a sweet note on the fridge, I grab a Ziploc bag of her blueberry muffins. I laugh, thinking she'll notice and call me out on it because there aren't very many left, which is both a good and bad thing. If the fridge is full of muffins, it's a dead giveaway she's stressed, but we eat them almost every day. It's a double-edge sword.

I set them on the counter as I mix a protein shake. As the sound of the blender drifts through the kitchen, all I can think about is in two days I'll be off and Courtney and I can spend time together. It's the only thing that got me through my shift last night, and I'm sure it'll be a reoccurring thought until Thursday.

Since I have time, I sit on the couch in the living room and flick on the TV. It's strange, but I can't help but notice something is off, like someone has been inside the house. I instantly stand up and look around. The lamp next to the couch is nudged just enough for me to notice. I almost text Courtney but I don't want her to worry. Before I leave, I search through the house, making sure Mia didn't somehow find a way in.

By the time I make it to the station, the muffins are room temperature, and I pop one in the microwave and pour a cup of coffee. As soon as I walk back to my locker, the Sergeant Officer on duty, Ashton, stops me.

"Fisher, you're being reassigned to a temporary project starting now."

I almost drop my coffee and muffin. "Okay?"

"A light-duty project," Ashton clarifies.

"What's with the change, sir?"

"Check yourself, Officer Fisher." He narrows his eyes at me and I know it's best to do as I'm told.

I suck in a deep breath and release it, but I'm furious about this. "Yes, sir."

"You'll be due for a meeting in fifteen minutes so you can obtain information for your temporary reassignment."

I give him a head nod and walk away thinking how much today sucks. Never did I imagine when I walked in today I'd be reassigned. It's total bullshit and if I had the balls to speak to the Lieutenant on duty I would, but I don't want to be seen as a crybaby who can't take commands from an upper officer. After I eat two more muffins and drink a full cup of coffee, I enter the conference room and Logan turns around with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"You bastard," I say. "I should've known you were up to this."

All he does is smile. "You can't live without me, literally."

COURTNEY

Directly after work, I meet Viola and Kayla at a cute Mexican restaurant that serves drinks with umbrellas and has a live mariachi band. By the time I made it through rush hour traffic, they already had drinks on the table and greeted me with a smile and a wave from the back of the restaurant. Viola stands up and gives me a big hug and I plop down next to Kayla and give her a side squeeze.

"I told them we'd be here a while." Kayla leans in and gently bumps me with her shoulder then sips her pink drink.

"I don't doubt that one bit," I say just as the waiter arrives with a big smile on his face and more chips and salsa in his hands. I order whatever Viola is drinking and am relieved to be hanging out with them. These girls are the definition of girl squad. After a while, I glance over at Kayla who's yawning and realize she looks exhausted.

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“What’s up, Kay?” I ask, pinching my brows together.

She immediately knows I’m referring to her being a grandma at six in the evening.

“I volunteered at the animal shelter all day today, which I love, but I seriously want to adopt every dog in there. I need a bigger yard.”

I burst out laughing and shake my head at her.

“Seriously! I love all of them,” she gushes, her lips forming into a cheesy grin. “But I washed at least fifteen big dogs today because no one else wants to. They can be a hassle, but I need them to be nice and clean so I can get them adopted.”

“You have such a big heart,” Viola says with a wink.

“Are you saying you’d like to adopt another dog?” Kayla doesn’t waste any time. She’s been volunteering for the last few years on and off, but recently, she’s been there a lot more than usual.

“Travis would kill me. But Gryff could use a friend,” Viola says. She’s always had a thing for puppies and can’t pass up the opportunity to pet a dog that’s in her sight. Kayla instantly lights up. “Well, maybe I’ll bring one or two by for you to foster until I find a forever home! Or three?”

“You’ll have five dogs by the time she’s done with you,” I warn Viola. “Seriously. She’ll bring wine and dogs to your next get-together. She might bring enough to pass them out like party favors.” The waiter sets my drink down and notices we are

nowhere close to ordering, so he steps away, giving us more time.

We continue to laugh and Kayla doesn't deny it; instead, I see a fire in her eye. "Oh my God! That's a great idea," she adds. "An adoption party!" I wrap my arm around her and squeeze and she turns and looks at me. "Court, you should totally get a dog. You've got the perfect fenced in backyard and you could use the company for when Drew's working. Plus—"

"Don't you even. Travis got Viola a puppy and the next thing we knew, she was popping out babies like Easter eggs. I'm not ready for all that yet!"

Viola nods her head. "It's true. Puppies equal babies. But I'm not going to complain about a niece or nephew. So maybe you should get one," she teases. I've never seen two people so excited about babies and animals.

I playfully roll my eyes with a smile. "Well, maybe one day. In the future. I can make that happen for both of you. But, not right now. And plus, how do you know I'm not a cat person?"

"I can get cats, too. Gerbils, rabbits, teacup pigs! Any kind of animal you want." Kayla takes another sip of her drink.

"Oh my God!" My head falls back, laughing. "You're slinging animals like drugs!" I'm laughing so hard and so is Viola.

"You're both going to make me pee myself." Viola wipes tears from her face, which makes me laugh even harder, but this time it's at Viola's expense. "Seriously, don't laugh at me. You both just wait. Getting pregnant and pushing out babies changes things down there. Especially your bladder. Mine is weak as fuck now. One sneeze and I'm a goner."

I suck my lips into my mouth, trying hard to contain my laughter, but the seriousness of Viola's face has me cracking up even harder.

"Y'all don't know how much I needed this," I tell them. "I love y'all so much." Being with them makes it so easy to get lost in the good times, in the right now.

The waiter comes back and we finally order. Viola rests her chin on her fist and searches my face. "Are you okay, Court?"

She knows the details about what happened in Vegas and who was involved, but Kayla has only gotten the CliffsNotes version. Once we got home, we went to the hospital and had blood work taken and went to the courthouse and filed a temporary restraining order until we could schedule an appointment with a lawyer. I felt like the days rushed by and I haven't had free time to tell her every detail, but she deserves to know what's going on.

"I'm okay, I think. I hate being alone in the house at night, knowing Drew won't be home until late. I hate how she knows everything about that house. About Drew. I hate her," I say with a passion.

"She's Voldemort for real," Viola adds. "The one that shall not be named."

"Great, now the Harry Potter theme song is going to be stuck in my head for the rest of the night," Kayla jokes and hums it, then of course Viola joins in.

"You two are ridiculous."

Viola pulls her straw out of her glass and points it at me. "You should be grateful I left my wand at home."

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We start laughing hysterically again when our food arrives and it smells delicious. Today is the first day I've had a real appetite, and I can't wait to dig in because chicken fajitas are one of my favorite Mexican dishes.

We eat and talk, and I fill them in on exactly what I remember. Viola has already heard it all, but she listens intently like it's the first time. "Then I woke up in the hotel room that wasn't ours, no shoes and phoneless and I really began to freak out."

Kayla's mouth is wide open. "How did you get there?"

"I don't know." I shake my head. "She had someone help her."

I continue about the breakfast room service and the bloody hot sauce tears and the more I think about it, the angrier I become. I've never been one to be bullied. I've always stood up for myself and I take pride in that. But here I am cowering to someone who needs to be institutionalized.

"I'm sick of feeling this way," I admit. "I'm sick of feeling like she's got control over us."

"And she does because you allow her to," Kayla adds. It's a harsh truth, but regardless it's the truth. "She's the classic psychopath. She waits for you to be vulnerable, then pounces when you least expect it."

"So, that means I have to expect the unexpected?"

"Exactly," Viola says. "You're so smart, Court. You're way smarter than her, trust

me on that. So, outsmart her. Because honestly, I have a feeling a piece of paper isn't going to keep her away. She doesn't follow the rules like normal people. She's too entitled. Mia has always made her own rules." Viola takes a bite of food. "Beat her at her own game."

My head is reeling and a million questions rush through my mind. "How do you think she found us in Vegas?"

"Easy," Kayla says. "Social media. You posted a lot of pictures. Anyone could have found you if they were looking for you."

"But I have her blocked on everything, so that doesn't add up." I made sure to block her ass as soon as she and Drew broke up. I didn't want her spying on us.

"But do you have all of her and Drew's mutual friends blocked? You tagged him. Just one person had to see it and send a screenshot to Voldemort."

I hadn't thought of that. Viola is so freaking smart. It's all beginning to make sense.

In unison, we say, "The wedding photo..."

"Yep! That's probably what set her off," Kayla says.

"Fuck," I whisper under my breath. In the moment, it seemed like a funny joke, but it lit the fuse to a ticking time bomb.

"We make good detectives."

I turn and look at Kayla. "Speaking of detectives...have you heard from Logan?" I lift an eyebrow and she frowns.

“Not really.”

“I’m sorry,” Viola says. “He’ll come around.” Viola instantly changes the subject because it became awkward. Note taken. I make a mental note to ask Drew about it.

“You know, I would’ve been pissed if you would’ve gotten married in Vegas without me there, but honestly, you’re the only person I can ever see with my brother. I can’t wait until you’re officially my sister.” Viola is smiling so freaking big just thinking about it. And the truth is, I can’t imagine life without Drew in it.

“I can’t wait, either,” I admit truthfully. I’d be the happiest person on earth.

“And I can’t wait to go to another wedding. I love them!” Kayla is back to herself again.

After dinner, we’re all yawning and decide it’s time to go. It’s been a long-ass day, and I hope I’m able to sleep and get rest when I’m home alone again. Yesterday was hard. Before leaving, we exchange hugs and decide we need to do this more often.

While I’m driving home I can’t help but smile because I have the greatest friends in the world. As I pull up to the house, I sit in the Jeep for a few minutes and look around, making sure nothing is out of place, but it all seems normal. I grab a small bottle of pepper spray that I keep in my middle console and make my way to the front door. Before walking inside, I grab the mail out of the box and then unlock the door. After throwing all the mail on the table, I get the pepper spray ready and go through and turn on every light in the house. I release a deep breath, feeling easier about being home until I glance over to the table. I catch a glimpse of an envelope sitting on top of the stack of mail with my name written across the front. My mouth falls open when I place that familiar handwriting.

CHAPTER SIX

DREW

“So, you going to tell me what you’re up to, Knight?” I ask as I follow him back to his office. “I’m guessing there’s no special project, is there?”

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He flashes a shit-eating grin, but doesn't say a word. Fuck.

"Any news on the hotel security footage?" I ask as he shuts his office door behind me. "Is this where you tell me Mia corrupted the footage and now I look like a lying police officer?"

He chuckles softly. "No, but she definitely did have help. My friend at LVPD sent it over and you can tell it's not her; it's a man, but he's wearing a hoodie and keeps his head down."

"Fuck," I curse, shaking my head. Sitting down in the chair across from him, he takes his seat behind his desk and begins typing on his computer. "But it shows her coming in the room?"

"Yes, but she used your room keycard, so she could say you gave it to her or something if she ever has to defend herself in court. The hotel clerk was able to send over the timestamps of when the keycard was used and verified it was the same one you used earlier in the day."

"What was the timestamp when she used it?" I ask, feeling uneasy about it all. Mia's smart. Too smart, which is why I'm feeling uneasy about her having set up this whole plan.

"3:47 a.m."

"Yeah we would've been passed out by then. Oh, speaking of that—our blood tests came back negative for Rohypnol and Benzodiazepines."

“So, if she didn’t roofie you, what was it?” Logan asks the same question I had.

“Temazepam sleeping pills, which when taken with alcohol can be very dangerous, even life threatening.” I clench my jaw at the thought. When I received the call with the results, I nearly punched my car door in, already aware of the side effects.

“Fuck, she wasn’t messing around!” Logan growls, shaking his head as he types on his computer. “She had help, and if we can figure out who it was and get them to talk, we can use them as a witness.”

“But what are the chances of anyone who was willing to help her actually speaking out?”

“Well, someone had to put those pills in your drinks. I’d assume the bartender?” He arches a brow, and I try to remember what the guy looked like.

“He must’ve also been the one who grabbed the keycard when I wasn’t looking. There’s no other way she could’ve gotten it,” I tell him, trying hard to remember our surroundings. I knew better than to let my guard down in an unknown territory, but Courtney and I were drinking, having fun and letting loose. The last thing I anticipated was Mia following us there.

I watch as he jots down more notes. His detective friend at the LVPD, Patrick Wolfe, has been very accommodating and helpful in securing the footage from the hotel. I know it’s not our jurisdiction, and if it wouldn’t get me in trouble, I’d go back up there myself and question him. However, I know I need to trust Logan, and if he says Patrick is legit, then I believe him.

“I’ll get him to pull some video footage while you were at the bar. If we can catch him in the act, he’ll have no choice but to admit that Mia put him up to it.”

“And what if he doesn’t? I wouldn’t put anything past Mia at this point, including blackmail.”

“Well, we’ll figure that out if it comes down to that, but Patrick is pretty hard core. He’ll keep him in interrogation for as long as he can, if he has to.”

“What about getting Mia on camera? Has he found her on there yet?”

“No, but even if he does, I’m not sure it’d prove anything enough to press charges. We’d need witnesses to solidify that she put them up to it, making her an accomplice to drug you, kidnap Courtney, and steal your keycard to get into your room without your permission.”

“So, this guy, the bartender, he could’ve been the guy in the hoodie who carried Courtney out?” I ask, cringing. My jaw ticks, nails digging into my palm from tightening my fists.

“I’d say it’s possible, based off what you’ve been telling me. Mia obviously was smart enough to stay out of the hotel until she was going to the room. Whoever helped and gave her the keycard did it out of the hotel.”

Mia is dangerously intelligent when it comes to her working for what she wants. She plays games and doesn’t follow rules. She makes up her own kind of crazy. Her agenda is dead set on getting me back, and I have an uneasy feeling she’s not going to stop until she feels like we’re even.

Logan and I spend the next few hours looking over other cases while we wait to hear any new updates from Patrick. It’s been awhile since Logan and I have worked together and it brings back a lot of good memories. Although I’ll be back on my regular patrol duty with Tyler tomorrow, I missed having Logan as my partner.

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“So, how’s Skylar doing?” I hesitantly ask as we take our lunch in the break room. He’s been pretty quiet about it lately, so I know it can be a sensitive issue sometimes.

“Good. We’ve been FaceTiming every night and I’ll be driving up there this weekend,” he says with little expression on his face. “Could deal without the drama, but it’s better than it has been, at least.”

“Well, that’s good news,” I say, waiting to see if he’ll elaborate further, but when I realize that he isn’t, I don’t press him on it. He’s private about his personal life, and I never felt right digging for more. I figure if he wants me to know and feels like talking about it, he’ll open up when he’s ready.

“How’s Courtney doing with everything? Still shaken up?”

I exhale. “Yeah, you could say that. She nearly murdered me with a pair of dull scissors this morning when I came in. She’s paranoid.”

“Can’t say that I blame her. I’m sure Courtney can hold her own, but Mia is another level of crazy.”

I shake my head, wishing I’d seen this side of Mia from the beginning. “I know. She’s carrying around mace like it’s an accessory.”

“Jesus,” he mutters.

“Doesn’t help I’m not home at night when she gets off work,” I admit, feeling guilty. “Mia showed up at the house today.”

He jerks his head toward me, his features tight. “Did you call it in?”

“Was just about to if she didn’t leave and once she saw I wasn’t playing around, she finally did. However, I have a feeling that restraining order isn’t going to do shit to keep her away.”

“We need proof,” he states. “Proof she was involved so you guys can press charges.”

I nod in agreement. “I just wish I understood her motive. I know she wants to get back together, but how can she even think I’d want her back at this point? Is she just messing with us to get revenge, or does she truly think I’ll leave Courtney and go back to her?”

As we sit and eat our food, I ponder that exact thought. Even if I wasn’t with Courtney and was single, I’d never take her back again—too many lessons learned. But is she doing this just for the thrill or to seek revenge in hopes Courtney will actually be the one to leave me? I wouldn’t put any of those reasons past Mia, but now that I’m really thinking about it, would Courtney think my baggage is too much for her and leave?

Logan finishes his food before I do and heads back to his office. I decide to call Courtney and make sure she’s doing all right.

“Drew?” she says before I can even speak. “Oh my God.”

“Court, what’s wrong?” I immediately panic, standing up and grabbing my stuff off the table. “Are you okay?”

I can hear her rapid breathing through the phone and the urge to go to her and leave work overtakes me.

“I-I think Mia was here,” she finally spits out, and I feel my heart fall into my stomach. I hadn’t told her yet because I didn’t want to do it over the phone. “There was a letter in the mailbox with just my name on it. No stamp or return address, but I recognized her handwriting from the note she left in the hotel room.”

Fuck, that bitch. I should’ve known she was up to something else.

“Sweetheart, lock the doors and windows and wait for me. I’m leaving work early.”

“I’ve already locked, bolted, glued everything shut!” she shouts. “I hate that she puts this fear in me, Drew. I-I’m so tired of feeling this way. Feeling paranoid that she’s going to be there anytime I turn around. I just...”

She’s starting to unravel and I need to calm her before she completely does.

“Baby, listen to me,” I say calmly, hoping she’ll focus on the sound of my voice. “I’m coming home. Stay put, okay? I’ll be right there.”

COURTNEY

I warned you. Prepare yourself. I’m watching.

What in the actual fuck?

I immediately look around; paranoid she’s watching me in the house right this minute. Part of me wishes she’d just show her ugly face so I can show her exactly how prepared I am to kick her ass; however, the other part fears she’d actually come with some kind of weapon.

I set the envelope and note back down on the table and snap a picture of it. If it’s proof we need, I’m not taking any chances of this going missing.

Feeling uneasy, I do a lap around the house, double-checking that every window and door is locked, looking inside closets and under beds, and even the mudroom.

Just as I'm closing the door, a loud noise from the bathroom makes my stomach leap into my throat. Oh my God. She's in the fucking house.

I should've known that bitch would break her order and come after me when she knew Drew wouldn't be home. I panic even more as I realize I left my phone on the table. Tiptoeing back to the dining room, I grab it as quietly as I can. My heart is beating so hard; I can barely keep up with my heavy breathing.

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Before I can call Drew, his name pops up on my screen with a loud ring. It scares the shit out of me and I nearly drop it before I can answer it. Tears start to surface at how relieved I am to hear his voice. He reassures me that everything will be okay and that he's on his way home.

But just in case, I head back into the mudroom and lock myself in there until he's back.

"Court?" I hear him yell ten minutes later.

I unlock the door and pop my head out. "In here!"

"Babe, what are you doing in here?" He opens the door wider, looking around.

"I think she's in the house," I whisper. "I heard a noise in the bathroom."

"When?"

"Right after you called."

He gives me a look and then says, "Hold on." He shuts the door and I can hear his footsteps moving away from the mudroom. After a minute, he returns, peeking around the door. "What kind of noise was it?"

"Like a loud banging, I guess. I read the card that said she was watching me then I heard the noise coming from the bathroom."

“A noise like your curling iron hitting the floor?” He holds it up for me to see. “It fell off your hook.”

My shoulders fall when I realize I’m overreacted for nothing. I can’t believe I let her stupid note get to me. It’s exactly what she wanted.

“I’m an idiot.” I deadpan, taking the curling iron from his hand. “I walked right into her trap.”

“Sweetheart, you couldn’t have known.” He’s trying to make me feel better, which is sweet, but nothing could make me feel better right now. I feel so stupid.

“She was here.”

“Yes,” he confirms. “She was parked in the driveway when I was heading out to the gym. I told her to leave or I’d call the cops. She called my bluff, so I started to call and that’s when she left. She knows I’m not messing around.”

“Well, according to her note, she’s ‘watching’ me and I need to ‘prepare’ myself.” I roll my eyes back, clenching my teeth.

“I’ll take it to Logan and he can add it to her growing file. The more we get on her, the better for our case.”

“And then what?”

“Then we can press charges and she doesn’t win.”

I exhale a breath of relief although I’m not really sure I’ll ever completely feel relief.

“Logan is working closely with the LVPD and they’re looking through surveillance

footage to make sure we find the guy helping her.”

“And what if they don’t?”

“They will.” He cups my face and presses a soft kiss to my lips. “I won’t let you down, okay? I promise.”

I mold my body into his chest and feel comfort in his arms. The more I think about the fear she’s put in my head, the angrier I become. I’m not a pushover and I can’t believe I let her threats get to me. If she wants a war, she’s going to get one.

Drew and I spent the rest of the night together, which makes everything feel better. Falling asleep in his arms put me back at ease, and by Wednesday morning, I wake up refreshed and ready to kick the day’s ass.

Travis makes sure to keep me extra busy today, which is great for my mind, but not great for my feet. These new platform shoes are squeezing my feet and making my heels sore as hell. Once I finally sit down at my desk, I slip them off and send Kayla a text.

C: Are you busy tonight? I need a pedicure BADLY.

K: I’m volunteering at the shelter until 6. I can meet you after?

C: Perfect! That’ll give me time to stop for a coffee first.

K: Like you needed an excuse anyway. I’ll take a skinny latte, not that you asked.

C: Ha! Sorry! My brain is mush today. I’ll meet you there around 6:15 with coffee in hand!

I decide to call Viola on my lunch break and see if there's any chance she can get away for an hour or two tonight.

"Hey!" she greets as soon as she picks up. "Everything okay?"

I clear my throat. "Yeah, fine. Any possibility you'd be able to come with Kayla and me to get pedicures tonight?"

"Tonight?" she asks and I hear the high pitch in her tone. I know she's devoted to her kids and tucking them in every night, but I'm starting to forget what she looks like.

"Yeah, around six."

"Ginny, I said don't touch that!" she screams into my ear and I pull the phone away at the sound. "Ginny Rose! One... two..." she starts to slowly count until I hear Ginny screaming her lungs out.

"Did I call at a bad time?" I cringe at the loudness of the chaos happening in the background.

"No. It's just lunchtime."

I laugh. "Well, okay. Sounds a little crazy."

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“Because kids are crazy. They test your limits, their boundaries, and push your buttons on a regular basis.”

“Sounds like you could use some help. Have you thought about hiring a nanny?” I ask, knowing Viola never intended on being a stay-at-home mom. I know she loves being a mom, but with Travis running his own marketing firm and working long hours, she ends up alone with the kids a lot.

“Yes, but honestly I’d probably just follow the nanny around to make sure she didn’t hurt my babies.”

“Well, they have those nanny cams,” I suggest. “I just worry about you is all. I miss you.”

She sighs. “I know. I miss you, too. Now that James is walking, he gets into everything. Ginny is the pack leader and together they outnumber me.”

“Okay, how about this? One of these nights after work I’ll make you and Travis dinner and watch the kids for a bit while you two eat. Drew will be at work and it’ll give me something to do besides bake muffins all night long.”

“Oh my God, Court,” she moans into the phone. “That sounds amazing. Seriously.”

“You guys need it,” I say. “I’ll even bring some of my muffin stash I keep in the freezer. But only if you come with me tonight! We need a little girl time.”

“Dammit, I should’ve known you’d have an ulterior motive.” She groans with a

laugh.

“Just a little one,” I quip. “So, tell Travis he’s on dad duty tonight and meet us at the salon at 6:15. I’m bringing coffee.”

“Okay, I’ll be there! You know what kind of coffee I like.”

Shutting my computer down at 5:45, I send Drew a quick text before heading out.

C: I miss you, baby! The girls and I are getting pedicures tonight but I should be home before 9 if you want to call me on your break.

D: Miss you too, sweetheart. Working with Logan today. I’ll call you around 9. Love you!

C: Love you, too. Be safe!

Hearing him say—and reading—those three magic words never gets old. It still feels like a dream sometimes. When he looks me in the eyes and tells me how much I mean to him and how much he loves me, it’s surreal. Never did I imagine he’d have the same feelings for me as I have for him and as our relationship becomes more serious, the fear of losing him gets even stronger.

I swing by Starbucks and order two skinny lattes for the girls and a large black coffee for myself. Driving to the nail salon, I smile at the thought of seeing Viola and Kayla again. We don’t normally get this much time to catch up, so I’m taking full advantage. After everything that’s happened this week, another girl’s night out is just what I need.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DREW

This morning I kissed Courtney goodbye before she left for work knowing we'd finally get to spend the next few days together. Working twelve-hour shifts for four consecutive days messes up my sleep schedule, but on Thursdays I catch up on sleep while she's at work for the day.

Once she leaves, I fall back asleep and once I wake up, I head out to the gym for a few hours. Afterward, I make a protein smoothie and take a shower. Just as I finish dressing, Courtney walks through the front door and before she can sit down, I pull her into my arms and press my lips against hers.

She sighs against my mouth and smiles. "What's that for?"

"I'm just happy to see you."

Wrapping her arms around my neck, I slide my arms around her waist.

"I'm happy to see you, too," she says, setting her purse down on the table.

"Don't get comfortable. We're leaving right away."

She stares up at me with a cute little smirk on her lips and asks, "To where?" She arches her brow, trying to read me. "What are you up to, Deputy?"

"It's a surprise." I flash her a devilish grin and she continues looking curiously at me.

I grab her hand and lead her out the door. We get in the truck and drive down the street, and she asks me questions, trying to put all the pieces together.

"Okay, I give up." She drops her shoulders. "Where the heck are we going?"

I decide to take the long way, back streets and all, so she won't immediately figure it out. I slowly turn onto Main Street and pull into a parking lot. She gasps as she sees the building for the Sacramento Animal Shelter.

"What?" she shouts, sitting up in her seat. "Seriously?" The smile that covers her face is infectious.

I grab her hand and press my lips against her knuckles. "Yup. I figure it's a good time."

She practically bolts out of the truck before I can put it into park. Kayla pushes the front door open as soon as she sees Courtney running toward the building. I catch up with them just before they head inside.

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“There’s my favorite couple in the world,” Kayla says, exchanging hugs with Courtney and me. “Now let’s get you a fur baby—or two.” She flashes me a wink and we walk through the building, passing several cute cats, and we follow her outside.

“You’ll have to watch her, Drew. She’s the best doggy dealer in Sacramento. She slings more dogs than any other.”

“Sounds like some serious shit,” I tease as we follow Kayla who has a bop in her step.

Courtney stops and bends down at one of the cages outside and holds out her hand to a furry mid-sized dog with white and brown hair. He’s the only dog in the big caged area—all alone. He has a cute face, and he’s the size of a golden retriever. The perfect guard dog—I hope.

“This is Buddy. He’s been in the shelter for a while,” Kayla says. “He’s such a sweetheart, but everyone always wants puppies.” Her eyes begin watering at just the mention of his name. “I’ve been trying to find him a forever home for so long. He’s a Forget Me Not pet. People just pass him by and it breaks my heart.” Kayla is getting emotional talking about him and her hand shakes as she opens the gate. Buddy lowers his head as Courtney moves closer to him.

“Come on, Buddy. Come on,” she says calmly and gently pats the ground with the palm of her hand. I smile when his tail wags.

Kayla watches and she’s on edge as Courtney calls Buddy’s name. I lean against the opening of the doorway and can see he’s not moving, so I join Courtney on the

ground and match the softness of her tone. “C’mon, Buddy. Who’s a good boy?”

He takes a few slow steps forward, then runs to Courtney and proceeds to vigorously lick her face, not missing a single spot. She falls back on the cement laughing. He’s friendly and sweet and for being a little older, he’s still playful and full of life. Courtney sits up and wraps her arm around his neck and hugs him as he continues his onslaught of doggy kisses.

“See, I told you he’s a big sweetheart,” Kayla says with a wide grin.

“But will he bark and keep the bad people away?” Courtney speaks in an overexaggerated playful tone and I can’t help but laugh. Buddy nudges my arm with his cold, wet nose as Courtney continues to pet him. His tail is wagging back and forth so fast, I’m worried it’ll wag right off.

“Do you want to continue to walk around?”

Courtney doesn’t answer, so Kayla moves to the next step. “So, do you think he’s the one?” Kayla’s eyebrows are lifted with a hopeful smile. I look down at Courtney and she looks at me asking for silent permission.

“Yes,” we both say in unison and she lets out a happy sigh.

“Yay! Oh my God, I’m so excited for you two,” Kayla squeals without taking a breath. “I just need you to fill out some paperwork and pay the adoption fee.” Kayla offers a hand to Courtney but she stays on the ground with Buddy.

“We’ll be back for you, okay?” Courtney tells Buddy. “We’re coming right back. I promise.” She kisses his face.

“See, Buddy?” Kayla bends down and pulls his head into her hands. “I kept my

promise when I told you I'd find you a good home."

We stand and step out of the kennel so Kayla can lock the gate. Buddy's tail stops wagging and it actually breaks my heart. "We're coming back, promise. Be a good boy."

We walk back inside and step into the office. Courtney begins asking Kayla all sorts of questions of the dog's past like it's an interrogation or something. I glance over at her with a smirk and she relaxes her shoulders a tad. She's excited, but I can tell she's a little nervous, too.

"His owner got sick and put him up for adoption, but he's been here for a while. He's sweet, energetic, and playful once you get him out of his shell. Sometimes I look at him and he just looks so sad. I imagine it's like being picked last for a sports team or not getting a date to the senior dance or something. He's watched so many other dogs come and go, and he's just been...forgotten." She frowns, looking down, careful not to make eye contact because she's getting emotional.

"That's so sad," Courtney says, holding her hand over her heart.

Kayla smiles. "I'm just so happy you guys fell in love with him and are adopting him. This isn't a no-kill shelter, which is why I bust my ass to find these animals homes. It breaks my heart."

Courtney grabs my hand and squeezes as Kayla walks around the corner and slides the application over to Courtney to fill out.

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“So, what kind of dog is he?” I ask, breaking the tension.

“A Heinz 57!” Courtney says.

“He’s a cocker spaniel-golden retriever mix, from what I can tell,” Kayla giggles.

Courtney slides the paperwork across the desk and I give Kayla my credit card to pay the adoption fee. “Now make sure not to let him out without a leash. He really likes beef treats and running.”

Courtney’s mouth falls open. “We get to take him home today?”

Kayla winks. “I’m the doggy dealer, remember? You want a dog, I’ll make it happen.” She stands up and pulls a leash out of a drawer in her office. “Buddy gets a pet license, too, so if he breaks out, he gets a free ride home. So you won’t get fined if he’s caught roaming. Come back in the next few days, and I should have it ready for you.”

Now I’m the one laughing. “No way. A dog license?”

“Yes, and he has a microchip. He’s been neutered and is up to date with all his shots. In this little goodie bag there is a voucher for a free checkup with the vet. I’d probably take him in a few months once he’s settled.” Kayla hands Courtney the bag and then they hug. They release their embrace and we follow Kayla back outside with a leash in hand. Buddy is lying on the ground in his cage. This will be the last time he’s locked up like this.

“Told you we’d be back,” Courtney says as Kayla bends down and puts a tag on his collar and clips the leash.

Before I can even brace myself, Kayla pulls us both into a big hug. “Thank you so much. I know you guys will take good care of each other.”

Buddy is so excited as he walks out of the shelter on the leash and I swear he’s doing a victory dance. I bend down and pick him up and set him between us in the front seat of the truck and Courtney looks at me with tears of happiness in her eyes as she buckles in next to him. “Thanks, babe. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I think I do.” I give her a smile as I crank the truck. “But I can’t believe we only walked out with one dog. Viola warned me about Kayla when we chatted about it.”

“Viola knew the whole time you were doing this?” Courtney is twirling her fingers in Buddy’s brown fur.

“Yeah, she said something about first comes a dog and then comes a baby?”

Courtney’s eyes widen and then she bursts out into a big laugh. As we travel home, Buddy sits between us with his lazy tongue hanging out and I can tell he’s just as happy as Court.

We did a good thing today. We saved a life.

COURTNEY

Never did I imagine this is how my Thursday night would play out. I’ve got the cutest dog I’ve ever seen in my life and it’s all because of Drew. I haven’t had a dog since I was in high school, and as much as I joked with Kayla the other night at the

restaurant about it not happening, deep inside I knew it would be a good idea. Buddy and I will be the best of friends, especially when Drew is on nights. As soon as I saw his messy fur and the sparkle in his eyes, I knew he was meant to be our first fur baby.

Drew pulls up to the house and gets out. I make sure the leash is on Buddy as he jumps out of the truck. Drew unlocks the door and walks right to the mudroom then returns with a big bag of dog food in his arms with a bow wrapped around it. I can't stop smiling.

"Oh, I got dog food and water dishes, too. I called the shelter before we went to see what kind of food I should pick up, so we're stocked up on that." I love seeing him so excited about this.

Drew fills one bowl with water and the other with food and sets it down. Buddy walks over to him with his tail wagging and begins eating right away.

"So..." I walk over to Drew and run my finger up his chest.

He places a finger over my lips with a smirk. "Not in front of the fur kid."

We both burst out laughing and Buddy looks over at us like we've lost our minds, which I feel like we kind of have. We move to the couch and I can't stop kissing Drew. Minutes pass and we get lost in the moment. Knowing this is going to the next level, I stand ready to lead him to the bedroom. Just as he places his hands on my hips there's a knock at the door. We stand there frozen, and Buddy takes off running and hides behind us.

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“You’re supposed to be barking,” I turn and say to him and he looks up at me like I’m the one who needs to protect him. His ears go back and I can tell it’ll take some time for him to come around. There’s another knock and Drew goes to the door and opens it.

I look around him and see Kayla just as he opens the door with a bag full of treats. She must have rushed to the pet store right after she left the shelter to make it here. She’s out of breath but smiling like crazy. “I wanted to get Buddy a new home present.”

“Did you wipe out the store?” I tease with a thank you. Buddy runs to her and places his paws on her legs.

“Be a good boy,” she says to Buddy then gives him a wide smile and a pat on the head. “I have to get going. I might have a coffee date later. I’m still waiting on an answer.” The look she gives Drew isn’t lost on me, and I’m half-tempted to ask her with whom, but I don’t push it. I’m willing to bet it’s with Logan. But if she wanted me to know, she would’ve named-dropped who she was going with. Before she leaves, I give her a big tight hug. “I’ll let you know how it goes,” she says.

“I’ll be waiting.” I give her a wink and she’s on her way.

Once she’s gone, Drew comes to me. “Hungry?”

“Starving.” My stomach is growling and all the excitement had pushed it away.

“Want to grab some dinner?”

“But what about Buddy?” I ask as he stares up at me.

“We’ll turn on the TV for him. Apparently, dogs like that. We’ll only be gone for less than an hour. He’ll be fine.” Drew pulls me into his arms. “Damn, you smell so good.”

“If you don’t stop, we’ll never make it to dinner,” I whisper against his mouth as his warm hands run under my shirt. He pulls me closer and I sink deeper into his lips. I feel as if I’m gasping for air as my world mixes and mingles with the taste of him. It’s so hard to pull away because it feels so good to be with him without worry. Somehow, we break apart and we’re both breathless. I glance down and can see the hardness in his pants.

“You’re right. We should go now or you’ll be my dinner. But I just need a minute to get the image of your body out of my head.”

I click the TV on and flip through channels until I find something dog appropriate.

“He’s not going to care what you pick,” Drew tells me, and I gracefully disagree.

“It can’t be something loud with explosions. What about this? Antique road Show.”

“Sure, so when we get back he’ll be able to price all of our prized possessions.”

I snort before laughing. “Shut up.”

Somehow Drew is able to pull himself together enough for us to leave. When it comes to him, I lose my inhibitions and it’s hard for me to break away. Before we leave, we pet Buddy, give him kisses and walk out the door.

“It was so hard leaving him. I can’t help but feel guilty about it especially when he

looks at me with his sad puppy eyes.”

We get in the truck and Drew turns and looks at me with his big hazel eyes and pouty lips. “I’ll remember that next time I want something,” he says.

I scrunch my nose and give him a smile as he cranks the truck. “It won’t work because I’ll know you’re playing me.”

He interlocks his fingers with mine and we drive a few blocks down the street to one of our go-to places. It’s a cute deli shop that has the best sweet tea. It almost reminds me of home. Plus, I didn’t want to go too far because I felt bad about leaving Buddy at the house alone. I’m hoping it’ll get easier with time. Honestly, I can’t imagine how Viola feels when she leaves her children. I’m already wrecked over a dog.

We order, sit, and wait for our food. Once Drew starts talking about everything he did today, all I can think about is his lips on mine and how much he means to me. No one or nothing will ever be able to take that away. No amount of threats will change the way I feel about him.

As if he reads my mind, he speaks, and it pulls me back to my reality. “I love you, Court.”

“I love you too. Today I tried to imagine my life without you and it was impossible. I can’t even remember life before you,” I admit. “And now you’ve gone and got me a dog.”

“You’re the love of my life, sweetheart. I’d get you five dogs if it’d make you happy and help you feel safe.”

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An overwhelming sensation rushes through me and I almost tell the cashier to make our food to go, but our salads arrive when I stand to change our plans. We eat, but it's so hard to concentrate. He says all the right things all the time and I realize how much I need him. I need him physically and emotionally. As he eats and shoots me cute smiles, all I can think is how lucky I am to have him.

Once we're done eating, he speeds home, and when we walk inside the house, I basically jump him.

"Mm," he hums against my lips as he kisses me against the door and that's when I feel Buddy at my feet. We stop and look down at him, then back at each other.

"The bedroom?" Drew asks, and I nod my head. Before we head that way, I stop in the kitchen and throw several treats on the floor, hoping it will occupy him.

We walk to Drew's room and once we're inside, he pushes me against the wall and his kisses are so greedy, I'm gasping for air. My eyes roll into the back of my head as he kisses down my stomach, unbuttons my dress pants, and slides them down along with my panties. I step out of them and kick them off and I sink into his touch as he circles my clit.

Wasting no time, Drew drops to his knees and swings my leg over his shoulder as he buries his face between my legs. His hands steady me on my hips as I allow him to take all of me. Right before I fall into the sexual euphoria that Drew's created, there's scratching on the other side of the door. Drew smiles against my pussy and we both try to ignore it, but Buddy starts whining a loud cry. Drew pulls away as I teeter on the edge of orgasm.

I let out a frustrated huff as Buddy's cries get louder. "We should probably check on him to make sure he's okay."

"If we ignore it, will he stop doing that?" Drew asks, readjusting himself. He's so hard that he's basically bulging out of his pants.

"We can try." I give him a smirk and he moves me to the bed.

As soon as Drew's teeth pinch my nipples, Buddy begins whining and scratching at the door again.

"I'll take him outside," Drew says. "Maybe he needs to go."

I sit up, realizing that's probably the issue. "Okay, hurry back. I need you."

Drew opens the door and Buddy bolts into the bedroom and jumps on the foot of the bed and lays down. I stand up and grab a pair of shorts from one of the many drawers I've taken over in Drew's room. "Go outside. You hear that? Your new daddy is calling you."

Drew is clapping and whistling by the back door for Buddy, but he's not moving—not even an inch. I hear footsteps echoing toward the room and smile when Drew leans against the doorway with his arms crossed.

"I never knew a dog could be a cock-blocker. Maybe that should be his name instead."

I laugh. "Wanna go outside?" I ask in an overly high-pitched tone. "Come on. Let's go."

Buddy jumps off the bed and follows me to the backdoor. I open it and he runs

around, pees on every tree, sniffs along the fence, and pees once more. Once he's finished sniffing almost every inch of the yard, he bolts past me through the dining room, down the hallway, and jumps on the end of the bed and starts digging.

"Buddy!" Drew scolds. The big ball of fur lies down, stares at us, and I'm pretty sure he's made the decision he isn't moving for the rest of the night.

"I can't do it with him in here," I tell Drew, looking at Buddy with frustration.

For the next thirty minutes, we try coaxing him with treats, food, water, outside, and nothing works. He just wants to be close to us, and eventually we give up, knowing it's a lost cause. He's in a new place with new people and we decide that just for tonight, we'll allow this, but next time he may get ignored when he's throwing a fit. We turn on the TV and watch reruns of Friends like an old married couple. It's not the ideal ending to my night, but it's not the worst way, either. Any time spent with Drew is a good time.

With Buddy at our feet, Drew wraps his arm around me and pulls me closer to his chest. I can hear his heartbeat as he speaks. "I imagine this is what it's going to be like when we have kids. We'll have to figure out a way to still enjoy each other."

It's the first time he's ever mentioned anything like that to me. I sit up and search his face then press my lips against his. "You want to have a family with me?"

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My heart is so full of happiness that I can't hide the smile that covers my face.

He nods his head and returns his lips to mine. "The truth is I couldn't imagine a family without you."

CHAPTER EIGHT

DREW

Who knew adopting a dog would be such a big responsibility? Well, I knew, but I didn't realize how much attention he'd need, how many times he'd wake me during the day to go outside, and how much anxiety he'd have anytime I left the house.

However, I know Courtney loves having him around, and if all that means she feels safer, then I'll do whatever it takes to keep her happy. After a week of spending time with Buddy and watching him interact with Courtney, I have no doubt he's the right pick for us. I'm almost getting used to sharing the bed with him, but now I think it's time to get him a dog bed for the nights Courtney and I are both home. It's getting a little overcrowded. Buddy isn't exactly a small dog and Courtney and I need our alone time back.

"What do you think about this one?" I ask her as she holds onto the cart in the pet store. "This feels soft and looks pretty comfortable." I rub my hand over the bedding.

She shrugs, clearly not paying attention. She's been out of it the past day or so, knowing that we're due back in court tomorrow morning. This whole thing with Mia is starting to weigh on both of us. I just want it to be over so we can move on without

feeling like it's unresolved. Since we were able to get a temporary restraining order, we go in front of the judge for the permanent one tomorrow. The unknown of what to expect is driving at her and I've been doing anything I can to distract her from it. Buddy can't even get her out of her haze.

"Sweetheart?" I say, grabbing her attention. She finally looks over at me. "You're going to drive yourself crazy thinking about it."

She sighs, her shoulders falling. "I can't help it. The anxiety of possibly seeing her face to face and having to relive the details of that night are driving me nuts." She points to the dog bed and nods her head. "That one is good."

I grab it and place it in the cart.

"And part of me just wants to walk up to her and slap her across the face until her ugly nose ring falls out." She narrows her eyes and releases a breath. "But being a Southern lady, I won't stoop to that level or let her bring that side out of me," she says through clenched teeth which really brings out her Southern accent.

"You have every right to be upset and stoop to whatever level, but you're right. The more we allow her to get under our skin and upset us, the more she gets off on doing it."

She nods, releasing a slow breath. I've noticed that a lot with her recently. She's been using her yoga breathing techniques anytime she gets worked up about something.

"I'm just glad your friend's lawyer friend agreed to help us out on such short notice," she says, talking about my partner, Tyler's friend, Jake. He's a defense attorney who specializes in family law but agreed to represent us in case things get ugly.

I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear and look into her eyes. "Stop worrying. We're

going to get through this and finally be able to move on, okay?" I tell her, trying to reassure her, although knowing Courtney, nothing I say will calm her nerves.

She nods and we continue looking for more dog toys. Since Buddy's arrived, he's taken over the bed, his shit has taken over the backyard, and his fur has accumulated in every corner of the house. He's also started randomly chewing on things out of boredom when he's home alone. Courtney doesn't want to kennel him, so we're going to try some heavy-duty bones and toys to see if that occupies him enough until one of us is home with him.

Since we have court tomorrow, Travis gave Courtney the day off and once it's over, we'll have the rest of the weekend to spend together. If the weather cooperates and doesn't rain, we plan to take Buddy to the dog park and help him get some exercise and socialization with other dogs.

"So, have you thought about what you want to do for your birthday next weekend?" she asks as we drive back home. Truth is, I really haven't thought much about it. Spending time with Courtney is all I ever want to do. As long as she's with me, it doesn't matter what we do.

"Not really. But I wouldn't be opposed to you giving me my birthday gift early." I flash her a cheeky grin, knowing she'll get exactly what I'm implying.

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She rolls her eyes with a sly smile. “Nice try, Deputy. No matter what special day it is, I draw the line at anal.”

I nearly swerve into traffic and choke on my own saliva. “Jesus, Court!”

She’s laughing, and I’m trying to slow my heartbeat back down.

“You’re so easy!” she says, laughing and wiping away the tears that came at my expense. “Why are guys so obsessed with anal anyway? I mean, is it because it’s like a taboo thing or does it actually feel better? Is it that much tighter? God, it sounds painful.”

“Okay, seriously. You’ve got to stop saying the word anal.” I adjust my crotch and she looks down and notices.

“You’re getting hard? So, you do like anal?” she inquires, and I’m two seconds away from pulling the truck over. She sucks in her lower lip, enjoying the way she’s riling me up.

“Can we not talk about anal right now?” I shift my pants again, getting really irritated that my dick is responding to the way Courtney’s talking. Goddammit.

“So, then, it’s a no on the anal?”

“Courtney!” I shout and she bursts out laughing. “I’m going to bend you over my truck and show you if you don’t stop.”

“Ha! I dare you! There’s no way you’re doing butt stuff without the proper lubricant.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, woman.” She’s trying to make me lose it.

“Okay, sorry.” She pouts her lower lip out and bats her lashes at me. “You look super uncomfortable right now. Perhaps I can help with that...” She rubs her hand over my thigh and starts rubbing me through my jeans.

“You better stop that, Court.”

“But I want to help.”

“Touching me while I’m driving is probably not going to help me, sweetheart.”

“Well just because I can’t offer you anal right now doesn’t mean I can’t offer you my mouth.”

Oh my fucking God. This woman. She’s trying to kill me.

“You’ll get us into an accident,” I warn as she unbuttons and unzips me. I swallow, keeping my eyes locked on the road. “You’re breaking about a thousand laws right now,” I tell her, only halfway teasing because now that she has her hand around me, I don’t want her to stop.

“Then I suggest you keep your eyes on the road, Deputy.” She licks her tongue up my shaft, and I jerk at the warm sensation her mouth brings.

“Do you have any idea how hard that is when you’re sucking my dick?”

“Willpower, babe. Keep us on the road, and I’ll keep my mouth right here.” I hear the

seduction in her tone and it's driving me insane that I can't touch her the same way.

I grind my teeth, fighting the urge to run my hand down her back and strip her clothes off. Fuck, she's got me exactly where she wants me. Taking control and knowing there isn't shit I can do about it until we get home.

"Holy shit, sweetheart. You and that fucking mouth." I groan, ready to speed the rest of the way home and throw her down on the bed. "You're so lucky there're no handcuffs in my truck right now."

"Oh yeah?" she asks and then brings the tip into her mouth until I feel it press against the back of her throat. After that, I lose every thought and the only thing I focus on is getting us back home as soon as fucking possible.

She works my cock like a fucking pro, sliding her mouth up and down my shaft as I shift uncomfortably in my seat. She knows it's driving me insane and it's getting her off knowing how much it's getting me off. I tangle my fingers in her hair and squeeze a fistful. Fuck, she's so goddamn sexy right now and if this stoplight doesn't turn green in the next two seconds, I'm going to have to pull over and bend her ass over the seat. There's no way I can wait until we get back home. I'm about to explode.

"Baby...fuck, I can't hold back any longer," I warn her, ready to come in my palm so it doesn't get everywhere, but she pushes my hand away and sinks her mouth deeper on my dick. She wraps one hand around the base of my shaft, glides her tongue in a circle along the tip, and just as my body tightens, she closes her lips around me and swallows down my release.

Of course, now the fucking light turns green.

I press on the gas and speed the rest of the way home as she cleans me up with her tongue. I swear to God, she lives to torture me.

“That’s a sneak peek at what your birthday gift entails,” she finally says, sitting back upright and licking her lips.

“Are you trying to kill us?” I jokingly scold, tucking my cock back inside my pants.

“Well how was I to know the word anal would set your dick off?” She looks over at me and sucks her lips into her mouth, trying to hold back laughter. Yeah, she knows exactly what she’s fucking doing to me and she’s enjoying it, too.

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Arriving back to the house, I bring in Buddy's new bed and toys and set them down so he can sniff everything. He doesn't seem the least bit impressed by his bed, but after a day or two, he'll get used to it.

"I hope it's comfortable enough for him," Courtney says, watching him sniff around the bed. "I don't think he likes it."

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her in close. "He'll get used to it." Or at least, he better. I want my woman back. And my bed. "How about we let him get acquainted with it and we go out to dinner?"

"Okay. I can do dinner." She smiles up at me.

"That's my girl." I pat her playfully on the ass.

She kneels and Buddy nuzzles into her face. "You be a good boy, okay? Mommy and Daddy will be right back!" She rubs his head and he wags his tail. I smile at the cutesy voice she uses.

"Sweetheart."

She turns her head and looks up at me, all while petting Buddy. "I just hate leaving him. He looks so sad."

"He'll be fine. We'll be gone twenty minutes. Thirty at the most," I try to reassure her, knowing it's not been easy having to leave him home alone. I grab her hand and pull her up, although she's reluctant. "C'mon, Mama Bear. Your baby cub will

survive.”

“Fine.” She pouts. “But I’m looking at pictures of him all the way there.”

I laugh, knowing she’s not in the least bit exaggerating. She must have hundreds of pictures of him on her phone already.

I drive us to a local restaurant and as we pull in, my phone rings, Travis’ name appears over the screen and I hit the speakerphone button.

“Hey, man. What’s up?”

I hear a child screaming in the background before I hear him. “Hey,” he shouts over the screaming baby. “Sorry, James is not happy at the moment.”

“Clearly,” I tease. “So, what’s going on?”

“Well, I thought I’d let you know that your little new love pet is causing Viola some major dog fever.”

“And?”

“And it’s your fault. You need to tell Courtney to talk Viola out of it. I can’t handle anymore poop around here. I’m buried in diapers and potty training as it is.”

I laugh at his winded plea, his voice sounding strained and exhausted.

“Well, it could be worse. She could be having baby fever,” I say, chuckling at the thought of Travis trying to juggle another baby.

“Oh, fuck my life. Do not give her any ideas.” He sounds seriously terrified and

Courtney begins laughing loudly.

“Yes! More babies!” I chant, even though I know Viola had her tubes tied after James was born. Although, it wouldn’t be impossible to reverse the procedure.

“Courtney, I swear to God! Do not put that thought into her head. You hear me?” Travis yells at her through the phone.

“What’s that, Boss? You want to give me a pay raise? How thoughtful of you!” Courtney smiles wide as she continues taunting him.

He groans and James screams once again. “If you pity me at all, you’ll have mercy on my sanity. No dogs. No babies. In fact, I’m thinking of taking one of them back.”

I chuckle, but the look on Courtney’s face is a serious expression.

“He’s joking, right?” she asks.

I nod and then second-guess myself. “I’m pretty sure he is.”

She rolls her eyes with a smirk. “Okay, fine. We better stop before we give Travis a stroke.”

“Thank God,” he breathes out. “So, if you could just maybe tell Viola how much work a new dog is and how she’s not really thinking with a clear head so she gets it out of her mind that we need to have another one, I’d be willing to overlook all those long lunches you take.”

“Ooh, blackmail,” Courtney snickers. “You play dirty.”

“Haven’t you learned not to mess with the King?” he taunts her right back.

“All right. I’m breaking you two up before it starts getting ugly,” I joke. “We’re just about to walk into a restaurant to grab some dinner. We’ll talk later, okay?”

Before I can hang up, Courtney speaks up quickly. “Hey, he only said to talk her out of getting another dog. He said nothing about another baby.”

“Courtney!” Travis shouts just as she presses the button and the call dies.

“Oopsies,” she mutters, pursing her lips.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I roll my eyes as I slip my phone back into my pocket. “Why do you have to torment him?”

“Because it’s fun, obviously.”

I unbuckle my belt and reach for the door. “Let’s go, troublemaker.”

Once we finish eating, we head right back to the house. Courtney is already anxious in her seat and mentions wanting to take Buddy for a short walk before we go to sleep. I agree on the account it’ll hopefully tire him out long enough to sleep on his new dog bed and give me mine back again.

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“Oh, shit,” Courtney mutters as soon as she opens the front door. I can tell she’s not really angry by the concerned tone in her voice. “Buddy, what did you do?”

I step around her and see what she’s referring to. Fluff from inside of his dog bed is all over the floor from the door all the way to the living room. The outside layer of the bed is also in pieces and spread around like a fertilizer machine got ahold of it.

I groan, dropping my keys on the table. So much for getting him out of my damn bed.

“Buddy!” I shout and Courtney’s eyes fly up to mine.

“Babe, don’t be mad. He probably doesn’t even know what he did wrong.” She tries to calm me down, but I’m more than annoyed that he destroyed it in less than an hour of buying it.

“Well, I’m a little mad. We bought him like a hundred chew toys and his bed is the one thing he decides to chew up?”

“Maybe it had a weird odor or something that he didn’t like. I’m sure he thought he was just playing.”

I turn my head and roll my eyes because I know that’s a load of shit. She loves him and is trying to make excuses and I can’t even be that mad knowing how much she wants me to love him, too.

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.” I kiss the top of her head. “I’ll go grab the vacuum.”

Courtney takes Buddy outside while I vacuum up the mess. He's also afraid of the loud noise and the first time we brought it out, he freaked out and peed on the floor. We learned the hard way to take him outside beforehand.

Once it's all cleaned up, I meet Courtney and Buddy outside where she's throwing him one of the new toys we just bought. Buddy's running around, happy as can be. Courtney's smiling and praising him each time he catches it and brings it back. It's hard to be mad when she looks so damn happy, something I know she's been struggling with ever since we got back from Vegas.

"Perhaps it's time to get a bigger bed instead," I tell her.

"Really?" she squeals. "You don't want to get rid of him?"

I furrow my brows and reach for her hand so I can pull her closer to me. "Of course not. He's still a work in progress. We'll figure it out, and for now, if you both feel safer and more comfortable with him in the bed, then we'll make it work."

She looks up at me and smiles wide. "I love you. Thank you." Wrapping her arms around my neck, she pulls our faces together and presses a deep kiss against my lips.

"I love you, too, sweetheart. Quirks and all." I smile back down at her as she chuckles. "Now, let's go take him for a walk so he actually sleeps tonight. I plan to do some not-so-nice things to you later." I lower my hand down her back and slap her ass. She yelps out in surprise and scolds me for spanking her in front of the dog. "I plan to do a lot more than that in front of him if he decides not to sleep tonight, so let's go."

"Yes, sir," she says, mocking me with a salute. "But now that Travis mentioned a second dog..."

“Don’t even think about it,” I warn, cutting her off as soon as I hear her words. “Maybe we can get a plant and see if we can keep that alive first before adding any more members to our home.”

She laughs, squeezing my hand. “Okay, deal.”

CHAPTER NINE

COURTNEY

Friday morning arrives much too soon, and I’m already dreading the entire day. I don’t know if I’m more nervous about seeing her face to face or just the fact that we have to stand in front of a judge and explain why we need a permanent restraining order. Even though Jake will be doing most of the talking on our behalf, I can’t keep the nerves away.

“Ready?” Drew asks, adjusting his tie and looking adorable as hell in his dress slacks and button-down shirt. He’s even wearing black dress shoes and everything about him is making me want to strip him down right here and now.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “No,” I respond bluntly. “I just want to close my eyes and have it all be over.”

He walks toward me, cups my cheeks, and places a soft kiss against my lips. “It’ll be over before we know it.” He flashes a sincere smile, meant to comfort me, but I feel more nervous than before.

Shrugging, I say, “Well, let’s get this over with!”

The next hour goes in slow motion as we arrive at the courthouse, stand with Jake in front of Judge Henderson, and watch as he gets impatient that Mia doesn’t show up.

Her attorney arrives late, still chewing on his breakfast. One look at the judge and it's obvious he's beyond irritated.

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“My apologies, your honor. Ms. Montgomery has come down with an illness last minute.”

More like a mental illness, but if that’s the card she wants to play, then fine. Jake has everything prepared for what we need anyway. The LVPD faxed over their files of the police report and everything else they’ve found in the weeks leading up to the court date. Although we have yet to press charges, this is one step in the right direction.

Jake is the first to speak on our behalf, explaining why the restraining order is necessary, what she did to us, what she’s done to Drew in the past, and why our lives feel threatened enough to file one in the first place.

Her attorney takes a long sip of his coffee as he stands and shuffles through files that look almost empty. You can tell he’s completely unprepared and considering that Mia comes from big family money, I’d at least expect her to come with a big fancy lawyer to defend her.

“After reviewing the plaintiff’s files, a restraining order against Ms. Montgomery is unreasonable and she would like to file a cross-petition.”

“On what grounds?” Jake asks, speaking out of turn. It’s only just begun and he’s already boiling.

Judge Henderson shoots him a disapproving look and motions for Mia’s attorney to continue.

“There’s been no physical evidence or proof that Ms. Montgomery is a threat to them in any way. From what I can tell, everything is speculation. The new girlfriend doesn’t like having the old girlfriend around and she wants her out of the picture for good.”

Before Jake can open his mouth, Judge Henderson tells him to stick with the facts. He also reminds him of just how major the speculations are; even if she wasn’t the one doing the actual act, she’s most suspected for being a co-conspirator in our drugging and my kidnapping. He also reminds him that Mia has most recently shown up at our house and that we feel threatened by her unstable behavior.

Her attorney rambles off facts about how she comes from a wealthy home, an elite university, was in the top twenty percent of her graduating class, and has never shown threatening behavior to either of us, which is obviously laughable. His whole defense infuriates me the longer he speaks. He then tries to say that being in the same city as us is only a coincidence seeing as Vegas is a big tourist city and it shouldn’t be assumed she followed us there or went there specifically to harm us. My eyes roll back so hard, but I squeeze them tight as soon as I catch myself. I cannot let her or her stupid attorney get to me.

While Judge Henderson agrees there hasn’t been any physical harm to us, such as assault, or video evidence of her being involved, the temporary restraining order stays in effect until the next court date. The lawyer is told to ensure his client shows up next time and if she is a no-show again, a warrant will be granted for her arrest. Until then, she’s to follow the orders or jail time will be the next course of action.

Apparently, her coming into our hotel room doesn’t break any laws since she had a keycard, and since we can’t show her being the one to steal it, we can’t pin it on her. Until the LVPD finds the bartender and can get him to talk, we can only make assumptions.

Judge Henderson lets us know that court will resume in twenty-one days. Until then, Mia cannot violate the terms of the restraining order, and if she does, she can face up to thirty days in jail. If she fails to show up, a warrant will go out for her arrest, and then only if they can find her, she'll do jail time. However, part of me doubts she'll actually stay in jail. Her parents come from big money—the kind that you don't do jail time, no matter the circumstances.

Drew and I walk out of the courthouse hand in hand, not really saying anything, just listening as Jake talks to us. He tells us we have nothing to worry about, that even without the video evidence, we'll have enough to be granted the permanent restraining order. Even better if she breaks the order and we have proof of that. He's adamant that we call the cops immediately if she returns.

“Well that was...” Drew begins as he starts the engine.

“Weird,” I fill in for him.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I guess I should've figured she wouldn't show, but man, her attorney is an asshat.”

“He's probably on the family payroll and just found out about the case yesterday,” I say, thinking that must be the reason why he was so out of sorts, which is probably good for us. However, now that we have another court date, that only means he can prepare for next time if he needs to.

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“I wouldn’t doubt that,” Drew says. “Doesn’t change the facts though.”

“So, if she breaks the order, how do we prove it? If we call it in, she’ll just leave before they show up.”

He purses his lips, thinking, and then snaps his fingers. “Cameras. We’ll install them around the house, and if she does come back around, we’ll have proof she’s violated the order.” He glances over at me and smiles. “Plus, I know it’ll make you feel more at ease, and I will too, when I’m not home at night.”

“Some girls get candy and flowers, and I get security cameras around my house,” I say in a teasing voice, although I agree with his idea. Since we’re at a standstill with getting enough proof in Vegas, this is something that makes me feel like we’re more in control.

“Only the best for my baby!” he says in an overexaggerated voice, reaching over and squeezing my thigh. I laugh and rest my head on his shoulder the rest of the way home.

By Thursday the following week, I’m more than ready for the weekend. Jayden’s been keeping my mind occupied with his stupid jokes he keeps sending me, and even though they’re lame as hell, I laugh at them every damn time.

“Oh my God,” I say, trying to cover up my mouth so I don’t disrupt the other workers. “That’s a dirty joke!”

“And you want to know what’s even weirder? My mother sent that one to me!” His

eyes widen as he tells me this. I laugh again, and this time, Bonnie from across the room flashes me a dirty look.

“Your mother must have a good sense of humor,” I say.

“Or boundary issues,” he responds matter-of-factly. I nod in agreement.

“So, remember that upcoming conference I found in San Francisco? I’m going to ask Travis if you can come with me. I think it’ll be a good experience.” I smile as I tell him because I know he’s going to freak out.

“Seriously? You think he’ll say yes?”

“I don’t see why not! You’re obviously here for the long haul and you’re a super-fast learner. A work conference would be great for your continued training.”

“That’d be amazing. I love San Francisco.”

“He’ll probably get back to me today, so when I find out, I’ll let you know right away.”

“Sounds good!” He gives me a little wave as he walks back to his desk. We talked a lot this week, which has surprisingly been a nice outlet for me. He’s listened to me vent about Mia and court and how we installed a camera security system around our house just to be on the safe side. He’s heard all about her crazy shenanigans and it’s been great having someone at work to release some of that frustration onto instead of Drew or Viola.

Drew’s been at work, and it’s just been Buddy and me at home all night. It’s allowed me to do some good planning for his birthday and I can’t wait for this weekend when it all happens.

By Friday afternoon, I'm overly giddy to leave work and get home to Drew and Buddy. Travis approved the conference, and I was excited to tell Jayden the good news this morning. Drew stopped in for our Friday lunch as usual, but now that we have Buddy, he cuts it short to make sure he doesn't get into any mischief.

Either way, it's a nice way to break up my day when I know in just a few short hours, my weekend with him begins. His birthday is tomorrow and I can't wait to share it with him. It'll be our first official birthday together as a couple.

As soon as I walk in our front door, Drew wraps his arms around me. I drop my bag before I even have time to comprehend what's happening. He lifts my body up and my legs tighten around his waist. He palms my ass as my arms wrap around his shoulders.

"Drew!" I squeal, tightening my hold on him. "What are you doing?"

"Shh..." he tells me, walking us down the hallway. "You'll wake him."

"Who? Buddy?" I whisper.

He waits to answer until we're in the bathroom and shuts the door. Pressing my back against the door, he holds me up with his hips.

"I needed to get you alone before he knows you're home," he says against my neck, his lips feathering kisses under my ear. "Biggest cockblocker I've ever met."

Leaning my head back, I laugh at how jealous Drew sounds over a dog. It's adorable.

"So, you're holding me hostage in the bathroom while he sleeps?"

His hands roam down my sides, gripping my hips and steadying us. "Yes. I've hardly

seen you all week and when I come home, the damn dog hogs you in my bed. Figured I needed to strategize to get to you first.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m not enjoying this side of you,” I say with a pleased smile. It’s been a while since we’ve had some alone time together. Between him working all night and Buddy clinging to my side, there hasn’t really been an opportunity for just Drew and me.

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“I’m taking back my woman,” he growls with a smile. “Now get undressed. We’re taking a shower.” He sets me down, and I adjust myself.

“A shower? I thought we’re supposed to go to your parents’ house for your birthday dinner?”

He starts unbuttoning his shirt and for a moment I get lost in watching him. Everything about him is pure perfection and some days, like now, I can’t believe he’s really mine.

“I’m the birthday boy. I can be late for my own party if I want to.” Smirking, he pulls his shirt off and tosses it to the floor. I laugh at his playfulness as he starts unbuttoning his jeans next. “Clothes. Off.”

“All right, all right! But you better not get me in trouble with your mom. Reenacting your first birthday picture is her life. She’ll have our heads if we’re—”

Drew cuts off my words with a kiss and mumbles, “We won’t be late if you stop talking and take off your fucking clothes.”

I smile against his mouth. “Yes, Deputy.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

As fast as I can, I undress, kicking my shoes off and tossing my dress clothes to the floor in a pile. Drew turns on the water and by the steam, I can tell he’s made it extra hot.

Once we're both completely naked, he pulls us into the shower and immediately, his hot lips are on mine. The water runs down his back and over his hair. We step in further until both of us are under the stream.

His hands rub over my arms and body, pressing us against each other. I can feel how hard he is against my stomach, and I'm already greedy for it.

"So, tell me, sweetheart. How many times did you touch yourself in this shower thinking about me?" His mouth moves down my jawline as he speaks in my ear. "How serious was this crush?"

"Oh my God," I groan. "You're so full of yourself."

His fingers move down my stomach and find my clit. He rubs them along my slit and slips one finger inside.

"You're about to be full of me real soon. Answer the question, Court. I want to know."

"No." My head falls back as he pushes a second finger inside, my face and hair not the only part of me drenched.

"No, you didn't?" he asks.

"No, I'm not telling you," I say matter-of-factly.

He cups my chin with his other hand and an evil smirk plays on his lips. "Why not? Embarrassed to admit you touched yourself while thinking about me?"

I shake my head, thinking of the times I did think about him in here. There are toys in my bedroom for a reason. Seeing him every single day, shirtless, sweaty from

working out, his hair slicked back after a shower—a girl had to take care of herself after seeing all that.

“You’ll just let it go to your head,” I say, teasing him just like he’s teasing my clit right now. He’s trying to torture it out of me. He rubs my clit between his thumb and finger, knowing it’s almost enough to set me off.

“I like thinking about you getting off while thinking about me. It turns me on.”

“Yeah? How many times have you taken care of business in the shower?”

He laughs. “That’s not really a fair question.”

“An answer for an answer,” I fire back, his fingers sinking deeper in, making my back arch against the shower wall.

“All right, we’ll play your little game. I’ve jerked off in the shower probably a hundred or more times.”

My head lifts and my eyes widen at his number. “Oh my God!”

“What? I’ve lived here for years, so in retrospect, it’s not really that much.”

“I know, but still. That sounds like a lot.” Just thinking about him in here touching himself is enough to set me off completely.

“Well, I had a girlfriend that was long-distance and sometimes not a girlfriend at all. Would you rather I’d brought back random hook-ups instead?” He brings his hands up and places them on each side of me against the shower wall.

“Well, no,” I admit. “What about in the last six months? How many times?”

A smile forms on his mouth as he presses his lips against mine, avoiding the question. We've been together for over six months now, so asking is only for my own selfish pleasure.

"Don't distract me with your lips," I tease, pulling my head back. "I want to know."

"You haven't even answered my original question. You owe me first."

Damn, he's right.

"Fine. I got myself off probably...every few days or so."

He raises a brow.

"Probably a few times a day."

He raises it higher.

"Multiple orgasms," I say as an explanation. "A girl builds up and sometimes they just keep coming."

His throat moves as he swallows. "How many times?"

I open my mouth, but then close it.

"How many times?" he repeats, his voice deeper.

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“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I think as the boyfriend, I deserve to know. Also, I need to know what number we need to top. So, spill it. What’s the magic number?”

“Didn’t you say talking was going to make us late? Are you going to have your way with me in here or not?” I ask, pretending to sound agitated. I lower my hand to his shaft and wrap my fingers around him. I begin stroking his cock, hoping it’ll distract him enough to drop the question.

He arches his hips into my palm, giving me a better grip. Moaning against my lips, I work him faster. He cups my breast with one hand and palms my ass with the other. His head dips into my neck as he speaks. “This isn’t over, sweetheart. I’m going to find out eventually.”

“We’ll see about that,” I taunt.

He pulls us apart, flips me around, and grabs my hips. My palms lay flat against the wall as he spreads my legs and plays with my clit. “If I didn’t want to fuck you so badly right now, I’d bury my head between your thighs until you were so swollen you’d have no other option but to confess.”

I arch my back and widen my hips for him. It’s enough to distract him for now, but if I want him to let it go, I know bringing up anal on the car ride to his parent’s house would probably do the trick.

He slides inside me, clawing his fingers into my hips as he forms a rhythm. His

shoulders block the water from hitting down on me so I can actually look over my shoulder and watch him as he sinks deeper inside me.

“I love it when you watch me,” he says, bringing our mouths together. He slams harder into me, making a slapping noise that echoes throughout the bathroom. Panting against his heated kiss, I hold myself up on the wall and move my hips back and forth with his. “Fuck, sweetheart. I should’ve just pulled you inside the shower with me all those times instead.”

“Yeah, we really could’ve saved on the water bill,” I mock.

He chuckles against my mouth. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Pushing us apart, he flips me back over so we’re chest to chest and wraps a hand under my thigh and pulls it up to his shoulder. Holding me up with his hip and hands, he slides back in me without warning.

I grab onto his arms as he drives inside me, harder and faster with each thrust, I can feel that I’m close. My head falls back and as he sucks on my neck, I tighten around him. Just as my body shakes with my release, he bites down on my shoulder. I claw my fingers down his arm as I feel him tense and I know he’s close now, too.

“I love feeling you come on my cock. Fuck, it’s so good.” He takes control, gripping my hips and moving them faster against him. I feel the build up again and just as I start coming down, I feel his hand wrap around the thigh that’s raised and slides down to my ass. Unexpectedly, he presses his finger into my tight hole as he continues sliding in deeper.

The sensation is completely unlike anything I anticipated and I actually like it. I cry out louder as another orgasm rides through me. He pushes his finger in deeper and watches for my reaction.

“You like that, don’t you?” he growls, pleased to see I’m enjoying it as much as he is.

I nod, sucking in my lower lip. “Didn’t think I would, but yes.”

He flashes a satisfied smile. “Good.”

“I still draw the line at anal,” I tease. “But I don’t mind this.”

“Never say never, sweetheart. You just might like it more than you think.”

“Just because it’s your birthday, don’t think you can ask for whatever you want,” I say, knowing he will anyway.

“You can’t deny the birthday boy on his birthday. It’s the rules,” he tells me with a faux pout. Although his birthday isn’t until tomorrow, I can’t help laughing at his pathetic plea.

“You’re relentless.” I groan.

“And you’re so fucking good, baby.” He covers my mouth once again, swallowing down a final moan as he builds me up one last time before he releases hard inside me. He slows his pace as we both catch our breath. He kisses me slowly and whispers, “So fucking good.”

CHAPTER TEN

DREW

The sun leaks through the bedroom window and I wake to our legs tangled together and Courtney’s arm resting across my chest. Last night, after dinner with my parents, we came home and almost immediately crashed. The chaos of the week finally caught

up to us.

Buddy is taking up half the bed and we've been forced to share a small sliver of it. I'm not complaining, but the next item on my to-buy list is a king size bed. Since Buddy chewed his up and spit it out for us to clean up, I'll compromise and get a bigger bed.

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“Mm,” Courtney moans with closed eyes and a smile sweeps across her lips. “Happy birthday, baby. I owe you birthday breakfast,” she states, still half asleep.

I chuckle and kiss her hair, her cheek, and then her lips. “It’s more like brunch considering it’s almost ten.”

She sits up quickly and turns and looks at me with wide eyes. “Almost ten? We can’t sleep the day away! It’s your special day!”

“Nah. It’s just another day and it comes every year.” I pull her close until her face is hovering above mine.

“Birthdays are important,” she tells me. “You don’t care what we do today?”

I shake my head. “As long as you’re with me, it’s bound to be an awesome birthday. But I was thinking we could take Buddy to the dog park. It’ll be fun and from what I can see, it’s a beautiful day out.”

“You’re too easy, Deputy. The dog park it is. I’ll make some eggs quick and we can get going.”

I give her my best puppy dog eyes. “Can we skip birthday breakfast and replace it with a birthday blow job?”

Buddy groans as if he understood what I said and jumps off the bed.

“Hold tight. I’m going to let him outside,” she tells me, pressing a finger to my lips.

Courtney runs down the hall and the sound of Buddy's paws against the floor follows behind her. The back door opens and she praises him for being a good listener. A moment later, she's in the bedroom and shuts the door before Buddy can follow behind her.

"He'll be okay out there." She hooks her fingers on my shorts and slides them down my body. Her wide blue eyes meet mine before she places the tip in her mouth.

"Just thinking about your lips on me does that." I nod down toward my cock, which is already at full attention.

She slides her tongue from the tip to the bottom of my shaft, and I close my eyes, losing myself in the sensation of her warm mouth on me. Courtney moves slowly, taking her time and randomly stroking me with her hand. My moans fill the room, and I thread my fingers through her messy blonde hair as her tongue swirls around and traces the crown of my cock. The orgasm builds quickly, faster than I expected, and before I can give her warning, she becomes more aggressive, taking my warmth in her mouth and swallowing it down. She crawls up my body, kissing my stomach, chest, neck and then presses her lips against mine in a heated passion.

Buddy starts howling and scratching against the door and Courtney rolls her eyes. "Tonight, we'll pick up where we left off."

I dig my fingers into her hips as she rocks against me and then climbs off. She slips out of her clothes, leaves them on the floor, and looks over her shoulder at me before walking out of my room. She returns wearing a pair of jeans and a low-cut shirt that I'm already a fan of. When she looks over at me, I'm smiling like a crazy person.

"Get up!" She tugs on my arm.

"Okay, okay." I stand and pull her into my arms and kiss her and can still taste her

mint toothpaste. I get dressed as she puts a leash on Buddy. Once I'm ready, I grab one of the new balls we just bought.

We walk outside and Buddy is raring to go, looking like he might pull off Courtney's arm. Before we get in the truck, she looks up at the sky and starts shaking her head before turning around.

"What?" I laugh.

"We're taking the Jeep. Not a cloud in the sky!" She twirls the keys around her finger.

Today couldn't be any more beautiful and spending it with her makes it that much better. We take the top off the Jeep and Buddy is the happiest dog I've ever seen in the backseat as we travel toward the dog park.

As soon as we park, Buddy's tail is wagging so much, his whole body's moving from side-to-side. He's so excited to get out and Courtney can't stop laughing at him as she grabs his leash.

"Once we enter the gates, you can let him off the leash," I say, grabbing a ball and Frisbee.

Buddy starts running and Courtney is being dragged behind him. "I wore the wrong clothes for this," she announces loudly, looking back at me and laughing.

I follow them and once Courtney lets him off the leash he starts running around in circles. Other dogs pass by and he starts playing with them, regardless if they want to or not.

"Buddy," I say and hold up the ball. His ears perk up and I move my hand around and

see he's watching. I throw the ball as hard as I can and he picks it up and takes it straight to Courtney.

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“You’re supposed to return it to the thrower,” I tell him, walking over to her. She throws the ball and he runs after it and returns it to her. She turns and laughs then hands me the ball and every time he returns it to her.

“He likes you way better than me.” I wrap my arm around her as we’re waiting for him to return with the ball again.

“It’s because you keep trying to kick him out of his bed.”

I grab the ball from his mouth when he returns and give Courtney a smirk before I lace my fingers with hers. Instead of continuing to play fetch, we take a few laps on the trail that goes around the park. Buddy is panting and we stop at a watering spot for him and after he drinks, he takes off running.

“I love you.” I turn and look at her as Buddy comes running back with a stick in his mouth.

“I love you, too, Deputy. Hope you’re having a good birthday.”

“Best one yet.”

We finish playing with Buddy and take another lap around the park. Once Buddy is worn out, Courtney puts the leash back on him and we walk back to the Jeep. She’s so sweet and already loves him so much. She opens the back door and waits for him to jump inside. He looks like a big shaggy ball of fur as he lies down.

“Do you want to grab something to eat before heading home?” I ask as she starts up

the Jeep.

“Nope, I’m good.” She smiles, but doesn’t make eye contact with me. “Let’s take Buddy home before we do anything else,” she suggests.

“Sounds good as long as lunch is on the agenda. I’m starving. I think there’s some tofu and broccoli leftovers in the fridge.”

She lifts her hand and stops me. “I’m not eating another bite of tofu. I’ll leave that rubber junk to you.”

I’ve tried to get her to like it as much as I do, but I suppose it’s a lost cause. Courtney’s laughing and smiling, and I feel so comfortable around her. It’s hard for me to remember what life was like before her and it makes me so happy how carefree we are with each other.

As we drive across town, I look over at her, trying to memorize the way she looks in this very moment as the wind blows through her hair. She turns and smiles at me, and it’s a look I always want to see on her.

Even though Mia tried hard to break us apart, I’m relieved Courtney wasn’t scared away. I can’t help but think of all the emotions she’s going through because of all of this. Although the temporary restraining order is still in effect, we really haven’t been able to breathe any easier. If I could go back in time and redo my past, dating Mia would be the first thing I’d change. While I believe she loved me, I realize now it was all a smoke screen. I was nothing but a superficial toy. Mia loved controlling me. Years of my life were wasted on something that wasn’t real, and I can’t help but feel regret.

We pull up to the house and Courtney is laughing at how tired Buddy is as he lazily jumps out of the Jeep.

We all walk up to the front door and as I start to unlock it, I notice Courtney fidgeting. “So, what are you hungry for?”

“Whatever you want. It’s your birthday,” she says.

I walk through the front door and the house is exactly how we left it, yet it feels different. Buddy moseys inside and starts barking and wagging his tail.

“What is it, boy? Is Timmy stuck in the well again?” I laugh at my own joke and flick on the lights. People start jumping out from behind the couch, out of the kitchen, and from under the table yelling, ‘surprise!’ It takes me a moment to understand what’s happening. I turn and look at Courtney who has a huge smile on her face. She walks to me, kisses me, and whispers ‘happy birthday’ against my mouth. Laughter and chatter fills the room as our lips separate and Viola hands me a glass of champagne.

I’ve never had a surprise birthday party before because I always seemed to ruin it when my friends would try to plan one. Someone would slip up, or I’d arrive to the party early as everyone was trying to get ready.

“I’m not sure how you pulled this off,” I whisper in her ear, placing my hands on the small of her back.

She shoots me a wink. God, I love her.

Viola interrupts and just as I’m about to scold her for lying to me about having other plans today, she gives me a big hug.

“You’re all so sneaky.” I smile at Viola.

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“I know how you like to ruin surprises. Why do you think we met at Mom’s last night instead of today?” She gives me a little shoulder bump, just as Travis interrupts us.

“Barbecue is almost ready. We have everything set up on the patio,” he tells everyone.

Courtney grabs Buddy by the collar and walks him into the bedroom with food and water and I hear the door click closed. I’m sure she didn’t want all the people to scare him. She returns and walks over to Kayla and I can’t keep my eyes from her.

Breaking my attention, Tyler clears his throat and hands me a gift bag.

“You didn’t have to.”

“Dude, you’re my partner. I do have to,” Tyler insists. “It’s nothing big.”

He glances over his shoulder then back at me. “Dude, who’s the brunette?”

“Viola? My sister?” I ask, not even thinking.

“No, the other one.” He turns and looks at Kayla, and I instantly glance over at Logan who’s standing stiff at the edge of the room drinking a bottle of water. I give him a smile and all he does is nod.

“That’s Kayla, one of Courtney and Viola’s friends.”

His eyes are wide and I know what’s coming. “So, she’s single?”

I nod, but still wonder if she and Logan will ever have a chance because I know she's interested, but he acts like he's not.

"Go on, go talk to her." I encourage him, because it's not fair to Kayla otherwise.

I walk over to chat with Logan while Tyler introduces himself to Kayla. Logan eyes them as he takes a long pull from his water.

"That's cute," he says, unamused, looking straight at them. Kayla is smiling and being polite but when she looks up, she makes eye contact with Logan, which is awkward.

"I thought you weren't interested."

"I have other things to focus on at the moment." I can see sadness in Logan's eyes when he speaks, and I want to push him but I know better. He'll change the subject and go stone cold. Before I can even attempt to dig deeper, a hard knock pounds on the door. We all stop chatting and look around and Courtney walks over. When she looks through the peephole she whispers, "oh my God." Immediately, I start thinking the worst, hoping Mia didn't actually have the balls to show up here, right now, on my birthday. Courtney takes a step back and opens the door and that's when I realize how wrong I was when Jackson comes barreling in with his big country accent, a bag swung over his shoulder, and a small box with a ribbon in his hand. Courtney takes the gift from his hand and he wraps his arms tight around her until she squirms to get away from him. After he gets her worked up, he comes to me and gives me another firm handshake reminiscent to the one we shared the first time we met. Jackson sticks out like a sore thumb, wearing a velvety black cowboy hat, a flannel shirt, blue jeans with natural rips and tears, paired with boots that are probably made from reptile skin.

"You're not here to kick my ass, are you?" I ask with a smile, knowing how many threats her brothers threw my way while I was in Texas.

“Nah. Me and my girl have been havin’ some issues, so I thought I’d jump on a big ole plane and come see my little sister and make it a double surprise birthday party,” Jackson says, looking at me with those Bishop eyes.

“I didn’t invite you,” Courtney says firmly, behind his broad shoulders.

“Yeah, well Mom told me what you were up to and I wanted to go visit those stars on the cement in LA, so I thought I’d make a pit stop beforehand.”

Courtney rolls her eyes. “Los Angeles isn’t even close.”

“California’s not darn near as big as Texas. I think I can handle driving six hours,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Next time I’ll have to tell Mom not to tell you. Because you’re too...too...Jackson.”

“That’s the best you got, Court? Losing your special smartass touch, I see.” Jackson crosses his arms and gives her a smirk. Before Courtney is completely riled up, I speak.

“I’m happy you’re here. You’re welcome anytime.”

Jackson smiles and Courtney narrows her eyes at me.

“See, now that’s a little bit of that Southern hospitality you’ve forgotten, Court.” Jackson shoots her an evil grin, and I know she wants to strangle him.

“Food is ready,” Travis says from the backdoor, and everyone begins following outside.

“Please don’t embarrass me in front of my friends,” Courtney demands between

gritted teeth as we walk toward the patio.

“You can take the boy out of Texas, but you can’t take the Texas out of the boy. Embarrassing my lil’ sis is my specialty. Even when we’re old folks with missing teeth and hair, I’m gonna drive you crazy.”

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Viola cracks up laughing and Courtney just huffs. “I’ll beat you with my cane.”

“Nah, you’d have to be able to catch me first.” Jackson is a great party favor, and I’m actually glad he’s here.

Once we’re outside, I see the long foldable tables with plastic tablecloths and chairs all around. The weather couldn’t be better than it is today. There’s a warmth in the air and the sun is out and shining bright. We grab plates and Travis serves us ribs and grilled shrimp along with hotdogs and sausage. There are big bowls of sides all around and beer in an ice chest.

Viola and Travis sit in front of Courtney and me. Kayla and Logan are on opposite ends of the table. It seems Jackson and Logan are getting along perfectly fine and are deep in conversation about bad guys and guns. Tyler sits next to Kayla and he gives her a sweet smile. I feel like I’m surrounded by family, and for the most part, I am. I try to memorize this very moment because it’s one I don’t want to forget any time soon.

I lean over and wrap my arm around Courtney and speak softly in her ear, “This is the best birthday I’ve ever had. Thanks sweetheart.”

She leans against me and I can feel the warmth of her skin against my body. “And just think...the day isn’t even over yet.”

COURTNEY

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Drew this happy and he deserves it today more

than ever. My parents always made a big deal about birthdays—still do—and this is the first official one I’ve spent with him as his girlfriend. Viola once told me it was impossible to throw Drew any sort of surprise party, and he’s notorious for ruining them, so I made it my mission to prove them all wrong. I called our friends and threatened them with pounds of blueberry muffins if they messed it up. Since most of them are trying to eat healthy, and they know how irresistible my muffins are, they agreed to keep quiet. I’m actually surprised no one slipped, but then again, we’ve been so distracted, I’m sure Drew would’ve missed the hint if they had.

“I didn’t know you Californians could cook ribs like a Texan,” Jackson says as he rips meat off a bone like a savage. If my mother were here, she’d be screaming at him for not having manners. Before I can say anything, Jackson starts introducing himself to everyone because I had totally forgotten. I’m sure if she were here now, she’d be screaming at me, too.

I look at him and point to the corner of my mouth to let him know he has barbecue sauce on his face, and I swear he’s doing it on purpose to embarrass me.

Tyler and Kayla are chatting about animals and her whole face is lit up. Seriously, the way straight to her heart is through animal adoption. I laugh when she tries to get him to adopt a dog because the girl has no shame.

“I’m planning a beach trip for the kids. You’re still going to Texas in June for your cousin’s baby shower, right?” Viola asks me as she picks at her plate.

“Yeah, you wanna come?” I joke, knowing she won’t. I’ve asked her so many times over the years and even bribed her with authentic cowboys, but she was always so busy with school. Now with the kids and the marketing firm, it’s almost impossible for her to leave for long periods of time.

“I wish I could,” she whines and Travis wraps his arm around her.

“Go on then. We’ll be fine.” He looks at her like she’s his queen, and I realize Drew looks at me the same way. I place my hand on his leg under the table and he places his hand on top of mine.

“And let you dress Ginny for when your mother comes over for playdates? I don’t even think so. I got a text with a picture of my baby looking like orphan Annie when I slept in one morning.”

Drew laughs and looks at me. “I hope that’s not going to be us when we grow up.”

“It’s totally going to be you,” Viola pipes in. “You’ve got the dog, now where’s my nephew?”

Travis lifts his beer and takes a drink. “She’s not going to stop until she gets what she wants. Trust me on that one.”

I almost choke and my eyes go wide. “There needs to be a ring on this finger before I even think about children.”

“Note taken,” Drew says, and I turn and look at him.

“Oh my God. You’re all in this together, aren’t you? It’s all a big conspiracy,” I add.

“Is Courtney having a shotgun weddin’?” Jackson asks loud enough for everyone to hear, and of course, everyone does. I roll my eyes and he gets a kick out of it.

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“And this is how rumors get started. No! No one is pregnant. Well, at least I’m not.” I throw my hands up in the air.

“Not yet,” Viola says with a laugh. She couldn’t even keep a straight face when she said it.

“Don’t you dare jinx me!” I give her evil eyes but they don’t faze her anymore. She’s one hundred percent immune.

Travis starts chatting with Logan and Jackson and the next thing I know we’ve all eaten and drank way too much. I’m so full it hurts to laugh.

“I probably need to let Buddy out,” I say, excusing myself. Kayla comes running up behind me and we walk inside together. I crack open the door to my room and see that Buddy is sound asleep, laid out across my bed. “Buddy, outside?” He lazily lifts his head and drops it back down. “We’re going to the dog park more often.”

We walk in the room and Kayla goes to him and kisses his head and pets him. He wags his tail, but he’s looking at her like she’s ruining his doggy sleep.

“Sure you don’t want to go outside?” I ask again with a laugh. “Guess that’s a no.”

Before we walk out of my room, Kayla stops me. “So, about Tyler.”

“Single. Rookie. Runner. And come to think of it, I don’t really know much about him. I’ll have to ask Drew since he spends so much time with him.”

She's smiling. "He asked me to go out to dinner tomorrow night."

"And?" I light up.

"I said yes, because why not?"

"Awesome. So, I guess Logan is out of the picture?" She hasn't mentioned him in a while.

"We had coffee the other night. He basically told me it wasn't the right time for him, but there's just something that draws me to him."

"All I can say is don't give up then. If I would've given up on Drew, no telling where we'd both be right now. I know it's hard to have patience, and I don't know what's going on with him, but I honestly don't think he's seeing anyone else. I don't think it's anything like that and Drew is sealed tight when it comes to Logan, so I can't help you there."

She gives me a big hug. "I don't know. I think I'm going to date other guys and try to move on from him. I feel like a stupid lovesick teenager or something because we've not even kissed. I'm ridiculous."

"You're not. You're just being human."

Buddy pushes his head under the pillow to block out the light and we take that as our hint. I shut the door and we walk down the hallway and everyone is crowded in the living room. Travis walks in with a silver tray full of the leftover meat and wraps it before setting it into the fridge. Jackson follows behind him carrying a bag of trash from the mess outside.

"We cleaned up. It's time to open presents," Viola says, clapping her hands together.

I almost think she's more excited than Drew.

He sits at the table like a kid. "You all really didn't have to do this. I know how busy everyone is, and I appreciate it more than you'll ever know."

I place my hand on his shoulder and squeeze as he reaches for the present from Viola and Travis. Drew shakes the box and looks over at them. Travis' arm is wrapped around Viola and they are both beaming.

Drew rips the paper off the box and opens it and smiles big as he pulls out a new pair of running shoes. "Guys, you didn't."

Travis chuckles. "Yeah, we did. It's time you get rid of those stinky sneakers you've been running in for the past five years."

"Thank you," Drew says.

I whisper a thank you to Viola and Travis and they smile really big.

The next present is in a plain gift bag. Tyler is smiling.

Drew opens it and pulls out a pocketknife. "Thanks, Tyler. This is awesome."

Drew's name is engraved on the side and I know he'll get tons of use out of it. He continues opening gifts and laughs when he opens Kayla's and its treats and toys for Buddy. I lean over and give him a hug and whisper in his ear. "You'll get a gift from me tonight."

He pulls me around and kisses me and I turn and see one last gift on the table. It's in a small box with a ribbon and I remember setting it there with the others. I grab it and hand it to him. "This one's from Jackson."

Jackson shakes his head. “No, ma’am. I found that in the mailbox and grabbed it.”

I look at Drew, confused. On the side is an address label with Drew’s name on it. He shrugs and opens it and now we’re all confused when he pulls out a small piece of plastic.

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“What is it?” Logan asks.

“I’m not really sure.” Drew looks at me and holds it up. I look at it and instantly recognize it’s a microSD card for a camera.

“Oh, I’ve got a reader that will plug into the back of the TV.” I grab my purse from the side of the couch and dig to the bottom until I find it. I put the tiny card into the slot, place the TV on the correct setting and plug in the reader.

“It looks like there’s a lot of stuff on here,” I say, scrolling through different random generic named videos. Everyone is huddled around the TV when I click on the first one and press play.

Mia’s face pops on to the screen and the remote slips from my fingers, hitting my shoe and bouncing to the floor.

Mia Fucking Montgomery.

“Hey, baby!” She flips her dyed blonde hair over her shoulder with a sly smile. “I wanted to wish you the happiest of birthdays. I miss you more than you’ll ever know.” She bends over and blows a kiss to the camera, and I nearly swallow down the vomit that rises in my throat.

“What is this?” I mutter, unable to take my eyes off the screen. No one says anything because no one knows what to say.

Mia continues, “And I miss the way you taste. I didn’t get nearly enough in Vegas.”

When the word ‘Vegas’ leaves her lips, I see something in her eyes, a glimmer of hope almost. I’m so confused on where this is going. I can’t comprehend any of it and before I can open my mouth and ask Drew, the camera cuts to another frame. It’s the back of Mia and she’s walking toward a bed. Before she slips under the covers, she looks over her shoulder, bites her lower lip and then flashes a smile at the camera.

There’s little light in the frame, but I recognize the room, my clothes thrown over the chair, and my suitcase is in view. My heart drops when I realize it’s our room in Vegas.

My stomach rolls when the camera cuts to Drew sleeping shirtless. Mia crawls under the comforter. The frame changes once again, sunlight from the windows shine in as Drew’s voice echoes in the room, and I swallow hard, knowing exactly what Mia’s doing under there.

“Mm...sweetheart,” he growls, his back arching as she continues. “Looks like you’re making up for last night.”

My heart is breaking, shattering, falling to the floor in a million fucking pieces.

What the hell is happening? I’m so confused.

“Jesus, sweetheart,” he groans on the video as his hands grip the sheets tightly. It’s easy to assume what’s going on, the way Drew is enjoying himself as Mia hides under the covers.

I stand frozen as my world completely shatters. I can see and hear everything—the moans, the sheets rustling, my nickname on his lips. It all happens too fast.

Struggling to bend down and grab the remote, Viola reaches it before me and quickly turns it off. Swallowing hard, I work up the courage to look over at Drew, his face

blood red and he's noticeably livid.

I blink several times, hoping to erase the image out of my brain, but there's no use. It's now burned in there and I can't feel anything. I'm numb. While I was waking up in a room alone, having no idea what was going on, Mia was in bed with Drew. She didn't just come into our room to get me out of there, she put her mouth on him, trying to claim what was no longer hers. And Drew never fucking told me. He actually left out that one detail.

I look around and see everyone is as shocked as I am. Viola's mouth is wide open and Travis' jaw is clenched so tight, it looks like it could break right off his face. Kayla, Tyler, Logan, and Jackson are all staring at me intently, waiting for someone to explain what the hell is happening.

My throat is too dry to speak and the room is spinning. Watching her with him, them being intimate together, feels like a direct punch to the gut—so powerful it steals my breath away. Why didn't I know? Why hadn't he told me this happened? We'd gone over the Vegas incident at least a dozen times. He never said a damn word about this. I want to scream and ask so many questions, but I can't find the right words. I can't find any words.

I feel Drew's hand on my arm, pulling me out of my thoughts. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I'm so fucking sorry." Drew pulls me to his chest and tightly wraps his arms around me and holds me. My arms stay limp to my sides as my head continues to spin. I can hear people whispering around us, but I can't make out any of their words. My body shakes as I try to process it all—the images, his raspy, needy voice, her evil grin. It already haunts me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DREW

The look on Courtney's face has me panicking, wondering what she must be thinking right now. I pull her close to me, but she barely moves, and by the stiffness in her body, I can tell she's in shock. I hadn't told her all the details when I woke up to Mia next to me because I didn't want her to feel the way she does right now—hurt, broken, confused, upset. I knew telling her when she was already in a fragile state would've only upset her more and it was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Sweetheart, look at me," I plead. "Please," I beg once she makes no movement. She blinks and then looks up at me with empty eyes. "Let me explain."

Her throat moves as she swallows, and I can tell she's digesting my words. "I need a minute." She pulls out of my grip and walks out of the living room and down the hallway to her bedroom, closing the door behind her. Fuck.

I brush my hands over my face and realize that everyone is looking up at me. I'm sure they hadn't expected that either and now I'm left trying to pick up the pieces of what was turning out to be an amazing day.

"I'll go check on her," Viola tells me, moving around me. I want to stop her and say that I'll go talk to her myself, but I'm sure I'm the last person she wants to see right now. Viola's good at talking Courtney down, so I nod and step out of her way.

"You hadn't told her?" Logan asks, in a tone that tells me he already knows the

answer. I shake my head, confirming what he already suspected.

“I knew it wouldn’t change anything, and I didn’t want her to be even more upset than she already had been,” I try explaining, but even as I say it, I know it’s not an excuse.

“You know how it looks though, right? You keeping something that big from her? She’s going to assume you were into it,” Logan tells me, as if he’s suddenly a fucking therapist.

“That’s insane. She knows I hate Mia and would never want her lips near me again.” I cringe even as I speak the words.

“No, but you didn’t tell her. You kept it a secret, and trust me, that’s almost worse than what actually happened. I have a psycho ex that taught me that,” he says with an annoyed shrug. “Girls don’t like secrets, bro.”

“I hadn’t meant for it to be a secret, I just didn’t want to upset her more than she already was. I was practically holding her up from falling to the ground,” I repeat, trying to convince myself more at this point than him. I should’ve found a way to tell her.

“Yeah, but she won’t see it that way. You’ve had weeks since then to say something.”

I should’ve known Mia was up to something else. She wasn’t going to take the restraining order laying down. She’s out for blood now.

“Go talk to her,” Kayla interrupts, obviously eavesdropping on our entire conversation. “Buddy doesn’t deserve to be from a broken home.”

“Kayla,” Logan hisses, nudging her arm. “A little inappropriate.”

She shrugs him off. “No, I’m serious. You getting a dog together was a sign of you two moving toward the next step. Now she’s going to second-guess everything about your relationship,” she tells me matter-of-factly, scaring the shit out of me that I could potentially lose Courtney over this. Dealing with Mia is more baggage than she ever signed on for, and this could be the one thing that tears us apart.

“Excuse me,” I say, walking away. Before I get to Courtney’s door, Viola opens it and pushes me back against the hallway wall. “What the hell?”

“Don’t what the hell me! How could you keep something like that from her, Drew?”

“Look, I don’t need another person scolding me, okay? I fucked up, I know. That’s why I need to talk to her.”

“Well, you better hurry and say something that’s going to fix this.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s in there packing a bag.”

My heart falls into my stomach, and I’m almost positive I didn’t hear her right.

“What? No.” I refuse to believe that. Courtney wouldn’t just leave without talking to me first.

“Courtney is one of the strongest people I know, but I think she’s finally had enough.” I hear the sadness in her voice, but it’s nothing compared to how my heart is feeling right at this moment. “Mia has been playing games with your relationship and that bitch just pulled the last straw.”

I step around Viola and barge into Courtney’s room, slamming the door behind me.

Her back is to me as she shoves clothes into her bag that's sitting on her bed.

“So, just like that, you’re leaving? You won’t even talk to me first?” The pain in my voice is evident, but if she notices, she doesn’t acknowledge it. She doesn’t say anything as she continues packing. “Courtney,” I plead. “I know I should’ve told you, trust me, I know that now. But you have to believe me that I didn’t want to hurt you. I didn’t want you to be any more upset than you already have been.”

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She finally turns around, her eyes narrow and glossy. “Guess that backfired, huh?” It’s obvious she’s been crying, and I hate that I’m the reason for it. I put those doubts in her mind, and now I’ll do anything to fix that. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

I exhale, feeling defeated already. “Of course, I was. The last thing I want is Mia getting between us. I truly thought it was you when I woke up because I only saw her hair. The moment I saw her face, I pushed her off me. You have to believe me. I would’ve never let her touch me had I known it was her.”

“Is that why she dyed her hair blonde?” she asks, her eyes drilling into mine.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I mean, I assume so. I was half asleep, and I didn’t even see her next to me because she hid under the covers as soon as I woke up.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me that when we talked about filing the report and telling the police? Did you even tell them that part?”

I hang my head and nod. “I did. I had to be honest with them if I wanted to file the report and not get caught in a lie down the road or something.”

“But you couldn’t be honest with me?” she fires back, her bottom lip trembling.

I step toward her, closing the gap between us and wrapping my hand around her arm to pull her into my chest. She doesn’t fight it, but she doesn’t fall into me either.

“Courtney, I love you. I was trying to protect your feelings while you were processing it all. You were so upset, I didn’t want to add to it.”

She backs up slightly and looks up at me. “When were you going to tell me then? When she showed up here claiming she was pregnant with your baby?”

“Courtney, be reasonable,” I beg. “I just wanted us to move forward from it all.”

“Well, communication and honesty would probably be necessary for that to happen then, don’t you think?” she retorts.

“Yes,” I agree. “And I’m sorry for keeping it from you. I’m truly sorry. I should’ve told you.”

She nods her head but doesn’t look up at me. Turning back around, she continues grabbing her clothes off the bed and stuffing them into her bag again.

“Don’t leave,” I say. “Please. If you leave then how are we going to talk this out?”

She spins around quickly, making me step back at her sudden closeness. “Because I need some space right now. I love you, Drew, I really do. But every time I think about Mia, I’m going to see you and her together in my head. She’s not going to stop until she gets what she wants, and who knows how far she’ll go to make that happen? I don’t know that I can just stand here and watch her come between us.”

“Then don’t let her,” I urge. “You walk away from us, she wins. She wants to put a wedge between us, but baby, please don’t let her.”

“I don’t know that I’m strong enough anymore. She’s worn me down and taken so much from me. Every sound I hear, I worry it’s her breaking in. Every time Buddy barks, I peek out the window, wondering if it’s her driving by. Every night after I get home from work, I open all the closet doors and look in the shower just to put my mind at ease that she’s not hiding in here waiting for me. I can’t do that anymore, Drew. She’s put this fear in me that feels uncontrollable, and I hate it. I hate her.”

“Sweetheart,” my voice breaks as I speak. Her words are gutting me, and I hate that I’ve put her in this position. “I will do whatever it takes to make this better for you—for us. The last thing I want is for you to feel that way and I hate her for it, too. But please believe me when I tell you she has no chance in hell of ever getting me back. I’m deeply, madly, insanely in love with you and the future I see for us. There’s no her. It’s only you and me. There’ll only ever be a me and you.”

Her face softens, and I see her eyes watering. I rub the pad of my thumb over her cheek and she sinks her face into my palm. My shoulders drop and I wrap my arms around her, chancing that she’d actually let me this time. She falls against my chest, and I tighten my hold.

“Losing you would destroy me. Don’t let anything she says or does get between us. She’s not worth it. Not worth what we have together.”

She nods her head against my chest and wraps her arms around my waist. I bury my face in her hair and kiss her. I need Courtney in my life more than I need to breathe, and if I lose her, it’ll be like losing everything.

“Move in with me,” I mutter.

“What?” She turns her head.

I press a kiss under her ear and whisper, “Move in with me.”

She narrows her eyes, arching one brow. “We already live together. What are you talking about?”

“Well, yes, but technically, we live together as roommates.”

The corner of her lips tilt up slightly. “What’s the difference?”

“It’s not really ours, you know? You moved into a bedroom as my roommate and once we got together, we started sharing a bed, but I think it’s time we officially move in together. One bedroom,” I explain, hoping she gets what I’m saying. She still looks confused, so I continue, “I want you to feel safe, sweetheart. I want to make new memories with you in a home that’s just ours. I want us to move to the next step, building a stronger relationship between us because I know we’re indestructible. I think we should move into a new home. One that we pick out together and share a bed and make us a home.”

“So...you’re kicking me out as your roommate?” she asks with a teasing grin.

“Yes, matter of fact, I am. You’re being evicted.” I bring my mouth down to hers and press a soft kiss against her lips. “Since you’re homeless now, would you do me the honor of moving in with me into a new place?”

She sucks in her lower lip, pretending to think about it. I raise a brow, pretending to anticipate her response. “Well?”

Finally, she smiles wide and nods her head. “I guess since I have nowhere else to go, I’ll take you up on your offer.”

The biggest grin stretches across my face as I pick her up in my arms and swing her around. I place her back down on her feet and cup her face in my hands. “I love you. Thank you for not leaving. I promise I will never keep anything from you ever again, no matter what.”

She leans up and presses her lips to mine. “I love you, too. And you better not, Deputy.”

Smiling against her mouth, I raise up my hand and hold up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

COURTNEY

I hate the way I allowed my emotions to get the best of me. The visual of her walking toward the bed—the bed I had been in, the bed Drew was in—was just too much. I couldn’t process it, but I also knew I couldn’t fault Drew for something he had no control of, even if he wasn’t upfront about it. I can understand his reasoning behind not telling me at first, but I was hurt he kept it from me the entire time.

Drew’s right, however, I won’t let her get between us, even if she’s making it really fucking hard. She’s persistent—I’ll give her that—but I won’t let her break us up. Drew means way too much to me to let someone like her ruin what we have.

Once I calmed down and listened to Drew’s words, I finally realized what he’s asked me and what it all really means. He’s right; we’ve been living together as roommates,

not really a couple who moved in together. Now that we're moving in that direction, I can't stop the flood of emotions that overwhelm me.

We walk out of my bedroom, hand in hand, and see the house is empty. Everyone must've left while we were in there, which is probably for the best. We could use some alone time right now.

Once we get to the living room, I see Jackson sitting on the couch. Well, I guess not everyone.

"You're still here?" I ask, startling him.

"Christ, Court," he yells, turning around to face me.

"Sorry." I look around him and see what he's been watching on TV. "Didn't realize you'd be so sucked into Keeping Up with the Kardashians." I smirk.

He rolls his eyes at me while Drew shoots him a disapproving look. "Dude, you're into those fake reality shows, too? What is with you Bishops?" he teases.

"I have no idea what a Kardash—whatever is. Turned the TV on and couldn't figure out how to change the damn channel. Y'all got some special kind of cable up here."

We both walk around the couch and Drew takes a seat on the chair as I grab the remote from the coffee table and see it was left on a recording from when I was watching it earlier.

"It's called a DVR, genius." I snort. "Just exit to the TV and flip through the guide like this."

"Well, I don't care now anyway. I was just trying to do something while waiting for

you two. Everything okay now?" He looks over at Drew, and I can tell he's waiting to hear if he needs to get all big brother on him.

"Yes. All good." I smile. "I'll set you up in my room for the night. Drew can grab your bags," I offer, but before Drew can get up, Jackson interrupts me.

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“Thanks, little sis, but I’m not about to crash in the house of love. I already booked a room at the Western Inn.”

“The house of love?” I laugh. “Shut up. You’re staying. Mama will have my head if she finds out I let you stay at the Western Inn when we have a perfectly fine bed here for you.”

He shrugs, knowing he won’t win the argument either way. “Okay, but I still expect a complimentary breakfast then.”

“Don’t worry. Courtney makes the best blueberry pancakes in the world,” Drew gloats, and I narrow my eyes at him, wondering what the hell he’s up to.

“Oh, does she?” Jackson turns to me with an amused expression.

“Well, she makes some kickass blueberry muffins, so I figure there can’t be much of a difference from muffins to pancakes.” Drew winks at me, and I shake my head at him.

“That’s like saying once you learn to drive a tractor, you can drive anything.” I roll my eyes at him again, but this time Jackson is laughing at Drew’s expense.

“You can take the girl out of Texas, but you can’t take Texas out of the girl,” Jackson tells him.

Drew laughs, nodding in agreement. “That I’ve learned.”

“C’mon,” I tell Jackson. “I’ll even get you the clean towels and sheets. Then maybe we can do a ride-along in Drew’s police car on the way to get some ice cream.”

Before Drew can tell me no, Jackson’s face lights up. “Hell yeah! Would be nice to sit in the front seat of a police car for once. Those seats in the back are tight as hell. Especially with cuffs on.”

I burst out laughing as Drew’s eyes widen.

“You’ve been arrested once before?” he asks, getting up to grab a couple bottles of beer.

“Ha! Once,” I say, chuckling at the memories of all the times a Bishop boy has been escorted home in a police car. “He wishes only once.”

“Hey, all the charges were dropped eventually, so basically they were just giving me a free ride home.” He grabs the beer from Drew’s hand as we all sit back down.

“Right. Like the time when you and John trespassed onto the Mueller’s property and you nearly got shot in the ass by old man Willie?” I remind him.

“Would’ve gotten away too had he not called the cops on us and if the wire fence wasn’t electric.”

“You’d think that would’ve taught them a lesson, right?” I ask rhetorically. “But no. The following weekend, they get caught cow tipping on the Peppernickle’s ranch—while drunk.”

Drew begins laughing and Jackson continues telling stories about all the mischief he and our brothers got into. Being the youngest—and a girl—I was never invited on these little adventures, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t make my own.

“When Court was fourteen, her and Maggie Wayfield broke into the old abandoned church and threw a kegger! Shoulda seen the look on Mama’s face when Sheriff Layton pulled up bringing her sorry drunk ass home! It was the highlight of my whole year,” Jackson says, laughing in between all his words, enjoying the look on my face.

“Well, we had to find fun somehow,” I say with a shrug. “Not like we had anything else to do.”

“Yeah, breaking into an abandoned church. Totally normal,” Drew teases.

“What do you expect a bunch of teenagers to do when they live on thousands of acres, no mall, no coffee shops, no diners, or even a Wal-Mart. It was either party or have sex in the hay barn.”

Drew chokes on his beer, and I nearly die of laughter. I popped Drew’s hay barn cherry, but I’m sure he wouldn’t be happy knowing it wasn’t my first time.

“So that was like...a thing? Sex in barns?” he asks me. Jackson looks back and forth between us.

“Well, it was that or in the back of a pickup truck,” I say honestly. “Pasture parties were all we had to do in high school.”

“I’m learning a whole new side of you, Courtney Bishop,” Drew quips, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Should we make it even? I can call Viola right now...” I taunt, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

“Nah, no. There’s nothing to share anyway. I was a perfect gentleman from day one.”

Jackson and I both crack up, knowing he's full of shit. Police officer or not, Drew Fisher looks like the epitome of a bad boy with a big heart.

Once Jackson finally settles in, we head out for a late dinner. Wanting to show Jackson what he's been missing, we take him to Ocean Fish & Chips where we can order the infamous fish and chips basket. It's one of the best in the area, and since he's not used to anything being close and convenient, or even the luxury of a drive-thru coffee shop, this will definitely be new for him. Eldorado, Texas feels like an entirely different universe compared to Sacramento.

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“I don’t know how you deal with this traffic, Court. I’d burst a blood vessel gettin’ impatient and frustrated with it every day,” Jackson says as we get to a stoplight.

I look over and see Drew shaking his head and smiling. He’s pinching his lips together, holding in the laughter that’s threatening to burst out.

“This isn’t traffic, Jackson. You’ve seen nothing yet. Trust me.”

“That’s even worse then. I haven’t seen one pickup truck yet either,” he complains.

“We’re in one right now,” I remind him. “It’s just not old, rusted, or threatening to blow up.”

“So, it’s a pretty boy pickup?” Jackson smirks, and I laugh at Drew’s side-eye glance. “No offense,” he says to Drew, but we both know he’s just messing with him. Jackson is as Southern as they come around here. I even had to persuade him to leave the cowboy hat behind before we left for dinner. We compromised on wearing the boots though.

“This ain’t too bad,” Jackson says around a mouthful of fish. “It’s not freshly-caught catfish, but I can stomach it.”

“You should try the oysters. Tell Mama you’ve found a new favorite.” I smirk.

“I wouldn’t dare. She wouldn’t blink twice about smacking me if I said that.”

Mama is an amazing cook. She prides herself on making dinner for Daddy and the

boys and making sure they're fed well. She's mastered plenty of recipes over the years and the last thing she'd do is feed her family takeout. You don't grow up on takeout or fast food on the Bishop ranch. If Mama can't make it, you didn't eat it.

Once we make it back to the house, Jackson hides in my room and calls his on-again, off-again high school sweetheart, Sophia. They've been together since seventh grade. She trains horses and their mutual love for animals was something they easily bonded over growing up, but after high school, she left for college and it broke Jackson's heart. I'm not even sure where they stand right now, but even when they aren't officially together, they talk all the time.

"Well, that was interesting," Drew says to me as he climbs into bed next to me.

"Always is when a Bishop boy is around." I pull the covers around me and snuggle into his side.

"Trying to picture you getting into mischief and being a Southern girl is really messing with my mind," he admits with a smile. "You must've adjusted well to the city when you moved here."

"I did. I loved it as soon as I visited. I loved the big city, the big university, the endless list of things to do, the amount of people to meet. It made for some great college experiences."

"So, no free rides in cop cars since you've left home?" he inquires, one side of his lips tilted, only half-kidding.

"No, I've been a very proper Southern lady, thank you very much. I graduated with honors and got a high paying job."

"Okay, but what about during college?" He arches a brow.

“Well, there was the occasional party and whatever, but nothing close to the mischief we got into as kids. You don’t understand. There is nothing to do on a ranch except haul shit, fix things, ride horses, and feed cattle. Once the chores were done, we got bored,” I say with a shrug. Really bored.

He chuckles, softly rubbing his fingers over my hand that’s resting on his chest. “Sounds like it was good for you, though. I like knowing my girl can take care of herself and still know how to have a good time.”

“I sure do!” I tilt my head and look up at him. He’s smiling as he looks up at the ceiling. “Can I ask you something?”

He looks down at me and nods. “Of course, sweetheart.”

“If the whole video thing with Mia didn’t happen and basically ruin everything, would you have ever suggested we move in together? Or was it kind of a whim?” My stomach tightens as I ask him, but I need to know the truth. I wouldn’t be able to move forward knowing he only said those things to calm me down.

“I’ve been thinking about it for quite some time actually. Even more once we got home from Vegas. It made me realize we need a fresh start. We need a place of our own to make it ours. This house has been great, but it’s been mine and Travis’, and then it was yours and mine as roommates, and now I think it’s time to move forward—find a place that is only ours.”

“That’s perfect.” I smile. “So, then does that mean you’ll still come to Texas with me this summer?” I ask. “Or has Jackson and his stories scared you off?” I tease.

“Nope. I’m looking forward to it actually. I plan to help you make new memories. Ones that will just be yours and mine and not tainted with any free police rides home or ex-boyfriends.”

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I tilt my head back further and laugh at his small side of jealousy. “Perfect, because I know just the place to make those new memories!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

DREW

It’s been two weeks since the birthday gift from hell shook our relationship. We were still trying to recover from the Vegas bombshell. Courtney hasn’t brought it up again, but I can tell it still bothers her.

The following day, I brought the SD card to the department for Logan, and although it might not be enough to prove Mia was behind drugging us and kidnapping Courtney, it definitely adds to our case for when we press charges. That’s assuming we’ll ever be able to serve her papers again. She was a no-show at the next court date for the restraining order. Judge Henderson put a warrant out for her arrest, but according to her trusty attorney, he thinks she fled the state.

My guess is her parents sent her to one of their vacation homes while they attempt to pay off someone in the system to get this taken off her record. It shouldn’t surprise me, really. Her parents have never forced her to take responsibility for her actions and have only enabled her behavior.

I wish she’d just show up and we could get this part over with, but she’s now made matters way worse for herself. The judge could’ve pushed the restraining order through without her being present in court, but once her attorney spilled the news that she hasn’t been at her residence the past few weeks, he doesn’t trust she’d be home to

be served the final restraining order papers.

So, until they can find her or she turns up, we'll continue building our case and the temporary restraining order stands.

Since my rotation is over for the week, I decide to sleep in and head to the gym for a few hours before Courtney gets home from work. As I pull into the driveway, I notice her car and another one parked next to hers.

"Court?" I shout as soon as I step into the house.

Buddy greets me at the door with his tongue hanging out. Bending down, I pet his head and scratch his back. "Hey, Buddy." He wags his tail faster.

"In the kitchen," she yells back.

I round the corner and see her and Kayla. Courtney adds ingredients to a bowl as the mixer spins and Kayla is placing muffin cups in a muffin pan.

"Special occasion?" I ask, stepping closer to Courtney and placing a kiss on her lips. I love when she bakes. She always smells like fresh blueberries afterward.

"Does there need to be a special occasion for muffins?" She smirks.

"Yeah, I should know better by now, huh?" I smile.

"Kayla and I are brainstorming decorating ideas for our next place. We get the brains of the super talented Kayla Sinclair, top interior decorator at her firm!" Courtney brags and Kayla blushes.

"You're brainstorming decorating ideas on a house we don't have yet?" I arch a

brow, leaning against the counter.

Courtney and Kayla exchange looks and I know they're up to something.

"Well, we'll obviously have a master bedroom and living room, so it can't hurt to talk color templates. I'd really love an earthy tone in the kitchen and living room; it's neutral and will match anything. I was thinking for our master bedroom, we could add a pop of color on one wall. Maybe teal so it's not too girly, yet gives it a lively feel. What do you think?" Courtney rambles everything so quickly, I barely catch what she's saying.

"I have no idea what that all meant, but if you and Kayla want to pick out color palettes or whatever, then I'm all for it. Just don't make me walk into a rainbow-colored bathroom."

Kayla chuckles, pulling her long, dark hair up as if she's preparing for battle.

"Rainbow is so not in," Kayla tells me, sounding all serious.

"Well, perfect then." I open the fridge and grab the ingredients for my after-workout protein shake.

"I thought we had like three bags of muffins in the freezer," I say as I mix my stuff together.

"Oh, these are for work. It's Jayden's birthday tomorrow, and I promised him I'd finally bring some of my muffins in, plus Travis has been begging for them so I figured it was time to bake."

"And who's Jayden?" I raise a brow.

“He’s the intern we’ve had for a while now. You’ve probably seen him a couple times on Fridays when you stop in, but he works in a different department, so he only comes around when someone in my department needs something. He’s in his last year of grad school and basically does all the bitch work around the office, so I thought it’d be a nice thing to treat him.”

“How nice of you,” I deadpan, keeping my lack of amusement obvious.

“Stop it,” she says with a laugh. “He’s harmless. He’s super metrosexual, like I think he swings both ways, but favors the D over the P.”

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Kayla snorts and giggles. “You can’t fault him for favoring the D.”

“Oh my God,” Courtney says, laughing and now they both have the giggles, and I take that as my cue to leave.

Grabbing my smoothie, I kiss Courtney on her forehead and tell her I’m going to take a shower. Kayla makes a sexual remark and Courtney throws a blueberry in her face. I dodge out of there before I get in the cross fire.

“You’re cleaning that up,” I shout as I head down the hallway, the sound of their laughter echoing in the kitchen. Buddy follows behind me, happily wagging his tail. Once I finish showering, I’m anxious to have Courtney alone for the night, but as I finish getting dressed, I hear them chatting in the living room.

Although I want to spend time with Courtney, I can’t even be mad that Kayla’s here. She’s been a great friend to Courtney and between house hunting online and talking about decorating, Kayla’s helped become a much-needed distraction for her while we get through all the court drama. In fact, she’s been more giddy than usual and I love when she smiles. House hunting takes a little longer when we don’t work the same schedule, but this weekend we’re going to four open houses, so at least we’ll start getting an idea of what kind of layout and design we both want. A yard for Buddy is a must and a nice-sized kitchen for Courtney. I’d love to surprise her with top-of-the-line appliances and a countertop big enough to hold all her supplies for the muffins I know she’ll be baking—probably making a huge mess in the process. Even though she keeps dozens in our freezer, I hope she never stops. It’s part of how we fell in love and that’s something that’ll always be a part of our history.

I decide to take Buddy for a walk while they continue their girl talk. Plugging in my headphones, I search for the right song and just before walking across the street, a car on the corner catches my eye. It's too far away to know for sure, but I'm almost positive someone's sitting in the driver's seat staring at me.

My first instinct is to assume it's Mia, but it's not her car. It wouldn't surprise me though if she bought a new one to avoid her warrant. I feel the anxiety building and although the only threat Mia is to me is her unstable mind, I wonder if I should call it in just in case.

COURTNEY

Kayla has so many great decorating and color scheme ideas, I can't wait until we find the right house for us and Buddy. I still can't believe we're planning to move. I've lived here for the past two years and Drew even longer, and part of it feels weird leaving, but the other part is ready for the next step. I know that Drew is serious about us, not that I ever doubted that, but after the heartbreak Toby put me through, I always feel that little insecurity that one day Drew will change his mind just like Toby did.

"So, Tyler's been texting me," Kayla tells me as I take a pan of muffins out of the oven.

"Yeah? And?"

I look at her as she shrugs. There's no sparkle in her eyes or excitement in her voice.

"And he's a really nice guy."

"Okay?" I start laughing because I'm not sure where this is going. "And that's bad?"

“No, of course not. He’s like a male version of Viola. He’s really into comics and video games. I just don’t think we have much in common.” She shoves a piece of hot blueberry muffin in her mouth and immediately grabs for the milk in the fridge.

“If Viola were around to hear you accuse her of being into comics and video games, she’d have your head.” I chuckle. “But I get what you’re saying. He’s not your usual type.”

“Yes, exactly. I feel so bad too because he is really sweet. He’s good-looking and he has a decent job and he’s everything I should want in a guy, but I don’t know. Something just feels off.”

“He’s not Logan,” I fill in for her, knowing it was heading that direction anyway. “You’ve had feelings for Logan and you can’t just date someone else, hoping they go away,” I say from experience. “Trust me.”

She sighs and shoves another piece in her mouth.

“But if you think that you could have feelings for Tyler, it wouldn’t hurt to date him casually. Make sure he knows that you aren’t looking for anything super serious but you still want to hang out. That way you aren’t leading him on to think it’s going somewhere it’s not.” I take the muffins out of the hot pan and set them on a cooling rack.

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“You’re right. I want to like him more than I do, so it might be one of those slow burn attraction type things.”

“Logan might come around, you know? If he says it’s not good timing for him right now, that could mean he doesn’t want a one-night stand or a friends-with-benefits type situation. So that’s good. Means he’s probably not messing around with anyone else.”

She shrugs, not completely ignoring my suggestion.

Kayla inserts more muffin cups into the pan as I add the batter. It’s the last set and I know Drew will probably be hungry for dinner soon.

“You want to stay and eat with us? I’ll probably just put some pasta dish together or something.” I scoop out the last of the batter and shove the spoon in my mouth instead of into the muffin tin.

“No, but thanks for the offer. I have this new client that’s been really pushy on seeing an example board, so I better get started on it,” she says with a knowing grin.

“I’m not pushy!” I defend. She gives me a look and raises her brows. “I’m...suggestive. There’s a difference.” I smile in return, placing the pan into the oven and setting the timer.

Kayla heads out before Drew gets back from his walk. As I sort the cooled-off muffins in a container to take to work, my phone rings with Kayla’s name flashing over the screen.

“Hey,” I say, holding it with my shoulder and cheek. “Everything okay?”

“Well, I just drove down the block and Drew was standing there with Buddy and a couple cop cars with their lights flashing. Did he call or text you? I didn’t stop because I didn’t want to get in the way of whatever was going on.”

“What? No! I’ll call him right now. Thanks.”

Drew picks up on the second ring and I can tell by the tone of his voice that something is off. “Hey, sweetheart.”

“What’s going on? Are you all right? Is it Buddy?”

“Everything’s fine. I just saw a suspicious car and called it in.”

“A suspicious car?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it was Mia driving,” he says, exhaling in frustration. “She left before the cops showed up, but I got her plates.”

“Argh!” I shout, balling my hands into fists. “She was just watching you, or what?”

“Yeah, she was parked down the block and it wasn’t until I got to the corner when I noticed it. I’m pretty sure it was her, and if it was, they have her new plates now and will be searching the area for her.”

“Jesus. I hope they find her now. Preferably in a ditch.”

“Listen, the cops are about to leave now, so I’ll be home in just a few minutes. Make sure the doors are all locked, okay?” I hear the concern in his voice.

“They are. This isn’t my first Mia rodeo.” I roll my eyes that I even have to think about things like that.

“Love you. Be right there.”

After we hang up, I busy myself in the kitchen and clean up the mess we made. The last batch of muffins are done so I take them out to cool and turn the oven off. I start grabbing ingredients for my pasta dish that I plan to make for dinner when I finally hear Drew and Buddy walk through the front door.

I run toward him and he catches me in his arms. It feels so good to have his body around me. “Everything’s fine.” He tries to console me, but until Mia’s put behind bars, nothing will ever feel one hundred percent fine.

“We can’t move out of here fast enough,” I tell him as he places a finger under my chin and tilts my face to look up at him.

“They’ll catch her,” he promises me. I see the sincerity in his eyes and as much as I want to believe that, I know Mia’s crazy and smart enough to keep her distance just enough to stay out of legal trouble. Although there’s a warrant for her arrest, that doesn’t mean much when I know her parents will bail her out as soon as she’s served the restraining order papers.

“I hope so,” I say with a nod. “Are you hungry? I was just about to make dinner.”

“Actually...” he begins, unleashing Buddy and shutting the front door behind him, “I was thinking we could start with dessert instead.” He flashes me a wicked grin and it takes a moment for me to realize what he’s implying.

Wrapping his arms under my ass, he lifts me up until my legs wrap around his waist. My arms cling around his neck as he walks us down the hallway.

“I didn’t realize you liked dessert that much,” I quip.

“I fucking love dessert. In fact, I think dessert should be a three-course meal.” He presses his lips to my neck and teases me with his tongue. “Especially when it tastes this good.”

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My head falls back, giving him all the access he wants as he walks us into his bedroom. Buddy follows behind, thinking it's time to sleep and jumps on the bed just as Drew sets me down on top.

"Sorry, Buddy. I don't share my woman. You can go sleep on the couch," he tells him as if Buddy understands a word he says. He shuts the door behind him and crawls back on the bed toward me. "Why aren't you naked yet?"

I chuckle and start grabbing at my shirt. I watch as his muscles flex and he lifts his shirt over his head. I love staring at his tattoos. Even though I've studied them a hundred times, I can't get enough. His hair falls into his face, and it's so damn sexy. I'm already wet just waiting for him.

He unbuttons my shorts and slides them down with my panties. He presses his lips to my inner thighs as he crawls his way back up. Instead of taking off his own jeans like I'd hoped, he bends my knee and hooks my leg over his shoulder. His hands grip my ass as he pulls my body closer to his mouth. I squeal and laugh at the same time at the greedy way his tongue slides in me.

"Mm...your entire body smells like blueberries," he purrs against my clit. "I could devour you all goddamn day."

I tangle my fingers in his hair as he swirls his tongue up and down my slit. He pushes my thighs wider apart and inserts his finger inside while simultaneously working my clit with his tongue.

"Oh, fuck," I whimper, arching my back as he sinks his finger in deeper. He adds a

second one and flicks his tongue even faster than before. “Yes, yes, yes...” I cry out, the pressure building quickly.

“I love hearing you sing, sweetheart. Makes your pussy so tight,” he tells me, twisting his fingers out and back inside again.

He continues his delicious torture, my body shakes as he holds his grip tighter. My legs tense as his mouth vibrates against my pussy and my release comes on his tongue. The way he licks it up and growls against my skin has me begging for more.

“I love it when you’re greedy, sweetheart. You’re so tight and you taste so fucking good. Your body just aches for it.” He rubs his thumb down my slit and back up again before circling my clit between his fingers. He knows it drives me wild, and he won’t stop until he feels me come once again.

“Take your pants off,” I demand, reaching for them, but the position he has me in makes it nearly impossible.

“Not yet. I’m not even close to being done with you.” His deep throaty moan tells me everything he says is true.

“So, what was that magic number again?” He lifts his eyes as I look at him with furrowed brows.

“What magic number?”

“The number of orgasms you’ve given yourself while playing with your little toy.” He smirks as if he’s going to get the answer out of me.

“I thought we talked about this already,” I say, hoping he’ll leave it alone. I don’t want to tell him and then he use it as a challenge because I don’t think I’d survive

something like that.

“But you never told me, so spill it, sweetheart. We have a record to break.”

“Never,” I say, trying to push my legs together, but he blocks my attempt.

“Don’t even try it,” he warns me. “I’m not stopping until you tell me.” He twists his arm and inserts two fingers as deep as he can and then rubs the pad of his thumb against my clit at the same time. It’s already sensitive from him and the way he’s working me right now, I won’t last much longer.

I moan and claw my nails into his biceps, trying to fight the urge because I know what kind of game he’s playing. He thinks he can build me up until I can’t take it anymore and I beg him to let me come. But I’m the queen of prolonged satisfaction. Before Drew, most of my orgasms were either faked or self-induced.

However, Drew has a talented-as-fuck tongue and whatever the hell he’s doing right now makes it damn hard to concentrate on not giving in. He’s being relentless, moving his tongue and fingers just how he knows I love. I attempt at pushing him away, but it’s no use. Drew is built like a brick wall. I’d end up hurting myself before I ever push through him, not that I really want to anyway.

“I know you need it, Court. Your pussy gets extremely tight when you’re about to come. I bet you want to, don’t you?” he asks in a mocking tone, knowing damn well I need it. He slows his pace and flicks my clit with his tongue as his fingers rub slow circles against my pussy.

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“Just tell me the number and you’ll get exactly what you need, baby.” He picks up his rhythm just enough to keep me in agony but not enough to push me over the edge.

“I have a toy in my nightstand for a reason. I can do the exact same thing myself,” I taunt, knowing it drives him nuts when I talk about my vibrator.

“Actually, your little toy went on a field trip.” My head pops up as I watch his lips form into an evil grin.

“What? You stole my vibrator?” I pinch my lips together to keep from laughing because I should’ve known. Drew plays dirty and thinks his police tactics will work on me, but I’m going to prove him wrong.

“I had to do what I had to do,” he says in a direct tone. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Either way, I know I’m going to win.”

Instead of allowing me to respond, he dives his face back between my legs and slides his fingers back inside. My back arches and I’m gasping for air as he slides a different finger lower. He pushes through the tightness and forms a rhythm with his tongue, making my entire body shake and nearly convulse as I try to control what he’s doing to me. The pressure and build up are too much and I know I won’t be able to last a minute longer.

“Drew, please,” I beg, my hips arching as his pace increases. “Holy fuck.” My fists grip the sheets as my nails dig into the mattress. My entire ass is off the bed as he consumes every part of me. He’s a starved man, tasting every inch inside me, and the willpower to be strong dissolves with every stroke of his tongue.

“Are you ready to tell me yet?” he asks, inhaling a deep breath. It’s probably his first one in five minutes.

“No,” I say, but deep down I’m close to crumbling just to get the relief he’s withholding from me.

Before I can take my answer back and beg him to give me what I need, he catches me off guard and kneels back on the bed so my legs come together and grips my hips in both hands, flipping my body over so my ass is in the air.

“Drew!” I squeal, flailing my arms as he spins me around. “You have no sense of the phrase being graceful!”

I hear him chuckle behind me as the sound of his jeans fall to the floor.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

His body hovers over mine as the tip of his cock rubs over my ass.

“It is when you’re trying to toss me around like a rag doll,” I fire back, feeling sexually frustrated at the moment.

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart. I’m going to take care of you.” He presses both of his palms on my ass cheeks and spreads them. I feel the crown of his dick at my opening, and with a slight arch of my hips, he begins sliding inside. I release a deep breath as I feel him fill me and gasp when he suddenly thrusts deeper and harder. “I’ll always take care of you.”

He stretches his body over me, rubbing his hands along my arms as he repositions them above my head. My body is lying completely straight on the bed, my legs pressed together as he fucks me from behind. The sensation is almost too much at

how tight and deep everything feels. He lays his body on top of mine as he pins me down underneath him. He's holding all the control, yet it doesn't feel that way at all. The way our bodies synchronize and keep a rhythm to please one another is the most intimate thing I've ever felt with another person.

"Do you feel that?" he whispers in my ear.

My cheek is pressed against the mattress as his hand wraps around my throat and his mouth finds mine. He kisses me deeply and passionately as our bodies tense at the same time and release moments later. His hand tightens on my throat at the same time, making the ride ten times more intense.

He collapses down on me, but doesn't stay there for long. He rolls over and I'm trying to catch my breath as he pulls my body toward him. I rest my head on his chest and swing my leg over his waist.

I feel his chest rising and falling as his heartbeat pounds against the palm of my hand.

"If that's how you do your interrogations, Fisher, I think you need to come up with another way," I say with a cocky grin.

"Don't get sassy with me, Bishop. I can contain you for up to forty-eight hours, so don't tempt me, because I have the entire weekend to get the answer out of you."

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“Ooh...that sounds like a challenge, Deputy.”

“And you should know that there hasn’t been a challenge I haven’t been successful at, so you might as well quit now and save yourself the embarrassment.”

Tilting my head up to look at the smug grin on his face, I roll my eyes at his attempt to intimidate me.

“You forget who you’re playing? I grew up with four older brothers who wouldn’t blink twice about pushing me into a huge pile of horseshit.”

Drew laughs and brushes a hand through his hair, pushing it off his face.

“In the rain,” I continue with a serious face.

“Well, I’m glad they toughened you up so I won’t feel so bad when I kick your ass and win.” He trails his tongue along his lower lip and he watches me study him. “You’re too easy.”

“I beg to differ!” I say, pretending to be offended and smack him across the chest. I lower my hand down his stomach and wrap my palm around his semi-erect cock. I feel him twitch immediately as a smile plays on my lips.

I know he’s always super sensitive afterward, which makes this even better. “Want to take bets how long it takes for you to get hard again? Then we can talk about easy.”

“Well, your hand or mouth on my dick is going to make it hard no matter what, so

that can't be a contingent."

"Okay," I say, removing my hand. "Let me watch you do it and if you make me come, I'll tell you my number."

"So that's what it's going to take, huh? You want to come while watching me jerk off and come all over myself before you'd tell me?" He wraps a hand around his shaft and begins stroking himself.

Holy shit, that's hot. Drew is pumping his dick, making it hard again. That thick vein down his shaft is ready to burst and watching the way he handles himself is doing things to me. Drew is big and thick and it doesn't take him long to be at full attention either, which is making this little game extremely frustrating at the moment.

"You want to ride it, don't you, sweetheart?" he asks in a gravelly tone as he turns his head and looks at me. He smiles when he catches me blushing.

"No," I lie and I can tell he knows it, too.

He smirks.

"Want to know what I'd like to do to you right now?" he asks, and I swallow as I watch his hand pump faster. I nod slowly, biting my lower lip to keep myself from speaking.

He arches a brow and notices my hesitation. He works his cock harder and cups his balls with the other. Sweet Baby Jesus. Stay strong, Court. If I cave, he'll never let me hear the end of it.

He smiles when he sees me crossing my legs.

“I’d take you from behind, but instead of pounding you into the bed, I’d fuck you up against the wall with your hands raised and cuffed. I’d spread your legs and dive in so fucking deep, pictures would start falling off the walls. I’d pull you close and wrap my hand around you so I could tease that sensitive, swollen clit. I’d rub your pussy so good, you wouldn’t be able to control yourself when you came hard on my dick. You’d tense up and scream out my name as you rubbed your ass against me, begging for more and riding your orgasm out as long as possible. Just when you’d think it was over, I’d spin you around and kneel in between your legs as I licked up your orgasm. I’d wrap your legs around my neck as you balanced against the wall and I’d devour every inch of your perfect, sweet pussy. You’d come on my tongue and you’d taste so fucking good, I’d go back for seconds and thirds.”

He finally pauses, giving my heart a chance to catch up. Good God, this man. He knew his words would be enough to get me all worked up, but I think he’s also working himself up in the process. His head falls back as he slows his strokes, and I can tell he’s trying to calm himself down. Watching him and hearing those words, I can’t restrain myself any longer. Fuck it.

I put my hand around his shaft, pushing his away in the process. He opens his eyes and folds his arms behind his head, looking smug as fuck. Bastard. A grin plays on his lips, and I can’t even be mad at the way he just totally played me, because he’s so damn good at reading people.

“Fine, I’ll tell you,” I surrender, needing to relieve the ache between my legs.

With a victorious smile, he turns and faces me. He wraps a hand behind my neck and pulls me toward him until our mouths meet. A heated, passionate kiss leads to him on top of me. He kisses down my neck and in between my breasts, giving special attention to each nipple first before making his way down and circling my clit with his tongue.

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“So, is it more than ten?” he asks, meeting my eyes.

I gasp. “No! Oh my God. I’m not a freak,” I say, laughing.

“Well, I needed a ballpark number to start with, so I didn’t think too high or too low,” he explains, but I’m already lost in the way his body feels against mine.

“It’s five, okay?” I nearly shout. “I’ve given myself five orgasms in a row before. I’d just watched a bunch of porn I found on some random Tumblr account and once I got myself all worked up, I just kept going.”

“Fuck, that’s hot,” he says while teasing my clit with his tongue.

“Not really,” I say, shifting my hips so they’re angled right where I need his mouth. “I ended up pulling a calf muscle and it hurt like a bitch for a week.”

He begins laughing and even throws his head back to control himself. I grind my teeth together, letting him know I don’t approve of his laughing at me. “That’s the best thing I’ve ever heard.”

I try to fight it, but end up laughing with him. “You suck.”

“Sweetheart...” he says softly. “I think it’s cute, okay? You giving yourself orgasms led to a sex injury.”

“Yeah, it’s adorable,” I deadpan, not the least bit amused.

“I think so. It’s a story for the grandkids one day.” He flashes a knowing smile and winks.

“You’re awful, Drew Fisher! Our grandkids will never ever hear that story, you hear me?”

He crawls back up my body and presses a sweet kiss to my lips. “We’ll see. But they might want to know about what it’s like to meet your soul mate one day.”

“You believe in soul mates?” I arch a brow, impressed.

“No.”

I narrow my eyes, confused.

“That doesn’t mean they won’t,” he explains. “I don’t believe in soul mates, but if I did, there’d be no doubt in my mind you’d be mine.”

I’m so overfilled with emotion that I don’t even know how to respond. I cup his cheeks and pull his face closer, expressing it all into that one deep kiss. I love this man so fucking much.

“You’d be mine, too,” I tell him. “I’ll be sure to tell our grandkids it just took you longer to come around.” I grin.

He laughs. “I had a feeling you were never going to let me live that down.”

“Never.”

He towers over me and presses kisses all along my jawline and neck, making the temptation even harder to deny. I want his hands and mouth on me all the time and

sometimes the feelings I have for him become overwhelming and I don't know what else to do but just smile at him and thank God for bringing us together.

Just as quickly as his sweet kisses began, they abruptly end when he pulls us off the bed and walks to his nightstand for his spare cuffs. He holds them up proudly with one finger.

“Now...time to shake some walls and break some records.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DREW

I can't believe the last few weeks passed by so quickly and we're leaving for Texas in just a few hours for Benita's baby shower. Weeks have passed and Mia has almost turned into a distant memory—for now. I haven't stopped looking over my shoulder or double-checking locks. Above all else, it's important my girl stays safe. The cameras we've installed have done their job thus far, and I'll be watching them while we're away since Buddy is staying with Kayla. Though there are days where I'm the one protecting him from his own shadow, I've grown to love his shaggy face, dog breath, and how he thinks he can sit on my lap like a puppy.

Once we're at the airport and make it through security, we grab some coffee and wait at the gate until boarding.

“So, have you thought anymore on that last house we looked at?” Courtney asks and then takes a sip of her coffee. Her bright blue eyes stare straight into mine, sending a jolt of electricity to soar through me.

“The one with the big backyard, huge kitchen, and the bathtub that can fit us both?”

Her lips curl into a sweet smile and she nods. “Yes, that one.”

“I really like it. I think there’s a lot of room for us to grow and would be perfect for a starter family.”

She tucks her lips inside her mouth and a hint of blush hits her cheeks. Lately I’ve found myself talking more about a forever with her because a future without her doesn’t exist for me.

“I agree.” She nods. “And it’s really close to Viola and Travis, so we’ll get to see the kids even more.” She grabs my hand and squeezes. “I just have a really good feeling about it.”

“I do, too,” I say truthfully. It checks most of the boxes on our dream list and it’s within our budget. “You think we should put in an offer?”

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“Yes! Let’s call Kathy right now,” Courtney says and I lean over, brush my hand against her cheek and kiss her. Our lips form into smiles and though we’re in a noisy airport, the only person I can pay any attention to is Courtney.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and call the real estate agent and officially give her our offer to write up. She was very excited for us and was confident our offer would be accepted. Courtney’s watching me, sitting on the edge of her seat as I talk about the house. I whisper I love you to her and she whispers it back.

As soon as I end the call, she speaks. “What did she say? Tell me everything!” She’s anxious and excited, and I love seeing her this way.

“She’s going to submit our offer before lunch,” I say and Courtney wraps her arms around my neck and laughs. “She said we should hear something by Monday at the latest.”

“I’m seriously crossing my fingers and toes right now.”

“I am too, sweetheart.” I place my hand on her knee and she turns and gives me a big smile. She has messy travel hair and I just want to pull her onto my lap, but I know it would go too far and there are children around.

“Oh my God! I’m so nervous now!” she squeals, bouncing her leg.

We both sit and smile, thinking about the house, and it’s so easy for me to imagine us living there, cooking together, and watching Buddy play in the backyard.

“Kind of off subject, but I can’t wait for Benita to see the gifts we got for the twins. She’s having twins, who would’ve thought?” she teases, knowing damn well twins run in her family, considering she has twin brothers.

I chuckle and she leans her head against my shoulder. I lean over and place a kiss on her forehead. She smells like strawberries and coffee.

Soon we’re boarding and the wings of the plane are cutting through the clouds. I turn and look at Court and she’s sound asleep, and I can’t help but think how peaceful she looks. I’ve watched her do double takes in dark areas as we walk Buddy, check windows and doors, and though she doesn’t say much about it, I know what she’s doing. I can’t wait for us to finally move into a place of our own and start fresh.

Once the wheels touch down in San Antonio, Courtney wakes up and fixes her hair back into a messy bun. We grab our bags and pick up the rental car since we’re stopping in Fredericksburg before making our way to Eldorado. The ranch is hours from the airport, and I want to experience Texas Hill Country with Courtney. According to her, the wine and peaches are to die for and she hasn’t stopped talking about it since we booked our flights. We exchange a soft kiss before we hop in the car and drive outside the city.

Texas is beautiful with its rolling hills and rock cut roads that are the color of beach sand. We didn’t go this route last time, so I imagined it would be long stretches of nothing, but I’m shocked at the bright yellow and purple flowers that line the highway. As Courtney stares out the window, I can see her smile reflecting off the glass.

“One day we should plan a trip to tube the Guadalupe River. The water is like ice and everyone drinks until they’re stupid,” Courtney says, laughing as if she’s recalling a memory.

“Deal,” I tell her and she makes me promise we’ll do it, which I happily do.

Soon we’re pulling off the highway and traveling down a narrow country road with no shoulder. The excitement on Courtney’s face is contagious as we enter Fredericksburg. The town is small and quaint with shops lining both sides of the street.

“Ooh, stop here,” Courtney tells me, pointing her finger to the right, and I pull over. Once parked, we head out in the heart of historic Main Street. She doesn’t wait a second before she grabs my hand and pulls me into the tasting room. The reflective ceiling tiles shine above us as we walk to the bar where our wine pourer introduces herself. She begins giving us samples of Riesling, cabernets, and informs us of the different kind of wines they make just a few miles down the road at the winery. If I close my eyes, it almost feels like I’m in Napa Valley, and I make Courtney promise that we’ll go experience the wine there, too. She agrees with a big, approving smile.

After a few glasses, a stone baked pizza, and enough grape facts to last us a lifetime, we’re laughing and having the absolute best time. Courtney leans over and kisses me, and I can taste the sweet red wine on her lips.

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“God, I want you so bad,” I lean and whisper in her ear. Her hand slowly moves up my leg until she has my crotch in her palm. I sit up and try to concentrate on the wine that’s being poured for us as Courtney smiles and nods like she’s paying attention to more grape facts. My dick is aching for her and if she doesn’t stop, we might have to leave here and rent a hotel instead. She rubs her hand along the hardness of my shaft, and I’m thankful when Jessica, our wine guru, brings our check.

I’m afraid to stand, but I adjust myself the best I can before we walk out. She looks over her shoulder at me and flashes an evil grin as we walk to the car.

Before I open the car door for her, I lean against her body, allowing her to feel exactly what she’s done to me and kiss the fuck out of her.

“You’re such a goddamn tease,” I say against her mouth.

“I’m only a tease if I don’t intend to please. And Deputy—I intend to.” She gasps as I grab her ass in my hand and squeeze.

Once inside the car, I sit there, trying to ignore the fact that everything about Courtney is consuming my mind right now, and it feels as if I can never get enough of her.

“Once we’re at my parents, I’ll make sure to make it up to you.” She winks.

“Then we’re going right now,” I tease.

“But what about the peaches?” She pretends to pout.

“The only thing I want to be tasting right now is you.”

She licks her lips and swallows hard but doesn't deny it. I know she's just as turned on as I am. The next few hours are going to be all about tempting and teasing, and I'm certain I won't make it.

COURTNEY

Drew's hazel eyes look greener today and his lips on my body are the only thing I can think about as we drive toward my parents'. Every time I glance over at him, I ask myself if it's truly possible to love someone this much. It has to be. I'm so madly addicted to him and there's no turning back now. I'm too far in. Drew has shown me what love is in its purest form, and I wouldn't have it any other way. We go together like blueberries and muffin batter—or as Drew would say, tofu and broccoli.

I give him directions to the ranch once we get closer. Gravel kicks up when he turns down the road that leads to the ranch. Once the big white house comes into view, he slows. There aren't handfuls of cars sitting outside like last time, and I'm relieved me being here isn't a family get-together—at least not yet. After he parks the car, he takes my hand in his and presses his lips against my skin.

“Now, you know my parents are extremely traditional. So, if they talk about anything crazy, it's their way of giving their opinion of us moving in together,” I tell him.

“But we already live together,” he reminds me.

“I know, but as roommates, which is like a stupid loophole that makes it seem like we're not really living together like a couple, so it made it okay. I'm sure Jackson confirmed that I had a room in the house, too. I have a feeling Mama asked him. She's nosey like that and always finds ways to get info out of people without actually asking.”

“Mama Rose would never...” he teases.

“Oh, she would. She’s a snake in the grass sometimes. Gotta watch her.”

A knock on the window pulls me out of our conversation, and I look over to see John standing there with a big smile on his face.

“I really don’t know how you tell them apart,” Drew says and all I can do is laugh because it’s obvious to me. Just the way they carry themselves is different. Jackson has a pep to his step and John just stands confidently without waving it around for everyone to see.

I get out of the car and give my brother a big hug.

“I was forced to help you bring your bags inside.” He looks over his shoulder. “Mom’s in a mood.”

“Shit,” I whisper. I turn and look at Drew. “Be on your best behavior.”

“I always am.” A sneaky smile creeps across his face.

Drew pops the trunk and John takes my suitcase from the back along with the present we picked out for Benita and the babies. It’s wrapped in yellow paper to keep it gender neutral because she’s decided to not reveal them until at the shower. I’ve begged her to tell me, but she swore she didn’t even know. It was fun watching Drew help pick out the clothes and diapers. I can already tell he’s going to be such a good dad, but I knew that after seeing him with Ginny and James for the first time. He’s a natural.

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We walk inside, and once John sets our luggage down, he takes the opportunity to escape. He makes up some excuse about finishing up a few things in the back pasture and scoots out before anyone can say anything about it. I walk into the kitchen where Mom is anxiously baking away. In her hand she has whiskey on the rocks and when I see her take a sip, she dumps it in the sink and smiles. Knowing she's in one of her moods, I don't even question it.

"Hey, baby," she says, walking over to me and giving me a big hug. She walks over to Drew and gives him a hug, too.

"How's it going, Miss Rose?" Drew asks with a boyish grin.

She grabs his cheek and squeezes it. "You're a cutie. Court is lucky to have you."

"Mom," I say with wide eyes, embarrassed.

She smiles, getting a kick out of my reaction.

"What are you doing?" I ask, looking at the baking pans all laid out and the mixer going full speed. She has flour on her apron and in her hair.

"Charlotte asked me to bake cupcakes for Benita's shower tomorrow, and of course, I agreed, because I love my niece, but it's a lot of work with the gender reveal and the amount needed."

I squeal loud. "You know the genders?"

I take a few steps past her and she grabs my arm so hard that her fingers dig into my skin. She pulls me back like I'm five years old and gives me a stern look. "Courtney Rose-Marie, I swear on your great-grandmother's grave, if you dare take a step toward that mixing bowl, I'll be sending you back to California so fast that you won't be at that shower tomorrow."

I look at Drew and his face is like stone. She pulled out all the middle names, so I know she means business. Not wanting to push her to the edge, I take a step back. I'm not even going to go there.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, taking that as my cue to leave because she is in a mood. "Well, Drew and I are going to put up our stuff, and then ride around, I guess."

She smiles at Drew. "Y'all taking the horses out?"

I didn't even think about that. "Want to?" I ask him.

"It wouldn't be Texas without horseback riding, right?" He looks nervous, but also excited.

"Don't put him on Shadow. He's been overly moody lately," Mama says as she goes back to mixing homemade icing. I want to tell her there must be something in the water with how moody she's being, but I keep my mouth shut.

We walk out of the kitchen and up the stairs and as soon as we enter my room, Drew bursts out laughing. "I didn't realize your middle name was Rose-Marie. I thought it was just Rose."

"Well, I usually just write Rose, but you know, when you're in trouble, your parents yell out all your names," I say, kicking off my flats and opening the closet and grabbing some boots.

“I wouldn’t mind yelling out all your names.” Drew takes a step closer and whispers against my neck between kisses. “While I’m fucking you.”

“Mm,” I moan, running my fingers through his hair, and I know we have to stop right now. It’s too risky. We’re both gasping for air between kisses and Drew realizes that we’re going too far and takes a step back. I glance down his body and see he’s rock hard.

“That bed is too tempting,” he says. “But I know better.”

“Come on, cowboy. We’re gonna saddle up.” I grab his hand and pull him down the stairs, off the back porch, and we walk a ways before we’re at the barn. I enter the tack room and grab a halter, a lead rope, and a handful of grain. I go back to the gate and lean against it before I start the chase. Shadow is eating hay along with a few other horses that are tame enough for little kids to ride.

“See that black beauty right there? That’s my boy Shadow.” I point to him but he sticks out like a sore thumb around all the quarter horses because he’s so tall and dark.

Drew rubs his palms against his jeans. “Didn’t your mom tell us not to ride him?”

“He’s fine. He doesn’t really like anyone but me. I’m sure someone tried to get on him and he ran away with them. It’s all about the confidence you have when you’re riding. If he senses you’re scared, just forget about it.” I smile.

“Do I need to change clothes for this?” he asks, as I throw the rope over my shoulder.

“You’re good. Blue jeans, T-shirt, Converse shoes.” I give him a look. “Unless you want me to get you a cowboy tuxedo?”

Drew bursts into laughter. “You mean cowboy boots and hat?”

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“Exactly.” I open the gate and head toward the black Arabian. My parents bought him the summer before I moved to California, and I spent months breaking him before I left for college. He’s thrown me off too many times to count, but I worked him until we were both exhausted. Shadow was my summer project and eventually he learned to listen to commands, but he’s a wild spirit at heart. I don’t think anyone will ever be able to break that out of him. It’s been a few years since I’ve ridden him, but when he looks over at me, I can tell he remembers that time we spent together just as much as I do.

“You’re just going to go after them?” Drew asks, leaning on the metal gate.

“Yeah, we have to catch them to ride them.” As soon as I take a few steps toward Shadow, he looks like he’s ready to run, so I stop. I’ve got him beat on that level, because I’m more patient than my brothers and can stand in this same position for the next hour if I need to.

I take another step forward and hold out some feed in my hand as I say his name with the halter behind my back. After a few minutes, curiosity gets the best of him and he moseys over to me. As soon as he’s close enough, I put the halter over his head and snap it up then put the lead rope on the bottom hook under his chin. I can tell he’s not happy he’s been caught, but he doesn’t fight me.

Drew opens the gate for me to easily walk through. I tie Shadow to a ring that’s on the outside of the barn and he already knows no matter how hard he pulls, he won’t break free. I walk into the barn and pull out a saddle pad and a western saddle. I throw the pad over Shadow’s back then lift the saddle, though he’s tall as hell, and put it on top of the pad. Drew walks over and helps me straighten it on his back as I

cinch him up.

“This is blowing my mind,” Drew says as I tighten the strap under Shadow’s belly and attach the rear cinch strap.

“Why?” I ask, brushing hair out of my face.

“Because you’re a real-life cowgirl.”

“Saddling a horse is like riding a bike, you never forget how to do it.” I give him a smile as I put the bit in Shadow’s mouth and release the lead rope. I swing the reigns over Shadow’s head then place my foot in the stirrup and pull myself up. Drew looks up at me and smiles. “Damn, you look sexy up there.”

I hold out my hand and take my foot out of the stirrup. “Come on, Deputy.”

His eyes go wide. “What do you mean?”

“Place your foot in the stirrup and pull yourself up by using the horn. You’ll throw that other leg over and hold on to my waist.”

“But your mom said he’s moody.”

I give him a side smile. “He’s always moody. Do you trust me?”

He searches my face. “Of course I do.”

I tap my foot on the stirrup. “Then come on.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DREW

I've never done anything like this before and Shadow looks like one of those demon horses the headless horseman rode. But I trust Courtney. I look back down at the stirrup and push my converse through it, grab onto the horn and pull myself up. As soon as I put my leg over his back, Shadow takes off into a fast gallop and Court is laughing the whole time. I wrap my arms around her small waist and pray I don't fall off and take her down with me.

Finally, Shadow slows to a walk and we travel down a small path. When I turn around, I can't see anything around us but rolling hills. The tall grass blows in the wind as the sun shines down on us. Courtney guides Shadow into the woods for some sort of shade, but the sun reflects through the branches. I can't seem to soak in the scenery fast enough because it all feels surreal. We come out the other side and cross a small creek that runs through the property.

I place my hands under her shirt until my fingers brush against her bare skin. She leans against me as she guides Shadow through an open field and in the distance, I can see a small house.

"Who lives there?" I ask and she turns her head back at me and smiles.

"Hold on," she says and makes a ticking noise with her mouth as she barely taps Shadow with her heels. He goes into a full sprint, and I wrap my legs tight around his body, hoping I don't bounce right off. She's laughing so hard as we slow in front of the house. She slides right off Shadow and I hop over the saddle and follow her lead.

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“Damn,” I say, walking up the steps to the modest house with peeling paint and worn boards.

“What?” She smiles.

“My ass, seriously.” I rub my tailbone.

“Why do you think cowboys walk a certain way? It’s because their asses are numb from riding all day.”

After tying Shadow to a post outside of the house, she grabs a key from behind a loose board and opens the door. I follow behind her and feel like I walked into a time machine. The decor is old western and the table and chairs in the dining room look like they were hand carved.

“Whose house is this?” I ask, looking at the horse pictures on the wall.

“It was an old ranch hand house that hasn’t been used for decades,” Courtney explains.

I can’t help but notice how untouched and clean it is, almost like it’s an authentic western movie set. When I look at her, she’s standing against the door with a devious sparkle in her eyes. She doesn’t have to say a word before I’m launching at her, our bodies pressed against one another, scrambling for relief.

Our kisses are rough and full of fervor, and I don’t think I can wait a minute longer to have her.

“We have to hurry. If we’re gone too long, they’ll get suspicious and come looking for us,” she says as she pulls her shirt over her head and unsnaps her bra. Her nipples are so damn hard. I lean down and twirl my tongue along her peaks. I suck and nibble until her head falls back on her shoulders with a sigh. When I pull away, she unbuttons her jeans as I remove my shirt.

“You’re so greedy.” I kiss her shoulder and nip her skin between my teeth.

“Fuck me, Deputy,” she demands and tugs at my hair. I love it when she gets rough and demanding like she is right now. I need to be inside her. I need to feel her. We take steps backward, our mouths ravenous for one another, and only stop when Courtney’s ass slams against the wooden table. Her back presses against the coolness of the wood and she sighs.

I kick my pants down and she instinctively wraps her legs around my waist. My fingers dig into her ass cheeks as I fill her with my length. We’re wild with desire and I can’t stop watching her as she begs for more of me. Her soft whimpers mixed with our moans drive me to the edge of our reality as I thumb her clit. Sinking against me, I give her everything I am until her body tenses and begs for relief. Dropping to my knees, I pull her toward me until her legs are resting on my shoulders and I taste her arousal. Before she finds her release, I kiss her inner thighs, slowing down the pace, making sure to tease her even more. Returning to her clit, I swirl my tongue until her body tenses and she loses herself in my mouth. I’m greedy as I taste her, wanting more, never able to have enough. She lifts her body up on her elbows and looks at me with a raised eyebrow and it’s all the permission I need to fuck her. I don’t know how much longer I can last because she feels so damn good. It doesn’t take long until I begin to unravel. As the orgasm rushes over me, she wraps her legs tighter around me and I bend down to kiss her. We’re breathing heavily with hearts rapidly beating, and all I want to do is lie naked with her for the rest of the day, but I know that’s not an option.

We stand, our naked bodies pressed against one another and I wrap my arms around her as she leans her head against my chest. Her hair and body smells like flowers and summer. We did what we set out to accomplish—made new memories.

“We have to get going,” she whispers, but doesn’t move. After another minute passes, she forces herself away and starts getting dressed but doesn’t take her eyes from me.

“Hurry, I think I heard something.”

My heart starts racing and as soon as I button my pants, the door swings open and Evan steps inside. He has mud up to his ankles and dirt on his face, but even I can tell he’s unamused because guilt is written all over our faces and bodies. Evan eyes me, then looks over at Courtney, who’s smiling like she doesn’t give a shit, because in reality, I know she doesn’t.

“What are you doing, little sis?”

She runs her fingers through her messy hair and pulls it back into a tight ponytail. “Just getting ready to ride out into the sunset, what about you? Shouldn’t you be at the hospital?”

“No, smartass, not today, which is why I’m covered in mud to my chin.”

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Courtney walks past him and steps outside. I go to follow behind her and Evan stops me. He's intimidating as fuck, but I've dealt with guys like him on duty a thousand times; however, I can understand he wants only the best for his little sister.

"My warning still stands. If you ever—"

"Evan, back off. I'm a grown ass woman and don't need my big brothers coming to the rescue. Come on, Drew," Courtney says through the screen door. She walks off the porch, unties Shadow and then pulls herself up on the saddle.

I look Evan dead in the eyes before I step around him. "I don't intend on ever hurting her. I can promise you that."

"Keep it that way," he says in his thick accent as I meet Courtney outside. The screen door slams behind me and it echoes over the open field. She's smiling but shaking her head at Evan's attempt to threaten me for the second time since meeting him. Dirt kicks up as I walk up to Shadow. When I look up at her, she scoots over the back of the saddle and gives me the go ahead to climb on. I don't hesitate, but I'm extra careful not to kick her when I swing my leg over to put my foot in the other stirrup.

"I was scared if I got off and you got on alone, he'd take off with you." She wraps her arms around me, places the reins in my hand, and we ride away.

"Why would Evan be at the hospital? Is everything okay?"

I can feel her smile against my back.

“Evan’s a doctor and works the night shifts in the ER. When he’s not at the hospital, he’s helping on the ranch as much as he can.”

I wish she could see my face right now because I’m completely shocked.

“So, he can break your bones if you piss him off and then fix them. Good quality to have, I guess,” I muse and she laughs.

“Never thought of it that way. But yeah, you’re right.”

COURTNEY

The next morning, everyone in the house is up before me. Drew’s drinking coffee with my father and I’m shocked to see them having a normal conversation.

“Hey, Pumpkin.” Dad pours me a cup of coffee from a carafe and sets the cup across the table from him.

“Mornin’, Daddy.” I give him a kiss on the cheek before I sit. Mom sets plates of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast, with glasses of orange juice in front of us but heads back to the kitchen instead of joining us for breakfast. She’s too focused to break away and often gets like this when she’s baking for events.

“Mornin’, Mama,” I say loudly and she responds with a mumbled ‘morning’ in return.

“Guess the moodiness didn’t disappear with a good night’s sleep,” I say under my breath, but Dad confirms it with a head nod and I know to stay out of her way and do what she says today.

“So, I was thinking while you women are at that baby shower today, I’d steal your

boyfriend to help with some tasks around the ranch.”

I glance over at Drew who doesn’t give a hint of what he’s thinking.

“Yeah, sure. But don’t feel obligated, Drew.” I shoot him a wink.

“I’d be happy to help Mr. Bishop.”

I have a feeling Drew is playing this card to try and impress my father, but he has no idea what he’s getting himself into. They’ll work him ragged until I get home.

“Great, son. I’ll meet you in the front in about twenty minutes.” Dad finishes eating, grabs his empty plate and takes it into the kitchen.

Once Dad’s gone, I look at Drew as I sip freshly-squeezed orange juice. “Are you sure you want to do this?” I look for any sign of hesitation or a hint but he doesn’t give one.

“I do. It’ll be fun.” He finishes eating his eggs and takes a bite of bacon.

I almost spit orange juice across the table. “I’ll make sure to ask you how much fun you had when I get back.”

“Courtney!” Mom yells from the kitchen just as I take my last bite of food. I grab my empty plate and step into her space. There are cupcakes everywhere and she’s putting homemade buttercream icing on the last ones.

“I’m gonna leave here in about thirty minutes, if you wanna ride with me. I’ll need help loading it all up, though.”

“Yes, ma’am.” My reply is short and sweet. Dark circles are visible under her eyes

and she hasn't stopped yawning since I entered the kitchen. Honestly, I'll be happy when everyone is bragging on how delicious the cupcakes are so she can relax.

Drew walks in and sets his plate in the sink and I bump his arm with mine.

“Breakfast was great, Rose. Thank you.”

“See, Courtney. These are the kind of manners I'm still waiting for your brothers to learn.”

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She turns to Drew with a sweet smile on her face, and I'm surprised he was able to temporarily make her stress vanish. "You're welcome, Sugar. Anytime."

Without missing a beat, she sternly looks at me. "Now go get dressed, Court. We can't be late."

Not wanting to give her any sass, I do as I'm told. Drew and I walk out of the kitchen and he grabs my hand and we walk upstairs.

"I'm actually nervous." Drew lets out a long breath.

"You'll be fine. But we might need to get you some different clothes." I look him up and down and know Converse won't cut it while working today.

"Come on." I take his hand and walk downstairs to the washroom. He's around the same size as Evan and I know there are extra clothes in the cabinets above the dryer. Though my brothers don't live here anymore, if they're dirty when they join for dinner, Mama makes them change clothes, washes them up, and places them here. I grab a pair of jeans that are worn out in the knees, a plaid button-up shirt, and find some boots by the back door that are his size. We go back upstairs and Drew changes while I slip on a sundress.

Looking over my shoulder, I catch a glimpse of him and laugh.

"I look like a cliché." Drew rolls his sleeves up to his elbows and tucks his jeans into his boots.

“Nah, you’re missing a big ole’ belt buckle and a ten-gallon hat, but I can make that happen, if you’d like.” The space between us almost instantly vanishes because when I turn back around, Drew is pulling me into his arms and his lips are on my neck, trailing up to my mouth. I grab fistfuls of his shirt as his hands thread through my hair.

“You should probably get going; Daddy doesn’t like people who aren’t punctual,” I say between kisses.

His breath brushes against my skin before his lips trail across my bare shoulder. “That’s where you get it from.”

“Go on.” I shoo him. “Make a good impression and good luck.”

He smiles over his shoulder as he walks out of my room and I say a little prayer for him that my brothers don’t do anything stupid.

After I apply some light makeup and fix my hair, I go downstairs and help Mama load the cupcakes in the back of her car, then we head over to the church where the baby shower is being held. Cars fill the parking lot and many of them are parked on the grass.

“What time does this start again?”

Mama looks panicked. “Not for another hour.”

I say things to calm her, but I don’t think it’s working because her face is stone-cold pissed. “Charlotte should’ve told me everyone would be here this early.”

“It’s going to be fine. I’m sure it’s just the excitement of twins and the gender reveal.”

Once she parks, we make several trips into the community room with cupcakes. Aunt Charlotte helps me unload them from the car as Mom starts stacking the cupcakes into a tall tower. The room is decorated beautifully with pink and blue pastels. Across the room there are two different colored punches and cute cards laid around that say ‘boys or girls or both?’. Just looking at Mama’s cupcakes make my mouth water and I’m so tempted to snag one, but I know I’d be murdered in front of all these people.

Eventually, I find Benita and she looks so pretty in a cute yellow dress with her hair curled. Her face is glowing and as soon as she sees me across the room, she squeals loudly and walks to me and I pull her into a big hug.

“Sorry, my stomach is so damn big,” she says then she leans in and whispers in my ear, “What the hell is everyone doing here so early? The shower doesn’t start for a little over an hour.”

I smile and hug her again and whisper. “Because most of them like to gossip and this is the only thing going on right now.”

Just as we release our hug, Toby’s mother Theresa comes over to me. “Oh my heavens, Courtney! I didn’t realize you would be here all the way from California?” Her voice is sweet, but her eyes are looking me over. I’m sure she’ll have something to say to the women she plays rummy with every Thursday night. She resented me the day Toby said he was leaving to be with me. But I guess in the end she got what she wanted when he moved back to Texas.

“Yes, ma’am. All the way from Cal-i-forn-i-a.” My accent is overly exaggerated and I sound way too happy. She gets the hint and so does Benita.

My cousin and I exchange a silent conversation when Theresa pulls the attention back to her. “Oh, did you hear about Toby and Christina?”

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I smile big, but I want to tell her that I don't give a damn about him because he's a liar and a cheater and scum. "No, I didn't."

"Christina is going to be having his baby this fall. We're so excited."

I keep smiling. "That's great, did they get married?"

Theresa's smile fades but she doesn't let it drop completely. The big fake smile that shows all her teeth returns, and I know I've hit her where it hurts. Her beady eyes give all her thoughts away. We live in a small town in West Texas and marriage before children is our tradition, it's the Southern thing to do. Considering she's the leader of the women's church group, I'm sure the gossip has been buzzing. That's just how the golden girls are—the older women in the church. I can tell she's seething, but I keep smiling, waiting for her to snap at me. Before Theresa can say a word, Mama becomes my mother hen with ruffled feathers.

"Theresa," she says, and I'm almost afraid of her tone. She doesn't smile. She stares Toby's mother down until she excuses herself.

"I should've told her where her lying, cheating son could go, but that's not the Christian thing to do," Mama says before returning to her seat next to Aunt Charlotte.

Once Theresa is out of sight, Benita bursts out laughing and it's so infectious that we're both cracking the hell up and can't stop.

"Aunt Rose," she says, between laughs. "Scary as fuck."

“Oh my God, I know.” Tears stream down our faces and I start coughing because I’m laughing so hard. It reminds me of our childhood when we’d get so tickled over the stupidest things. After a few minutes, I can’t even remember what we’re laughing about because Benita’s laugh makes me laugh harder. It’s one of those giggles that seems like a joke laugh, but it’s legit. Aunt Charlotte walks up and asks if I’d like to make a list of everything when Benita starts opening gifts. All I can do is nod my head because we’re clearly having too much fun and my tummy hurts from laughing.

Once the baby shower starts, Benita is pulled in a million different directions. Each time someone touches her stomach, she rolls her eyes—hard—and I can’t help but crack up as I drink punch. Mom finally relaxes once the cupcakes are neatly stacked and she’s had punch. I somewhat wonder if she spiked it.

Benita had cute plain white onesies at the door and tons of waterproof markers so we could decorate them. It was such a cute idea and I’ll have to remember that the next time one of my friends gets pregnant. I draw a Dallas Cowboys star on the front because she bleeds blue and silver.

Aunt Charlotte stands up and gives a speech about Benita, her beautiful daughter. I scan the room and everyone is so genuinely happy for her.

“But now it’s time to find out more about my grandbabies,” Aunt Charlotte says.

Mama takes the cue and stands up and helps pass out the cupcakes. She has them split and stacked evenly across the table for the two babies. Before everyone opens them, Aaron walks in and magnetizes toward Benita.

“He’s only here for the reveal,” Aunt Charlotte says. “He doesn’t know yet.”

Aaron grabs Benita’s hand, and since the wedding, I can tell how much their love has grown for one another.

Aunt Charlotte raises her voice above the chatter. “So, the way this is going to work is we’re all going to get cupcakes and on the count of three, everyone will open them up.”

Rustling and electricity fills the room as the countdown begins. We all take bites of our cupcakes and I start searching around to see if there are different colors than the one I have.

Tears of joy stream down Benita’s face as Aaron kisses and hugs her. In this moment, the only two people in the room they see are each other, and I feel my emotions get the best of me as I realize all the cupcakes in the room are filled with blue icing. I stand up and run over to her and give her a huge hug.

“Boys,” she says. “Two boys.”

As we pull away from our embrace, Aaron gives her a big kiss and then excuses himself. Mama comes and gives her a hug. “Don’t cry, honey. Boys aren’t that bad.” She wipes away Benita’s tears, but we both know they are tears of joy.

I give her another hug as people begin to swarm her. “I’ll pray every night they aren’t like my brothers.”

“Thank you! I wished for baby boys the entire time,” Benita says and everyone in the room is full of smiles. Soon people rush to congratulate her and I walk to the back of the room where Mama is wiping her eyes.

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“I’m waiting on my grandkids,” she wraps an arm around me.

“I know, Mama. But first comes marriage,” I smile.

“Unless you’re...” She stops and gives me a wink, and I know she was going to say something about Toby. Mama is my biggest cheerleader, the one who helped mend my broken heart, but I don’t think she ever forgave Toby for what he did to me. However, I’ve learned to let go of the resentment a long time ago. Every day I’m thankful for him cheating, regardless that it was wrong, because if he wouldn’t have, Drew and I wouldn’t have ever had a chance.

“I’m better off. It didn’t even bother me her telling me about the pregnancy. That’s how I knew for certain I’m over it. Drew is my life, Mama. I love him.”

“I know, baby. I know. I’m happy for you. I can tell he loves you, too, and would do anything for you. That boy looks at you like you’re his world.”

“I am.” I’m smiling big and it’s not because of the delicious cupcakes that practically melt in my mouth or the precious baby boys Benita is having. No, it’s because my mother knows—really knows—Drew loves me.

“Now get over there and save your cousin from the golden girls and help her open those presents.”

I give her a big hug and tell her how much I love her. She’s the most strong-willed woman I’ve ever met, and she calls it like she sees it. The older I get, the prouder I am to be her daughter. Most women don’t want to be like their mothers, but one day I

hope to be just like mine.

Gifts are stacked on a cute table and someone had gotten Benita a rocking chair as a gift, which she rocked in the whole time as Aunt Charlotte handed her gifts. I stayed busy, doing my job, writing down the gifts and what they were so she could send thank you cards afterward. When she gets to my gift, I can't contain my excitement. As she rips off the paper and sees the Baby Bjorn for twins, she shrieks then leans over and hugs me.

"One baby for each boob, you know," I murmur, just loud enough for her to hear.

"I was hoping I'd get one of these fancy things!" In the bottom of the big bag there are booties and a gift card.

She looks at it, confused. "Since there's not a Wal-Mart close, thought I'd get you a gift card so you can shop online." I give her a wink and she shakes her head and thanks me.

"It's too much," she whispers.

"Shut it and keep opening your gifts," I tell her, and Aunt Charlotte brings the rest.

By the time the shower ends, I can tell Benita is tired. She's been on her feet a lot today and the sugar in the cupcakes didn't help any of us. We help load up all the gifts, clean up, and then we're on our way.

"Don't be a stranger." Benita hugs me tight before we leave.

"I promise to come back and see the boys," I tell her. It's so bittersweet leaving everyone. Each time I do, it kind of hurts, but I love California, so it's a constant struggle.

Soon we're on the road and Mama is all smiles as we drive back to the house. Every single cupcake was eaten, and the gender reveal went off without a hitch.

"I'm proud of you," I tell her, and she looks over and smiles at me.

"Thanks, Court. I was worried," she finally admits.

"You're the best baker in Texas and everyone knows it. But I am kinda sad there aren't any more cupcakes left. The icing melted in my mouth. They were so good."

She turns her head and looks at me with a big grin.

"You have some hidden, don't you?"

I burst out laughing, realizing I get my need to hoard baked goods from her.

"We'll eat them after dinner with big bowls of ice cream. You know I couldn't bake all those cupcakes without saving some for your brothers. They would've complained the whole night."

I snicker because it's all truth. We pull up to the house just as Drew and Dad are pulling up on a four-wheeler. Drew is covered in mud and he's walking like he did a thousand squats.

"Oh, dear," Mama says as she turns off the car. "City boys aren't cut out for this life."

I get out and walk over to Drew and he forces a smile, but I can tell he's exhausted. "Are you okay?"

He shoves his hands in his pockets and chooses his words carefully. "Remind me to never get into a fist fight with any of your brothers. If they work this hard every day,

well, they'd all be able to kick my ass."

"Why do you think every guy my age was scared off by them?" I turn around as my brothers pull up, hooting and hollering with the top down in the jeep. Everything is covered in mud—even them.

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“Where the hell did ya go, Fisher?” Jackson says in his thick accent. “We were just gettin’ started.”

John points over to the four-wheeler and they all turn their heads, except for Evan, who stands with arms crossed staring at me. I take a step forward and give them all the evil eye because I know exactly what happened, they set Drew up for failure and Daddy rescued him.

“Where the hell have you all been?” I ask, knowing damn well they were at the pond.

“Just having some fun,” Alex chimes in, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“I don’t know how I survived growing up with any of you. You’re all assholes.” Once the word leaves my mouth, I hear my father say my name loudly on the porch.

“Courtney! Language.” I look over my shoulder at him and he cracks a smile. He’s drinking something, and I assume it’s whiskey on the rocks. If I dealt with the Bishop boys all day, I’d be drinking, too.

“Drew, tell Court how hard it was to pull weeds from the pond,” Jackson says.

“You. Did. Not,” I say between gritted teeth, because it’s the oldest, stupidest joke in the book. Each of them are laughing and enjoying this way too much.

I turn and look at Drew and all he does is shrug. “I thought they were being serious. They came up with this big story about needing the bank cleaned.”

I walk toward my brothers, ready to kick all their asses, and Dad steps off the porch and stops it. “That’s enough. Boys, it’s time to get back to work. Playtime is over.” None of them argue with Daddy and their smiles instantly fade. I shoot them a sarcastic smile and Jackson shoots me the middle finger when no one else is looking. Childish.

“Go wash up, son,” Dad says to Drew and pats him on the back. Drew doesn’t hesitate, but takes his boots off at the door. I can tell he’s worn to the core.

“Go through the back,” I yell before he walks through the front door and sets off Mama.

The whisper of the wind in the leaves on the trees and the rustling grass is all that surrounds us. Dad has a philosophical look on his face as he stares out into the open field with rolling hills. Sometimes his silence says more than his words and I’m almost concerned. Sucking in a deep breath, he looks over at me, and I can tell he’s tired. He’s worked this land since he was a boy, and if he had any other profession, he’d be retired. But as he told us long ago, cowboys never retire.

When I open my mouth to speak, to break the nerve-wracking silence, Dad asks me one question.

“Do you love him, Pumpkin?”

Not a second passes before I say yes. There’s no hesitation in my voice, just the truth. He nods and pats me on my back, then we turn in unison and walk to the house. He doesn’t ask me any other questions, which is normal. But to ask just that one throws me off.

After dinner, and after we’ve eaten cupcakes and ice cream like Mama promised, Drew and I head upstairs for bed. Throughout dinner he didn’t stop yawning, and I

thought he'd fall asleep with a cupcake in his mouth. Since we arrived, we've been sleeping in separate rooms and it's killing me because I want to feel the warmth of his chest against my back as he holds me.

Before he kisses me goodnight, Drew searches my face as a smile dances across his lips. "Guess what?"

I fall into his arms and he dips down and kisses me. "You wanna be a cowboy now?"

He shakes his head and lifts his eyebrows, excitement written in his eyes. "We got the house."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DREW

Courtney's been on cloud nine since our offer was accepted, and the rest of the week after we returned from Texas consisted of several decorating and furniture ideas, but I don't complain, because her happiness is contagious.

"So, I was thinking in this corner here would be the perfect spot for a bookshelf," she says while looking at the photos of the house on her phone. "Then in the foyer, we could put a cute little entry table on that one wall with picture frames, candles, or a bowl with dog treats. It'll set the mood for the rest of the house, don't you think?" Courtney continues talking and follows me through the kitchen as I shake up my protein shake. "Then I was thinking we could do a theme for each bathroom. Our master bath will reflect a calm and relaxing atmosphere, like a day spa. Lavender oils and plush towels...it'll be our sweet sanctuary." I glance at her and watch her eyes light up. "In the guest bathroom, we should do a rustic antique look—an old repurposed vanity or dresser we can install a sink into, a claw foot tub, or sliding barn doors. It'll be like a cozy cottage." I can hear the smile in her voice, but before I can

get a word in, she continues, talking about the kitchen and dining room.

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“Sweetheart...” I interrupt her calmly, her voice overpowering mine. “Sweetheart,” I repeat louder, setting my shake down on the counter.

“What?” She finally stops scrolling and looks up at me.

“Slow down. I love that you’re excited—I am, too—but you’re making my head spin.” I wrap my hand around her shoulders and pull her mouth to mine, pressing a kiss against her lips.

“Well, I just figured we should have some kind of idea how we want to decorate our house, don’t you?” Her forehead wrinkles, and I hate that disappointed look on her face.

“Of course. I’m just making sure to stay logical, because you never know. Until we close, it’s not actually ours yet.”

Her lips turn down. “Yeah, I know. But it doesn’t hurt to have plans.”

She’s been so excited and passionate about this new step in our lives, it’s the first time I’ve seen her this giddy in weeks. She’s been humming around the house, laughing more, and even switched to baking a homemade pie for us one night, which means she wasn’t stress-baking muffins for once. I want her to stay this way for as long as I can help it.

“Okay, you’re right.” I return a smile.

“Kayla’s been giving me so many ideas. She texts me Pinterest links about twenty

times a day.”

“I knew she was a bad influence,” I tease, lifting my pre-workout shake and chugging it down.

Courtney laughs and nods her head in agreement. “Yeah, if you think you’re overwhelmed by me, you should see the pin board she set up for us.”

“Well, it sounds like she has some good ideas.”

“Did I mention she has a board for every single room? Including the pantry and storage? Oh, and even the garage.”

I burst out laughing. “We need to get her a boyfriend.”

“Ha! Speaking of boyfriend, I think she and Tyler are getting rather cozy together. She’s been holding out hope for Logan, but he doesn’t seem to want to make a move, so she’s seeing where things go with Tyler.”

“Yeah, he talks nonstop about it, too,” I say, rolling my eyes because Tyler brings her up at every opportunity. “In fact, it’s getting really annoying.”

“Oh my God! He does? Tell me.”

“Court, no. I’m not gossiping about our friends.”

“Oh, come on! Kayla deserves to find a nice guy.”

“Logan’s a nice guy,” I say matter-of-factly. “He’s just going through some stuff right now.”

“What kind of stuff? Is he married or something?”

“What? No. He’s not really an open book, so you just have to peel back his layers bit by bit. If she really likes him, she should just wait it out, because he’ll come around.”

“Drew Fisher!” she squeals. “You’ve been holding out on me, haven’t you?”

I close my eyes. “I’m regretting this entire conversation right now,” I say to myself, but she hears me anyway and smacks the back of her hand against my arm.

“Well, maybe him seeing her with Tyler will give him the kick in the ass he obviously needs to finally realize that Kayla isn’t going to twirl her thumbs waiting around for him. She’s a catch! She’s sweet and caring, has a good job, she’s freaking gorgeous, and has the biggest heart. I mean, she volunteers at an animal shelter! She shouldn’t be settling for anyone, if you ask me,” she states matter-of-factly.

“I’ll be sure to tell Logan those exact words,” I say dryly.

She scowls at me in return and I laugh at her unimpressed expression.

“Babe...don’t get involved. We don’t need any additional drama right now. We have plenty of our own.”

She sighs. “Fine, but that doesn’t mean I can’t give him a little push.” A sneaky smile plays on her lips.

“Courtney...” I warn.

“What?”

“What does that mean, exactly? What have you done?”

“Nothing!” she says in a high-pitch tone that tells me otherwise. I raise my brows at her until she gives in. “Fine! I’ve invited him to come with us to Kayla’s Christmas in July ugly sweater party.” She smiles proudly, pushing her shoulders back to show she’s not backing down from this.

“The same party that Tyler will be at?” I inquire, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Yup. And when he sees them together, he’ll realize he’s jealous and that he’s been an idiot for pushing her away all this time.”

“Oh my God.” I shake my head. “So, now you’re a matchmaker?”

“Just when I need to be. Kayla knows what she really wants, and if Logan wants to dance around what’s been in front of him the entire time, perhaps he needs to be shown what he’s potentially missing out on.”

“This isn’t going to end well,” I mutter, looking up at the ceiling. “You can’t just assume he’s going to get jealous and pounce her like an animal. Guys don’t work like that.”

“Oh, really?” she challenges, lifting her brows. “I remember a certain someone got pretty protective during a wedding reception.”

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I burst out laughing at her accusation. “I was not. I asked for a dance and that’s all it took to get your panties off.”

“Drew!” She chuckles. “That’s not true! You kept asking me to dance so no one else would!”

“Oh, shit. You figured that out, did you?”

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her against my chest. “I guess it did take me seeing you get hit on by numerous drunk guys, and the thought of you going home with any of them didn’t sit well with me.”

“And that’s when you realized you had to have me, right?” She smirks.

“Don’t push it. Logan threatened to dance with you and there was no way in hell I was letting him get anywhere near you.”

“So, you went all alpha caveman when you realized I was more than just your blueberry-muffin-baking roommate?”

“Well, it didn’t help you were always parading around half-naked.”

Her head falls back with laughter. “You were always walking around shirtless!”

“No one said you had to look,” I say, digging my fingers into her hips. I lower my head to her neck and press a kiss under her ear. “But I’m glad you did.”

She shivers as my tongue travels up her jawline and I press my lips to hers.

“Ugh,” she groans, pushing me away.

“What?” I pinch my brows together.

“You smell like wood. Your nasty protein shake reeks.” She makes a face and wrinkles her nose.

I lower my hand down to my crotch and grab myself. “Speaking of wood...”

Her eyes follow down my body. “Drew! Oh my God! You’re going to make me late! I have to get to work.”

“Oh, come on. Just a quickie,” I tease, wrapping my arms back around her and smothering her against the kitchen counter.

“No! I can’t! I have to call Viola on my way to work, and then I’m looking up ugly Christmas sweaters on my lunch break. So, you’ll just have to keep Mr. Happy in your pants for now.”

“Mr. Happy, do you hear that? We’re being rejected.”

She bursts out laughing and presses her lips to mine once more. “What am I going to do with you two?”

“Maybe you can make it up to us tonight?” I smile.

“We’ll see.” She starts walking out of the kitchen and grabs her things off the table. “I’ll see you after work! Love you!”

“Love you more,” I call back just as she rushes out the door. I have the entire day to wait for her, which sucks, but it’s nice having a day off finally. It’s been a long week.

I call Logan who I know also has today off and ask if he wants to join me at the gym. He does, so we meet up and I give him shit for agreeing to come to Kayla’s party.

“What was I supposed to say? She bluntly asked me and caught me off guard,” he explains as he spots me on the bench-press.

“Yeah, Courtney is pretty hard to say no to, hence why I’m being forced to wear an ugly Christmas sweater.”

Logan smiles and shakes his head. “See what happens when you’re in a serious relationship? You get roped into all kinds of weird shit.”

He helps me return the bar and I sit up, rubbing the towel along my neck and forehead.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t change any of it for the world.”

“That’s because you know you’ve found the right girl now. You don’t always know it’s the wrong girl until it’s too late,” he says, and I know he’s referring to his ex.

“So, then what? You’re writing off dating all together?” I ask as we switch places. I spot him as he lowers the bar to his chest.

“When would I have time to date anyway? Girls take up time and energy.” He counts to ten to himself before I help spot the bar back up. “And money,” he adds, and I smile.

“Yeah, that’s all very true, but you don’t think about those things when you’re with

the girl you're supposed to be with. Then you start wondering how you ever lived without them."

"I can't talk to you when you're all in love."

I laugh as we switch places once again, but this time he adds more weight to the bar.

"Well, just a heads up, Court is trying to hook you and Kayla up together." I lift the bar out of the holder, but instead of spotting me, Logan spaces out and lets the bar fall on my chest.

"Shit," he mutters as soon as he hears me yelling at him. "Sorry about that."

"What the hell?" We put the bar back up, and I slide out from underneath it. He must've added an extra fifty pounds to it.

"Sorry, you just caught me off guard." His jaw tenses and I notice a weird expression flash across his face.

"About Kayla?" I inquire, not realizing it would affect him this much.

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“Yeah, but it’s nothing. I think I’m ready to do cardio and then head out.”

“Okay.” I follow behind him, wondering what the hell just happened to make him react like that. Perhaps there’s more to this Kayla thing than he’s let on.

COURTNEY

Viola and I chat on my drive into work. The mornings are the best times to call her because I know she’ll already be up and the kids will be eating breakfast, so she’s not having to chase them around the house as we talk about the party and where to find an ugly Christmas sweater in the middle of summer.

“With the amount of vomit and snot I get on my clothes daily, I could just add a few red and green pieces and pass that off as my ugly sweater.” She snorts, but I can tell she’s being serious. “I think I’m getting the flu bug though or these kids are just sucking the energy completely out of me.”

“Oh no, are they sick?”

“No, they’re like the energizer bunny twenty-four seven. Is anyone at the office sick? Travis could’ve brought it home.”

I think about it for a moment. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe you caught it at the grocery store. Or the pharmacy. The bank, maybe?”

“Oh my God,” she groans. “I need to get out more. My immune system is probably shot from being inside all day. All I do is chase toddlers and run errands.”

“You want me to help you find a nanny? I’ll find you the best one in town,” I offer, knowing she could use the help since Travis has been working longer hours lately.

“No, I don’t think I could relax while a nanny takes care of my kids. Maybe if I was out doing something or working, but I’d just be here.”

“Well, if you need a project or something to get you out of the house, Kayla can give you plenty of ideas. Between the color pallets and concepts she sends me for the house and her always talking about the shelter needing more volunteers, I’m sure she could assign you something.”

She inhales deeply. “Maybe. I should probably shower though. It’s Thursday.”

I chuckle at the sound of her defeated voice at just the idea of taking a shower. “Lola, it’s Friday.”

“Oh, motherfucker,” she curses, and I hear Ginny in the background yelling at her for saying a bad word.

I laugh at her expense and pull into the parking lot. “Okay, I’m at work now. You go take a shower and drink some coffee before you lose your mind.”

“I’ve already had a pot and a half,” she says like it’s no big deal. “Tell my husband he better be home before dinner tonight or he’s not getting sex for a week.”

Putting the car into park and turning off my engine, I scowl even though she can’t see me. “Disgusting. I’m not getting in the middle of your affairs. At least, not again. He always gives me shit for it.”

“You’re supposed to be my best friend!” she scolds, but I hear the sarcasm in her tone.

“I am! I’m just not going to tell my boss that his wife wants him home early so she can ride him all night long.” I lock the Jeep and slam the door shut before making my way into the building. “Unless there’s a raise involved,” I clarify.

“You get him home before dinner, I’ll make sure you get a raise,” she offers, and although I’m not sure she’s one hundred percent being serious, I take her up on the challenge.

“Okay, deal.”

We hang up and now that I’m on a mission, I’ll make sure to be extra sweet to Travis today.

By my lunch break, I’ve sweet-talked Travis several times to the point where he’s getting very suspicious, but of course, I don’t admit anything. I take as much of his workload off as possible and delegate projects to a few people who are too idle during the day. If I can shorten his to-do list, he can leave early and hopefully make it before dinner. Although, knowing Travis, he would still find something to do, so I may just have to push him out of the office myself.

As I’m scrolling through ugly Christmas sweaters, Jayden pops his head into my office and scares the crap out of me.

“Jesus! You’re like a fox,” I screech, pressing a hand to my chest to calm my heart rate.

“I didn’t realize you’d be so sucked into looking up...” He looks over at my screen and scrunches his nose. “Fugly sweaters.”

“You’d be surprised how hard it is to find an ugly Christmas sweater in July! Especially matching ones.”

“Matching ugly Christmas sweaters? I must know what this fashion statement is!” he squeals, pretending to sound excited.

I laugh at his fake amusement and enlarge one of the images I found. “My friend, Kayla is having a Christmas in July party and we’re all required to wear ugly sweaters, and what’s cuter than going as a couple in matching sweaters!” I look up at him and flash him a grin. “Oh my God! You should totally come! You’d love Kayla! And then you could officially meet Drew.”

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“Are you sure? She won’t mind?”

“No, not at all. She’s all about the more the merrier! Now, let’s find you a sweater, too.”

By four in the afternoon, I see Travis is still in his office and I’m starting to panic if I’ll get him to leave on time or not. He ends up walking out just as I stand up to go into his office, so I quickly sit back down.

“Hey, Travis!” I call out, grabbing his attention. “Are you heading out?”

He looks at his watch and furrows his brows. “No, I wasn’t planning to.”

Shit.

“Oh, well you’ll be late for your appointment with your lawyer at four-thirty. He’s meeting you and Viola at the house, remember?”

“My lawyer? For what? I don’t have anything on my calendar.”

“Oh, that’s um, because Viola scheduled it last minute to go over your living wills and life insurance policy,” I lie, trying to keep my voice steady. “She told me to remind you if you didn’t remember.”

He draws his brows together as if he’s trying to remember Viola telling him, but he shakes his head and clears his throat. “Okay, well then I guess I better grab my stuff and head out. She’ll be pissed if he shows up and she has to deal with the kids by

herself.”

“No problem, Boss. I’ll handle the office for you,” I say with a cheesy smile.

“Yeah, I have no doubt,” he grumbles, heading back into his office to grab his briefcase and keys. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“Yup. See you Monday!” I beam. It might not have been the most honest way to get him home early, but I know I kept my part of the deal. Now to make sure Viola does, too.

The following week, we finally get the closing date for the house. We’ve been so fortunate for such a smooth process, it almost feels like something will go wrong at any moment because that’s what usually happens. Nothing ever seems to go this easy for us.

We continue packing boxes and Kayla continues sending me Pinterest links, which make it harder and harder to stay patient. I just want us to move in, be unpacked, and able to decorate already.

“It feels so weird packing up my room,” I tell Drew as he sits on a stool, taping a box shut. “I can hardly believe it’s been three years since I’ve moved in here.”

“I know. Travis and I moved in like seven or eight years ago, I think. It was the summer before our junior year. Lots of memories created in this place.” He looks around, and I can only imagine the memories he and Travis made while living together—especially during college.

“I don’t even want to think about how many girls Travis has brought back here,” I cackle, knowing all about his past prior to Viola and him getting together.

He pinches his lips together, not admitting anything.

“What?” I inquire. “You have that look on your face.”

“I’m pleading the fifth, that’s all. I’m not saying a word about Travis and his...conquests.”

I laugh because I know he knows all too well about Travis and his pre-Viola days. The war between those two helped bring us together on the night of their wedding.

“Well, it was in this very house that they finally admitted their feelings and got together,” he states. “Just glad I wasn’t home that week.” His face contorts, and I laugh at his expression.

“It was also here where I first met you and you nearly took my breath away—well, technically the beam I walked into did—but it was the sight of you that distracted me.” I snicker at the memories.

“Come here.” He pats a hand on his thigh, motioning for me to come sit on his lap. I take a seat and wrap my arm around his shoulders, keeping our eyes locked. “We’ve created a lot of memories here, and I’ll never forget them, but I can’t wait to make many more in our new house.” He flashes an ear-to-ear smile and leans in, pressing his lips to mine. “Plus, think of all the new places we’ll need to christen.”

“That is true,” I say sardonically. “However, we’ll always have an extra pair of eyes on us, so we’ll need to create a spot just for him.” As if he could understand what I said, Buddy comes over, wagging his tail and sticking his nose in my face. “Yes, you,” I tell him, petting his head.

“I think he’ll like the new house. A whole new yard to mark his territory,” he says playfully. “Just make nice with the other dogs in the neighborhood. Don’t want to go

pissing them all off before they even get to know us.”

“Buddy’s a good boy,” I praise. “He’ll make friends with everyone, won’t you?” He wags his tail so hard, his entire butt shakes. “He agrees,” I tell Drew, smiling.

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“My woman, my dog, and my new house. What else could a guy need?” Drew’s smiling and I take the opportunity to press my lips to his. He wraps his other hand around me and pulls me on top of him until my legs are straddling his body. Buddy rubs his nose against me, but I ignore it. Drew’s hands are all over me and nothing can take me away from this man.

Just as his fingers unclasp my bra, Buddy lets out a loud bark, jerking us apart.

“Buddy!” Drew shouts, but it does nothing to stop him. I start laughing because I know exactly why he’s barking.

“He’s jealous!”

“Of what?”

“He’s protective of me,” I try to explain. “Dogs are territorial and once they claim their owner, they don’t want to share them with anyone. Buddy’s used to sleeping alone with me most nights.”

He sighs, flashing evil looks at Buddy. I laugh at his attempt to look mad, because you can’t look at Buddy and be mad.

“Well, I guess that should give me relief then. I’ll know that if any other guy is here while I’m away, I can count on Buddy to show him his place.” He cracks a hardened smile.

“Oh, I just lock him up when my other boyfriend comes over.” I smile wide just to

get under his skin; however, he takes it to the next level and begins tickling under my arms. “Stop! Oh my God! Drew!”

“That’s what you get,” he growls, making me fall to the floor. He follows and soon is on top of me, torture tickling me. He’s pinned my legs down so I can’t even try and run away.

“Buddy, help!” I call out through tears of laughter. “Dammit, Drew, I hate you!”

He grabs my wrists and pulls them above my head. “You love me.” His lips rise. I roll my eyes and rock my hips against his crotch.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he warns, pressing his groin into me. I can feel his cock pushing against the fabric of his shorts. “Unless you plan on doing something about it.” He arches a brow and before I can respond, Buddy starts barking wildly.

“Um...” I hear Kayla’s voice behind Drew. “Am I interrupting something?”

Drew shuffles off me and helps me up. “No. We were just packing,” I say.

“On the floor?” Her brows rise in speculation.

I clear my throat and straighten my shirt. “Shut up.”

She cracks up laughing as she kneels and pets Buddy. “I came to join the packing party, but I didn’t realize it was going to be one of those kinds of parties.”

“C’mon, smartass. You can help me in my room.” I reach for her hand and she takes it. “And then we’re talking about that hickey on your neck.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DREW

“So, what’s with Kayla’s obsession with Christmas?” I ask Courtney as she throws me the ugly sweater I’m supposed to wear tonight. “Every time you two talk on the phone, she’s watching a Christmas movie or about to pick one out.”

She puts her sweater on and adjusts it over her body. For being an ugly sweater, it actually looks really good on her.

She shrugs. “I’m not really sure, to be honest. It’s something to do with her childhood, I think. She never really says much about it, but I know it was a special time of year for her when she was growing up.”

“Isn’t Christmas a special time for all kids?” I pull the sweater over my head and let it fall down my body. Although we’re wearing matching sweaters, it doesn’t look half as good on me as it does on Courtney.

“Yeah, but I think it’s something sentimental. I don’t know. I never press her on it because, although she’s super chatty, she’s pretty closed when it comes to talking about the past. She just says she doesn’t want to talk about it, so I never pushed her on the subject.”

She meets me in front of the mirror and smiles when she sees us paired up next to each other. “We look so cute! What do you think?”

“I’m a guy. I don’t want to look cute, but you look fucking adorable.” I wrap my arm around her and pull her closer. “The guys are going to give me so much shit for this.”

She pouts, pushing her lower lip out and giving me puppy dog eyes. “But I want you to love it.”

“I love you. That’s the only reason I’m wearing this thing.”

She shrugs. “Fine. I guess that’s good enough.”

I bend down and swat her on the ass and she yelps with a laugh. “Let’s go before all the good booze is taken.”

“Oh, I told Jayden he could carpool with us since he doesn’t know where she lives.”

“Jayden? The guy you made birthday muffins for?” My expression hardens as I flash her an unapproved look.

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“Yes, I invited him, so be nice.”

I release a breath and roll my eyes when she’s not looking. “As long as he keeps his eyes and hands off you, I will be.”

“You’re worrying for nothing. I’m telling you, I should be the one worrying.” She points a finger at me.

“So, you invited Logan and some Jayden guy to this party? Is this party actually a cover for something else?”

“Like what?” she questions, looking concerned as if I may be onto her.

“Oh, I don’t know...maybe a matchmaking party?” I lean against the wall and cross my arms. “To see if Logan gets jealous and makes a move on Kayla?”

“No, I already told you. I invited Logan to be nice and if he just happens to see Kayla with another guy, like Tyler, and it stirs up some feelings he’s been hiding, then that’s just a bonus.” She says it so casually, as if she really thinks I’ll believe that.

Before I can remind her to not get involved, the doorbell rings.

“Oh, that must be Jayden. Let’s go.” She grabs my hand and then stops abruptly and turns around. “Be. Nice.”

I place my hand on my chest and snarl. “I’m always nice.”

Rolling her eyes, she walks us out of the bedroom and down the hall toward the front door. Buddy's barking up a storm, finally becoming the home alarm system we need.

"Jayden! Oh my God, that sweater looks so good on you!" He wraps her up in a hug and my jaw ticks at how tight he's holding her. "Come in. Meet Drew and Buddy."

She steps aside, letting him in, and as soon as I catch a glance at him, I've already decided I don't like him.

"Jayden, this is my boyfriend, Drew."

He holds his hand out for me, and reluctantly, I shake it. "I've heard a lot about you," he tells me. I study his features, trying to read him and make sure he's not here for the wrong reasons. He flashes me a smile, but I can't quite tell if it's genuine or not, and when the corner of his lips tilt up, I notice a small heart-shaped mole on his chin. I smile, but release a fake cough to hide it because I don't want to look obvious.

"I heard it was your birthday recently," I blurt out, not knowing what else to say. Courtney flashes me a disapproving look, but I ignore it. "Well, are we ready?"

The three of us head to the truck and Courtney talks up a storm to Jayden, discussing work and everything else under the sun. The moment we arrive at Kayla's condo, Courtney jumps out and happily drags us to the front door. As soon as Kayla answers it, we hear Christmas music in the background.

"Hey!" she squeals and her eyes light up. "I'm so glad you all came!"

"Kayla, this is Jayden. I work with him."

"Nice to meet you. Come on in, guys!"

“You look great, Kay! I love your sweater,” I tell her as we walk inside, her three dogs sniffing us as soon as we do. Her sweater lights up and when she presses a button, a song begins playing. “Oh my God,” I say, laughing. “Where did you find that?”

“I’ve had it for years, but it still works great!” Her brown eyes brighten as she smiles wide, linking her arm through Courtney’s.

“I can’t believe you have three dogs in this small condo. You need a bigger place just for your dog hoarding addiction.” I bend down and pet all their heads. “What are their names?”

“The little brown one is Philip, the big black one is Adam, and the mix is Kristoff,” she answers with a smile.

I continue petting them before it hits me. “Oh my God.” I laugh. “You named them after Disney Prince’s, didn’t you?”

“Duh. I needed some romance in my life.”

We follow her into the kitchen and see it’s stocked with green and red cups and plates; sparkling champagne bottles sit on the counter next to platters of Christmas cookies and candy. She’s even hung strands of Christmas lights on the ceiling and fake mistletoe hanging above the doorway.

“Everything looks great!” Courtney tells her. “Can I help with anything?”

“No, no! You guys mingle and help yourself to drinks and snacks.” The doorbell rings. “I’ll go grab that. Be right back!”

Tyler and Logan end up arriving at the same time, and it’s not hard to notice Logan’s

tense jaw as he watches Tyler wrap his arms around Kayla and kiss her cheek. I shake my head as I think about Courtney's plan and wonder if she's been right about him this entire time.

Shortly after, Travis and Viola show up with the kids, and I immediately steal Ginny from them. "There's my girl!"

"Uncle Rew!"

"Hey, Monkey!"

As soon as Viola sets James down, I tell him to give me a high-five. "Ow! You got so strong, buddy!"

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Courtney asks for one too and soon we're all laughing with the kids. Jayden is standing next to us and surprisingly, he fits right in, making funny faces at the kids and making them smile.

"You okay, Lola?" I hear Courtney ask Viola. She does look a little pale, but I suspect that she's tired from the kids.

"Oh, yeah I'm fine. Exhaustion just hits me when I stop moving for more than five seconds."

"Well, Drew and I would be happy to take them off your hands any time!"

"I'll remember that at two in the morning when James' diaper explodes and Ginny's crying from a shadow that scared her." She sighs and Travis takes her face and lays a kiss on her lips.

"So, Logan, how are things going?" Courtney asks him, forcing him out of his silent corner.

"Fine." His arms are crossed over his chest and it's obvious he'd rather be any place but here.

"Anything new?" she keeps digging.

He purses his lips, glances over her shoulder where Kayla and Tyler are standing, and shakes his head. "Nope."

“How are things at work?” she asks, more firmly.

“Busy.”

“Are you seeing someone?”

His jaw ticks and I can tell he’s over this twenty questions interrogation.

“Court...” I interrupt, grabbing her attention away from Logan. “Let’s grab a drink.” I hold my hand out for her, eyeing her to grab it. She stares at me and then finally takes it. I lead her into the kitchen and ask what the heck she was thinking.

“What? He’s totally watching them. I know he won’t admit it, but he has feelings for her. I just need to figure out why he’s pretending he doesn’t...” She narrows her eyes and chews on her bottom lip.

“Stop,” I tell her in a firm tone as we make our way into the kitchen. “Stop pushing.”

“I’m not pushing! I was just asking him a question!” she defends, but even she can’t believe her own words. “I wanted to see his reaction and now you saw it, too. There’s definitely something there. They used to text and hang out occasionally, but now he’s just completely off the grid. Says he’s too busy at work, blows her off, or doesn’t even return her messages. Something is going on and I intend to find out what it is!”

“Why is it your business to dig up? Don’t you think you’re being a little too nosy? If he doesn’t want people to know his private life, then just let it be.”

“But what if they’re meant to be together and it’s his stubbornness that’s getting in the way? Maybe fate brought us all together as friends for us to help him see what’s right in front of him.”

I shake my head, unable to get through to her. I place my hands on her shoulders and pull her toward me. “I love you and I love that you want your friends to be happy, but you have to let them work this out. You can’t get involved.”

She sighs and then pouts. “Fine, I will try to stay out of it.”

I raise my brows at her.

“What? That’s the best you’re getting out of me.”

I chuckle, knowing Courtney all too well and how much she loves seeing her friends happy. “Fine. I’ll take what I can get.”

She smiles. “Good. Now dance with me, Deputy.”

COURTNEY

More of Kayla’s friends arrive and soon her condo is packed full. She introduces them to us, most of them from the firm she works at and others she met in college.

The mood shifts as more people fill in. She brings out her special holiday punch that I’m almost positive is ninety percent liquor. In the corner of her living room is a mini decorated Christmas tree with colored lights and a little train track set running around it. It’s actually pretty cute and festive and if it wasn’t eighty degrees out, I wouldn’t mind the Christmas music and Santa hats.

“I think I’m going to head out so I can get up early and FaceTime Skylar in the morning,” I overhear Logan tell Drew. I pinch my brows together, wondering who Skylar is and why it’s the first time I’m hearing the name.

Before Drew can reply, I interrupt. “Dance with me first!” I grab Logan’s hand before

he can say no and pull him with me toward the middle of the living room.

“Jesus, Drew wasn’t lying when he mentioned your abnormal strength.”

I wrap my hands around his shoulders and he reluctantly wraps his arms around my waist.

“Born and raised in Texas,” I say with a smile. “Grew up on a ranch,” I explain. “With four older brothers.”

His eyes widen briefly. “Sounds intense. Damn.”

“Yup. So, you want to go at this the easy way or the hard way?”

He arches a brow, questioning me. “Excuse me?”

“I know you’re a detective and you’re used to being the one asking all the questions, but Kayla’s my friend and you’re Drew’s friend, so I feel it’s my duty to make sure you don’t hurt my friend.”

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“How could I hurt her?” He looks puzzled.

“I know that you know she’s had a thing for you. Is that why you backed off? If you don’t have feelings for her, then I completely understand, but if you do, I don’t understand why you wouldn’t pursue it.”

He inhales deeply, obviously annoyed with me, but I don’t care. Sometimes guys need an extra push.

“It’s complicated, okay?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, Avril Lavigne.” He flashes me an even more confused look. “Who’s Skylar, then? Can you tell me that much? Is she a girl?”

“She is a girl, but that’s all I’m saying.” His lips are in a firm line and I can tell he’s not going to give me any further info even if I beg.

“All right. Well, where does that leave Kayla, then?”

He doesn’t keep eye contact with me and I can see him glancing over to his side. I look and see he’s staring at Tyler and Kayla sitting on the couch. Kayla’s in his lap and Tyler’s eyes are glued to her chest.

“She seems pretty content where she is right now,” he deadpans, and I’m not blind to see the hurt in his eyes. I know he’s pushing away from her, I just can’t understand why.

Travis and Viola leave early once the kids start to get tired and cranky. We end up making plans for brunch the next morning since we don't get to spend much time with them anymore. We drink more punch and snack on the red and green sprinkled sugar cookies and by the time we head out, it's past midnight.

Jayden had no problems mingling with the other guests. In fact, I'm sure he would've stayed if he hadn't carpooled with us, but today was our last full day together before Drew starts his four-day swing shifts again and I don't want to spend the remaining hours we have together nursing a hangover.

"You guys have some dope friends," he says and I see Drew glancing over at me with narrow eyes. I chuckle softly as Jayden continues talking our ears off all the way home. Who knew he'd be one of those chatty drunks?

As soon as we arrive home, Jayden schedules an Uber and a part of me suspects he's heading back over there, but I don't ask him. Mostly because I don't care right now. I just want to get in bed and lie with Drew.

The next morning, Drew wakes me up with his head between my legs. Both of my thighs are hooked over his shoulder, and I'm completely trapped by him—not that I mind one bit. I dig my nails into his shoulder blades and he doesn't stop until my body shakes and releases on his tongue.

"You keep that up, Deputy, I'm going to start expecting that kind of wake-up call every morning." I rest my head against his chest once he lies next to me.

"As long as some of those mornings start with you straddled on top of me." He flashes a cheesy grin.

"Considering you wake up equipped and ready, that shouldn't be a problem."

“It was part of my training to always be prepared,” he says matter-of-factly, hiding a smile.

“Where’d you go to get your training? The boy scouts?” I laugh at him and right on cue, he attempts to tickle me under my arms.

After a karate kick of an attempt to get away from him, he pins me down, straddling my hips and holding down my wrists.

“You suck,” I huff, trying to wiggle my body out from under him.

He laughs as he lowers his lips to my neck. He slides his tongue along my jaw and pulls my earlobe in between his teeth. “You’re so lucky we have to leave in forty-five minutes or I’d really show you who sucks.”

“Dammit,” I groan. “I forgot about brunch.” I arch my hips and grind against him.

“We can show up fashionably late,” he suggests, although he knows I hate being late.

“No way,” I refuse. “If we’re more than five minutes late, they won’t think twice about eating without us. Especially since the kids have a twenty-minute sitting limit,” I remind him.

“You’re right. C’mon, sweetheart. We’ll pick this back up later.” He rests his lips against mine. “But don’t think it’s going to be easy. I’m going to need to take a cold shower now.”

He grinds his erection in between my legs, making it even more torturous. “Ugh.” I pretend to cry. “We have a few minutes to spare. Just put the tip in.” I smirk, rocking my hips against him.

Bursting with laughter, he says, “It’s never just the tip. I’m not falling for that one again.”

We arrive for brunch just on time. Viola, Travis, and the kids walk through the door just as we get a table. I snag James from Travis before he can set him down in the highchair.

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“Lola, you okay? I’d be glad to take the kids for a few hours this afternoon if you want to get some rest. Drew leaves for work around two-thirty, so I could play with them all afternoon.” I’m starting to get really concerned, because if the dark circles are any indication, she hasn’t slept in weeks.

“It’s just this virus that’s going around is making me feel like shit. I’ll be okay.”

I don’t buy it for a second, but I don’t press it. “All right, well just let me know. My offer still stands.”

Ginny and I head to the buffet together and I help her with her plate. For three years old, she’s not as picky as one would assume. Her plate is filled with bacon, eggs, fruit, and mashed potatoes.

“That’s quite the combo,” Travis says as I set her plate down.

“She’s got good taste.” I chuckle. “And a big appetite.”

“You’re telling me,” Viola chimes in. “She asks for a snack before I even rinse her plate off after every meal. I can’t even imagine how they’re both going to be as they grow up.”

“I’d start saving now,” I tease.

We chat and eat for the next half hour. I watch as Viola shuffles food around her plate and I can’t help but notice she’s not eating.

“I’m going to use the restroom. Ginny, you need to go potty?” Viola stands up, but Ginny shakes her head with a mouthful.

“I’ll come with you,” I tell her, standing up before she can insist I stay put. Something’s going on with her, and I intend to find out.

Once we’re secure in the bathroom, I stare at her through the mirror until she lifts her head and meets my eyes. “What?”

“Are you pregnant?” I ask bluntly, holding her gaze so she can’t lie to me.

“What?” She whips her head toward me. “I have my tubes tied,” she reminds me, but I’m not convinced.

“So? That isn’t one hundred percent effective. Have you taken a test?”

“No, but I know I’m not pregnant.”

“How do you know? You’ve been sick, nauseous, you aren’t eating, you look worn down,” I list them out for her on my fingers. “This isn’t just a virus, Lola.”

“The chances of getting pregnant after getting your tubes tied is really low,” she informs me.

“But there’s a chance?” I raise a brow. “All right, you need to take a test. Come over this afternoon after Drew leaves for work, and I’ll buy you a pack of tests. Bring the kids so Travis doesn’t get suspicious.”

“Court...” she starts to argue, but I cut her off.

“C’mon, just humor me, then. I’m worried about you. If you aren’t pregnant, then

you need to get looked at for something else.”

She sighs and then shrugs her shoulders. “Okay, fine. I’ll pee on a stupid stick for you, but don’t say I didn’t tell you so.” She flashes a cocky grin.

“Ha! Better drink up!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DREW

The first day back to work is always the hardest for me. I hate leaving Courtney after getting a couple days together and my night is usually packed with paperwork and patrol duty is usually the busiest on Sunday nights.

Once my shift is over and I head back home, I tiptoe into my bedroom and once I get Buddy off my side of the bed, I slide under the covers next to Courtney. She immediately molds her body to mine and I softly kiss her forehead, cherishing these moments. There’s no better feeling than knowing the person you love is home waiting for you.

Courtney kisses me goodbye in the morning before she heads off for work and Buddy and I sleep for another couple of hours before I decide I need to get up and head to the gym. I blast my music as I lift weights and do some cardio, and by the time I head home, I have to get ready for work again.

I love my job—I wouldn’t change it for anything—but ever since Courtney and I have been together and our relationship’s gotten more serious, I wish I worked normal daytime hours. I want to be home when she’s home and spend the evening hours with her. Buying a house together, adopting a dog, and thinking about our future as a couple makes it harder to work these swing shifts.

As I finish up in the bathroom and hang up my bath towel, I glance down and notice something odd in the wastebasket. I bend down and grab the box, and as soon as I read the words pregnancy tests, my eyes nearly pop out of my head. The box is open and when I peek inside and see two white sticks, I immediately pull them out.

I'm not expert on pregnancy tests, but I'm pretty certain a plus sign means it's positive. If that's the case, I'm pretty certain that means Courtney is...pregnant.

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The other test has a plus sign too, which seals the deal, but why didn't Courtney say anything to me? She didn't seem any different, but then again, we only got to sleep together for a few hours before she left for work. I pull my phone out of my pocket and send her a message.

D: Hey, sweetheart! How's your day going?

C: Hey, baby! It's going good! I miss you though :(Jayden has been talking nonstop about the party ALL day! It's actually pretty hilarious. He's like a superfan of Kayla now.

D: That's great. Anything else going on? You feel okay?

C: Yeah, I'm fine. Why?

D: Just making sure. I gotta head to work. Love you!

C: Love you, too!

Hm...well that didn't help me any. She hasn't been acting sick or anything from what I've noticed, but maybe it's too early in her pregnancy for that. Shit, I don't know. As soon as I get to work, I head to Logan's office and knock on his door.

"Yeah?" he shouts.

"Hey, can I come in?" I peek my head inside.

“Yeah, man. Come sit.” He points a finger to the chair across his desk. “How’s it going?”

“Good. How are things here?”

“Meh. They’re fine. I spoke to the head detective on your case in Vegas. They think they’ll have enough footage to help build your case. They found the bartender, but he’s not talking.”

“So, how does that help us?”

“They’ll interrogate him, tell him what we know, show him the footage and tell him what charges he faces—he’ll talk,” he says confidently. “He lawyered up, which tells me right away he’s guilty of helping her, so unless he’s willing to do jail time for her, he’ll make a deal and give us all the information we need.”

“Wow, that’s great. Sounds like it might actually come together.”

“Yeah, I’m certain it will. These things just take time and the waiting process sucks, but I have no doubt we’ll get them both.”

“Well, good, I could use a distraction right now.”

“Why, what’s going on? Trouble in paradise?” He smirks. “Not that Courtney isn’t a delight to be around.”

I laugh, brushing my fingers through my hair and flashing an apologetic smile.

“Yeah, she can be rough around the edges when she’s after something—like secrets.”

“I thought she was going to back me in a corner and threaten my balls until she got what she wanted out of me.” He shifts in his seat just thinking about it, and I snicker

at the way his eyes widen.

“I might just know something about her and she doesn’t know I know,” I try and explain, although I know it’s not coming across the way I’m meaning to. “I found something out and now I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Well, what is it?”

I cross my leg over my knee and my jaw tenses. “I found a pregnancy test in the trash this morning.”

“Oh, shit. What’d it say?”

“It had a big plus sign on it, so I’m thinking it’s positive. They both did.”

“There were two?” His high-pitched voice has me sinking lower into my chair. “Fuck, man. So, I guess congratulations are in order? Unless you’re not happy about it?” he asks, checking my mood. It’s been on my mind since the moment I saw it, but I haven’t really processed my feelings about it. I need Courtney’s confirmation to really believe it, I think.

“I think I am. Shocked, mostly. I want to tell her I know, but when I texted her earlier, she acted totally normal. I don’t know why she wouldn’t tell me something like this.”

“Oh, man, you can’t tell her you know.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because chicks are weird when it comes to finding out they’re pregnant. They want to put on this whole grand pregnancy gesture display. They buy a onesie or bib with

the words DADDY on it and make a special dinner with hints like serving baby carrots and baby back ribs and then balloons fall from the ceiling in neutral colors and there's basically a parade happening in your living room before she finally spills the news."

"Jesus." I release a deep breath. "Well, if that's the case, then maybe I'll wait until she's ready to tell me, but it's not going to be easy pretending I don't know."

"Probably helps when you work opposite hours during the week, at least," he offers, and I nod in agreement.

"Yeah, but it's going to be eating at me until then. I wish I had an idea when a day shift was opening."

"I think Whinburgh's headed out soon. I just got an invitation for his retirement party," Logan tells me.

"Really? Maybe I should stop in and speak to the chief before he heads out."

"Good luck. He's been in a mood lately."

Great.

I run into the chief on my way out and give him the CliffsNotes version of the situation and why I'm eager to find out if my request for days will be decided soon or not. He assures me he'll know within the week and I thank him for considering me. I need this now more than ever.

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Once I'm back home, I check for any notes or messages from Courtney on the fridge. I open the freezer and see she's added another three bags of muffins, which means she's been stress baking again.

As I get Buddy off the bed and climb in next to Courtney, she starts mumbling in her sleep. I try to coax her out of it, but she's stirring in her sleep, and now I know something's on her mind.

"Courtney..." I whisper. "Babe, wake up."

"Get away from me," she hisses and shifts her body away from me.

"Sweetheart," I say, louder. "It's me. Wake up." I shake her shoulders, getting more concerned.

"Drew?" She startles. "What happened?"

"You were dreaming, babe. Everything's fine," I tell her calmly. "Are you feeling okay?" She looks flushed and I don't know how much longer I can hold it in that I know. I want her to let me take care of her.

"Yeah, I think so. It was just one of those dreams that felt really real." She rubs her eyes and sits up.

"Anything you want to talk about?" I kindly urge. "Or anything that's on your mind you want to discuss?"

She sighs and blinks a few times. “It was about Mia.”

“Wait, what?” I ask confused.

“The dream. I’ve been having dreams every few nights about her and it’s making me a little anxious.”

“When did this start?” I ask.

“A couple of weeks ago. At first, it was nothing, but then they continued and became more real. I guess it just feels like we’re in limbo right now and it’s creating some anxiety in my sleep.”

“That makes sense, but at least I have some good news, then. Logan told me tonight they found the bartender and once they show him all the evidence against him, they’re pretty confident he’ll talk.”

“Really?” Her eyes light up. “That’s great! I’ll be so relieved when it’s all over.”

“I know, sweetheart. Me, too.”

She lies back down and rests her head on my shoulder, closing her eyes. I can see the exhaustion written all over her face as the anxiety starts to melt away, so I don’t push her to tell me the news right now. I know she’ll tell me; I just hope it’s sooner rather than later.

Pretending I don’t know is a struggle as the week progresses. I keep wanting to message her and ask how she’s feeling and if she’s eating and getting enough rest, but I know it’ll send a red flag, so I resist the urge to do so. I’ll wait if she wants to plan something special, but I’ve already planned everything out that I want to say to her. I want her to know I’m in this for the long run and that she’s the only person I want to

be having babies with and grow old with and that no matter what happens, I'll always be right by her side.

COURTNEY

Friday is finally here and we've both been waiting for this very moment. At eleven, we'll sign the closing documents for the house and it'll officially be ours. The word ours puts a smile on my face. I'm so damn excited about it that I can barely concentrate on anything at work. I've had an extra peppy bounce to my step all day, and I'm sure I annoyed Travis so much, he gave me a half-day just so he could focus. I can't help that I was going ninety to nothing all morning and I'm sure the pot of coffee I drank in two hours didn't make it any better.

Once I leave work, I drive home and pick up Drew so we can go to the office, sign our autographs, and get the keys. As soon as he sits in the Jeep, I lean over and kiss him. He smells like fresh soap and coffee and his hazel eyes match the shirt he's wearing today.

"Hey, beautiful." Drew's voice is rough and sexy and he looks at me like he has more to say, but doesn't. I offer him a smile and back out of the driveway. During the drive across town, I can't stop talking about the house, our lives, and the new neighborhood.

"I was thinking I'd bake all the neighbors blueberry muffins and we could go door to door together and introduce ourselves."

He lets out a hearty chuckle. "Is that what people do in Texas?"

I lift an eyebrow and glance at him. "Neighbors?" I laugh. "The only time I ever really saw my neighbors was if they got stuck on their property somewhere and needed a tow, their cows got loose, or we were at a church function. Trick or treating

didn't really exist when I was a kid. We did harvest festivals with hayrides and photo booths. That's another reason why I'm excited to be in our new neighborhood. Trick or treaters!" I squeal.

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“I’ve been doing some research, and apparently, our neighborhood celebrates every holiday. Easter, Fourth of July, Halloween, and Christmas. There’s an activity center really close that does things on the weekends for kids,” he adds at the end and I smile really big.

“Oh my goodness. Isn’t this the best already? I seriously can’t wait! Maybe we can bring Ginny and James down there one day?”

Drew grabs my hand and rubs his thumb across the top of mine. “We should.”

Once we pull up to the office, I realize I skipped lunch. “I’m so hungry.”

Drew perks up. “We should get you something to eat right now.”

I give him a look. “Well, I’m not hangry yet. We can grab something after this.”

He nods. “If you say so, but it’s not healthy to go too long between meals.”

I roll my eyes at him and we get out of the Jeep and walk inside. Kathy, our real estate agent, greets us with a huge smile and handshakes. She’s just as amped about this as I am. I turn and look at Drew and grab his hand and he’s so cool and calm while I can barely contain myself. It’s very typical.

Once the final papers are signed, we stand and are handed the keys. We’re told the previous owners have been moved out for over a month so we’re okay to start moving in now if we want. I cover my mouth with my hands to hold back the squeals because I almost can’t believe this is really happening. As soon as we’re in the

hallway, Drew pulls me into his arms and kisses me. “God, I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I tell him and grab his hand, and he pulls me into his arms and swings me around. I let out a yelp and can’t stop smiling. “We’ve got the perfect house now. We’ll be able to make all of our dreams come true.”

The keys in my hand feel like a winning lottery ticket we’re about to cash in.

“I love seeing you like this.” Drew leans in and kisses me on the cheek. He takes the keys to the Jeep and suggests we take the top down. Once we’ve unzipped the windows and pushed the top down, we climb inside. He leans his head against the seat and searches my face. “It’s time to eat.”

“Oh, can we go to Cafe Salada? It’s right downtown and it’s supposed to be super cute. It’s a build your own salad place.”

“Anything you want, sweetheart.”

I give him directions and he parks on the street. We both have a pep to our step because it seems like everything is finally starting to fall in place as we move to the next level in our relationship. The sun is shining and we decide to sit outside at the tables under the umbrellas. Our salads arrive and I don’t realize how hungry I am until I see big fresh strawberries and almonds sprinkled on top. Once I take a bite, a small moan escapes my mouth.

“If you keep doing that...” he says lowly.

My eyes meet his as a smile creeps across my lips. “Then we’ll have to christen the house sooner rather than later?” I pull the key from my pocket and swing it around my finger.

Drew nibbles on the edge of his lip and it drives me absolutely insane.

“God, I love you,” I tell him and tuck the keys back into my pocket.

“I love you too, Court. More than you’ll ever know.”

“Aww, I know, babe. I loved you first, remember?”

He leans his head back and lets out a hearty laugh. “Don’t think so, sweetheart.”

Once we’re finished eating, we head back to the house. I go into hyperspeed with packing small things that I’ve procrastinated doing for the past week.

“Maybe we can have our first night in the new house tomorrow?” Boxes of all sizes are stacked neatly in the dining room and the thought of them gives me a slight panic. There’s still so much to do.

Drew takes a few steps and pulls my face into his hands. I stare at his mouth then look into his eyes and he kisses me. I fall into his touch, his lips on my mouth and neck, and I totally forget what I was saying until my phone buzzes. At first I ignore it and then it rings again and again. I somehow manage to pull away from Drew’s warm mouth and look down to see it’s Kayla so I answer, hoping it’s not an emergency.

“I knew you couldn’t ignore me.” She’s smiling.

“I was busy doing something!”

Drew looks at me and playfully shakes his head. “I’m going to take Buddy out.” Then he points at some boxes and toward the door and I nod. I move the phone from my mouth and whisper thank you and give him a seductive look.

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“So, did you get the keys yet?” Kayla is almost more excited than I am.

“Yes! We’re going to start dropping boxes today. The movers couldn’t schedule us until next weekend, so I’m bummed. Honest question. Do you think it’s possible for me and Drew to have all our crap moved by the end of the weekend? The sooner, the better.”

She laughs and I can hear the beeping of her mustang as she puts her keys in the ignition. “I have a few contacts I can call that owe me a few favors. Want me to?”

“Have I told you how much I love you? I mean, I seriously love you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, I’m getting another call. I have to meet a client on the other side of town. Just wanted to make sure you’ve got the keys. Talk soon.”

I throw my phone on the couch and change into a pair of yoga pants. Drew’s been making trips in and out, carrying several boxes at a time. His flexed arms look so damn sexy, and sometimes when I catch side-glances of him, it makes me smile to know he’s mine.

After my hair is pulled back into a ponytail, I pick up a big box and carry it outside. Drew has the truck backed up with the tailgate down and as soon as he sees me, he hurries over and grabs the box out of my hand. “Court, you shouldn’t be carrying things that are way too heavy.”

I laugh. “I’m an independent woman. I can carry a box.”

He tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Yeah, but I want you to be careful and not hurt yourself.”

All I can do is laugh and roll my eyes. We finish packing a truck full and decide to try to move as much as we can for the rest of the day. Once the truck is parked in our new garage, Drew unlocks the side door and we both walk through, imagining it fully stocked with furniture and decorations and the smile on my face is evident of how happy I am at this moment.

I stand in the living room and look around and I feel a little overwhelmed with happiness. “I might cry,” I say.

He wraps his arm around me. “It’s normal to be emotional.”

I take a step back and look at him. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Drew’s eyebrows are up and his hands are out. “What do you mean?”

“You said I had to eat. You’ve been weird about me lifting heavy boxes, and now it’s normal to be overly emotional. Spill it.”

He lets out a sigh and swallows hard. “I know you probably wanted it to be a surprise...”

My eyes furrow and I’m honestly confused. “Surprise?” I wait for almost a minute as his mouth drops open and closes again.

“I don’t know how to say this...”

“One word at a time?” I offer him a smile.

“Court,” he takes a step closer, removing the space between us, and pulls me into his arms. His hands rub against my back and it feels so comfortable being with him like this. “I saw the pregnancy tests in the bathroom. And Logan told me that girls like to make a spectacle out of it and I didn’t want to ruin this for you, for us.”

I take a step back and I’m actually shocked. “Now, I don’t know what to say.”

“I know you’re going to be a great mom. And it’s like fate that we moved into a bigger house for our new family.” He’s so happy and he’s going on and on about this.

“Drew…”

“I’ve known for days and I’m sorry for not saying something sooner.”

“Drew… I’m not.” I swallow hard. “I’m not the one pregnant.”

I don’t know if he’s upset or happy and I’m waiting for him to say something, but I can tell he’s piecing it all together as the memories of Viola and I in the bathroom come flooding in.

Viola plopped down on the edge of the bathtub and her face fell into the palms of her hands. “I feel like a asshole.”

I let out a big laugh as I unboxed the pregnancy tests and lined five of them up on the counter. She looked up at me and gave me a sarcastic smile as I held out my hand like Vanna White.

“I’m not pregnant, Court. Tubes tied. Burned. Chopped. I’m even willing to bet you a million dollars.”

“Okay, okay. I might take you up on that bet, but did you know that every one out of

a thousand women get pregnant with healthy babies even after getting their tubes tied, chopped, burned, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera? Seriously, how will we know for sure if you don't take a ninety-nine-point nine percent accurate pregnancy test?"

As she rolled her eyes at me, she let out a big huff. I could tell she was irritable, one of the many signs of her being pregnant.

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“I’ll even turn my back as you pee on each stick. Each of them. I want pee on all five,” I demanded. “Squeeze it out.”

“You’re being a drill sergeant about this. And after having two kids, my dignity has vanished.”

I smiled when she went on all the pregnancy tests. We both stood over them on the counter as if they would grow legs and run away. When a big plus sign appeared on all of them, her mouth fell open.

“Fuck.”

“I’ll take my million in hundred dollar bills.” I smiled, but she was having a mini freak out.

“What the fuck!”

She was livid and confused and all I could do was wrap my arms around her and give her a big hug. “Lola. You’re going to get through this. You have a beautiful family and loving husband...”

“Loving husband who has super sperm.” She let out a big sigh, followed by laughter. “Holy shit. I’m going to have to tell him I’m pregnant...again. Please, Court. Please don’t say anything to anyone until I can tell Travis.”

I gave her a smile. “I promise, Lola. I’ve always had your back and I always will.”

“You’re my best friend in the world. I love you.”

“Love you too, Lola. And congrats?”

Drew’s voice brings me back to reality. “If you’re not pregnant, then who is?”

I swallow hard, knowing I can’t say, not right now. I’m hesitant to speak because I’m sure by this point, he’s connected the dots and already has it figured out.

“You don’t have to say. Logan told me girls like to make an ordeal about it. So, I respect that. But I have to admit, I was really starting to get excited about us having a family together.”

“One day, Deputy.”

The next morning, a moving truck is at the house bright and early. They have everything packed up within a few hours and set in the correct places in the new house. I’m so damn thankful for Kayla that I invited her over for dinner.

“You should be making her lobster. There’s no way we would have been in this weekend without her help,” Drew says just as the doorbell rings.

“Oh my God! It’s the first time I’ve heard the doorbell.” I rush to the door and open it and men from a furniture company are outside unloading a huge ass bed.

Drew walks up and signs the paper and they bring it down the hallway to our master bedroom and set it up.

“I had no idea you were getting this.” I plop down on it, making sure not to put my feet on the bed and it feels like clouds.

“Buddy knew about it. We had a talk.” As soon as his name is said, Buddy takes off running through the house, his collar jingling in the hallway. Seconds later he’s jumping on the bed and we both scream and he jumps down.

“It’s perfect, I love it.”

“I thought we could shop for the house furniture next weekend?” Drew lies next to me and I prop myself up on one elbow. I nod and I can feel exhaustion coat me, but we’re not even halfway done yet. It’s going to take us awhile, but at least we can start sleeping here and it will keep me busy and keep my mind off things.

“I was thinking about making lasagna tonight. Break the kitchen in.”

“And tonight, we’ll break in the new bed?”

“And the bathtub?” I say, getting up and going to the kitchen to go ahead and start dinner. Drew helps me with the lasagna ingredients and layering the meat and cheese and noodles. With each layer, my mouth starts watering because it smells so good.

An hour later, the doorbell rings again and I’m giddy to answer. As soon as Kayla walks in, I scream and Drew comes running.

“A puppy?” I ask, pulling the dog from her arms. He has a big blue bow tied around his neck.

“Surprise!” Kayla says and all Drew can do is laugh.

“Another dog?” Drew pets the puppy and I can see in his eyes he’s already smitten with the little fella.

“It’s a housewarming gift,” she says. “His name is Reed. If you really, really don’t

want him, I can try to find him a home while you foster, but when I saw him, I just thought of you two.” Her smile slightly falters when she thinks we might say no, but then she picks it right back up. I feel like a kid again when I turn and ask Drew if we can keep him.

He places his hand on my back and looks down at the cutest puppy in the world. “I told you before, whatever makes you happy, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DREW

The next morning, I roll over with two rowdy dogs and a beautiful woman in my bed. I didn’t think we’d have another dog so quickly, but I’d been warned several times about Kayla being a doggy dealer, so I should’ve expected it eventually. I can’t even complain because I love how happy it makes Courtney.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:04 am

Before my last shift of the week, the chief lets me know I'd been approved for the shift change. In just a couple weeks, I'll be back on day shift, and that can't come soon enough. Although finding out Courtney wasn't in fact pregnant took me by surprise, I'm still glad to be switching to day shift because it feels like I don't see her for four days straight.

"Babe...I'm heading out," she whispers, shaking me lightly. I'd meant to get up with her so I could tell her the good news. "I'll see you after work, okay? I love you!" She presses a soft kiss on my cheek and before she pulls away, I wrap an arm around her and pull her on top of me.

"Don't go," I mumble, burying my face into her neck.

"Drew!" she squeals, alerting Buddy to jump up on the bed and rescue her. Reed jumps up next.

"You can't jump up here every time you hear her scream, Buddy," I tell him. "Especially when she's screaming my name later tonight."

"Oh my God!" She blushes. "Don't tell him that!" Slapping a hand against my chest, I growl in her ear and pull myself on top of her. She laughs as I hover over her body and she tries to push me off. "You're going to make me late! I have that conference today and have to leave early! I didn't wake up before the sun for nothing."

"What conference?" I ask.

"The one in San Francisco. I told you about it a few weeks ago," she reminds me.

“Oh, right. The one Jayden is attending with you?” I ask dryly.

“Yeah, it’ll be a good learning experience for him,” she says with a smile.

“Great,” I draw out and she senses my sarcasm.

I know how much she hates being late, but I don’t release her just yet. Buddy and Reed make themselves comfortable at the end of the bed, so I take advantage.

“You can’t leave without breakfast,” I tease, sliding my hand down to my groin and wrapping a hand around my erection through my shorts. “It’s the most important meal of the day, after all.” I grind my hips between her legs and I can tell she’s contemplating it as her head falls back.

“Tonight, I promise.” She presses her lips against mine before she pushes me off.

I pout and push out my lower lip.

“Stop it!” She laughs. “I’ll let you mount me as soon as I get back.”

I pretend to think about it before responding. “Okay, fine. But I’m holding you to that.”

“Yes, I know.” Rolling her eyes, she kisses me once more before getting off the bed. She stands up and straightens her clothes out. She runs her fingers through her hair and adjusts herself.

“Still beautiful,” I say, folding my arms behind my head as I watch her. She flashes me a quick smile before she walks toward the door.

“Don’t forget to walk the dogs,” she reminds me, although she knows I always take

them for a walk.

“I know! Now go!”

“Fine. Love you!” She blows me a kiss and steps out.

“Love you!” I call out. Climbing back under the sheets, I decide to sleep for a few more hours. I then realize I completely forgot to tell her my news, but that means I can tell her later when I’m between her legs tonight.

Once the dogs and I get up, I take them for a walk around the block. Reed is so full of energy, he gives Buddy a run for his money. I love our new neighborhood. It’s quaint and mostly quiet, and I love the family atmosphere. It’s definitely a change from living near the campus. People are always out walking their dogs or pushing a baby stroller, and any time I’m out walking or running, people wave hello without even knowing my name. It’s everything I’ve ever imagined sharing with Courtney.

Just as I’m mixing up my protein shake and snacking on some of Courtney’s muffins she tried to hide from me in the back of the freezer, my phone rings and Logan’s name flashes on it.

“Hey, man. How’s it going?” I answer.

“Drew, we got a picture. You’ll want to come down here.” His tone is serious and deep and my gut instantly tightens.

“A picture of what?”

“The LVPD just sent over a still of the guy that carried Courtney out of the hotel room. It’s not the bartender like we assumed.”

My jaw ticks as anger boils through my blood. “Who the fuck is it?”

“I don’t know yet. They digitally restored the image and finally got a good frame to confirm it’s not the same guy. But that means she had someone else besides the bartender helping her.”

My heart beats faster at just the thought of who would help Mia. I know if I ever see him face to face, it’ll take everything in me not to wrap a hand around his throat.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:04 am

“I’m on my way,” I say before hanging up. I finish getting dressed, lock up the dogs, and get to the PD as fast as I can.

Walking directly into Logan’s office without knocking, he looks up at me as soon as he sees me rounding his desk.

“They don’t have an ID on him yet, but they’re doing everything they can to identify him as soon as possible. Since the bartender is only a partial co-conspirator to the whole thing, nailing this guy would make your case concrete.”

Truthfully, I don’t care much about the case right now. Whoever thought they could lay hands on Courtney and carry her out of our hotel room should be praying I don’t ever find out where they live.

“Let me see it,” I demand, nodding my head to his computer screen. He clicks a folder and pulls up the image.

“It’s grainy, but at least we can confirm it wasn’t the bartender, which means we’re looking for another guy, too.”

I narrow my eyes, squinting at the screen as I focus on the face that’s pressing closely to Courtney’s unconscious body. My hands form into fists and the longer I stare at him, recognition surfaces.

No fucking way.

I follow along the length of his jaw and see a heart-shaped mole on his chin. He’s

smart to keep his head down, but I'd recognize that mole anywhere.

"Holy fuck, I know who it is."

I immediately grab my phone and call Courtney.

"You do?" I hear Logan's voice, but I can only focus on the ringing that's repeating over and over. Answer the phone, Goddammit! It goes to voicemail, and I curse.

"What is it?" Logan speaks louder.

"That guy—" I point to his screen. "His name is Jayden. He works with Courtney and you met him at Kayla's Christmas party. They drove up to San Francisco early today for a work conference. Alone."

Logan tells me to take an unmarked police car up there because he knows me too well. He calls the SFPD and informs them there's a new warrant out for Jayden Rooks who's at the Four Seasons Hotel, but who knows if that's where he's even really taking her? The hotel has a huge conference room and it wouldn't even be noticeable if they didn't show up at their table.

I call Courtney's phone several times before I even hit I-80. If they are in the conference, she probably has her phone on silent and who knows how long until she finally realizes she's missed over a dozen calls from me. I text her just in case she checks her phone but can't listen to my voicemails.

D: CALL ME AS SOON AS YOU CAN.

D: BABE, I NEED YOU TO CALL OR TEXT ME ASAP. IT'S IMPORTANT.

I'm losing my mind at the possibilities of what Jayden's capable of and considering I

didn't see it coming, I can bet she won't either. I told Logan to dig up what he can on him and call me the moment he finds anything. The drive is only an hour and a half and they left before eight this morning, which means she's been alone with him for hours.

I call Travis next and by the tone of my voice he knows right away something is wrong.

"Are you sure it's him?" he asks after I tell him about the camera footage.

"Positive," I answer sternly. "What do you know about him?"

I can hear him ruffling papers around on his desk as if he's shaken up just as I am.

"Um...well, he's a grad student at the university, originally from the South Lake Tahoe area, graduated college with honors, getting his degree in marketing and..."

"Wait," I interrupt, letting his words sink in. "That must be how he knows Mia."

"How? And why would he help her?" he asks.

"If he's from the same area as her, it's likely they went to the same private school." It takes a moment to process, but I'm now surer than ever that she cooked up this plan with him months ago.

"Oh, fuck," he whispers, just loud enough for me to hear. "I've never heard him mention Mia or anything about his life outside of work, actually."

"Yeah, and I bet he didn't apply for your internship by coincidence, either." My jaw ticks as my fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This is worse than I imagined.

“He’s been working with Mia this whole time,” he states exactly what I’m thinking.

“And Lord only knows what Courtney’s told him over the last few months,” I say tightly. “That motherfucker.”

“I’ll call the hotel and see...”

“No,” I raise my voice. “I don’t want him having any clue we’re tailing him. He’ll run...or worse.”

“Right, okay. Let me know if I can do anything, all right? I feel so helpless right now.” His voice is thick with tension and I know he’s blaming himself.

“I’ll call you as soon as I know anything,” I tell him before we hang up.

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I'm less than a half hour away now and I try Courtney's phone again. This time it goes straight to voicemail. Shit!

Either her phone died or she's turned it off, which doesn't make any sense. She'd never read my messages and turn her phone off without replying. Fuck, this isn't good.

COURTNEY

Jayden offers to drive us there, and I gladly let him so I can read over emails from the office. We always have projects we're working on, but the current one is a huge opportunity for King Marketing.

"So, have you always wanted to work in the marketing field?" I ask as we cruise down the highway.

"No, not always. I majored in business and originally wanted to focus on finance, but a professor of mine really encouraged me to go into marketing after a presentation I did. I looked into it more and decided it was something I'd probably be good at, so I changed to marketing and then decided to get my master's degree so I could pursue working in the big leagues."

"Sounds like you have that professor to thank for helping you to realize your full potential," I say with a smile. "And for bringing you to King Marketing, of course. It's nice having a pretty face to talk to every day."

He blushes. "Are you calling me pretty?"

“No, I was referring to myself.” I burst out laughing at his expression. “I was saying it must be nice for you to have a pretty face to talk to every day.”

He rolls his eyes and shifts his eyes back to the road. “You’re a real pain in the ass sometimes, but you aren’t bad to look at, so I’ll give you that.”

“Speaking of pain in the ass, have you met Travis’ new assistant, Claire? She’s a piece of work,” I groan.

“I ran into her briefly but she looked at me and rolled her eyes before I even said hello.”

“Oh, that’s nothing. I left a message for Travis about updating the analytic software next week, and she said she’d give him his messages in order of importance and by the sound of it, mine wasn’t that important.” I raise my brows and purse my lips. “Girl is lucky I value my job or she wouldn’t be able to sit with my cowboy boot up her butt.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “I wouldn’t want to get in a fight with a Southern girl, that’s for sure.”

We talk the rest of the way, and before I know it, we’ve arrived at the Four Seasons Hotel. We walk in and are directed to the conference hall, which holds a few hundred people. I brought my laptop and notebook with just in case I need to jot down any notes or good information to bring back to work with me.

“The bar’s open and I was going to get a Coke. Want anything?” he asks as we settle into our seats at a table that’s near the middle.

“Sure, I’ll take a glass of water with a lemon, please.”

“Water with lemon?” He arches a brow. “Okay, grandma.”

“I’m not a grandma! I just don’t want a sugar high when I have to sit on my ass the next seven hours.”

“Fine, how about a Diet Coke, at least?” He flashes me one of his boyish smirks.

I sigh and give in. “Fine, but then I want some extra cherries.”

Jayden returns with our drinks and the seminar begins shortly after. I jot down notes during the PowerPoint presentation and two hours in, I start to feel sick. I quietly excuse myself to go to the bathroom to throw up, but it does nothing to relieve the sudden onset fatigue and nausea that hits me before I even make my way back to the conference room.

“Are you okay?” Jayden whispers, concern written all over his face. “You look pale.”

I shake my head and close my eyes, trying to take slow, deep breaths. “I feel really sick all of a sudden. I need to lie down somewhere.”

He looks around and we both realize there’s nowhere in here I’ll be able to just lie down without causing a scene. My stomach feels like it could roll at any moment and soon I’m feeling too dizzy to even stand.

“Hold on, I’ll be right back,” Jayden says quickly before stepping out of the conference room. My eyes begin to weigh too heavy to keep them open. Moments later, Jayden returns and tells me he got a hotel room so I could lie down and rest until this passes.

“Thanks, Jayden,” I mumble as he helps me lie down on the bed once we’re in the room. He’s been so sweet and helpful and I tell him that repeatedly until I no longer

have the energy to even talk anymore.

I feel myself falling deeper into a sleep, my body feeling like it weighs a thousand pounds. My head is pounding and my arms and legs feel too numb to even move. I let sleep take me because I feel powerless to do anything else at the moment.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:04 am

Voices startle me awake, but my eyelids can only open halfway. I expect to see Jayden but when I hear a woman's voice, I try to lift my head to search the room.

I must be hallucinating because the voice gets louder and sounds exactly like Mia Montgomery's. Now I know I'm being paranoid because there's no way Mia would be in the same hotel as me; nevertheless, the same room. However, as fate would have it, I realize I'm wrong because that moment I somehow get enough strength to turn my head, the sound of the sheets give me away. Mia and Jayden are standing next to each other and as soon as they hear rustling, they both turn their heads to look at me.

No fucking way.

Why isn't Jayden pushing her out of here? He knows the backstory with her. How does he even know her? What the hell is even happening?!

"I thought you gave her enough to knock her out?" I hear Mia's sharp tone hiss at Jayden and now I know I'm not hallucinating. I blink my eyes, fighting the urge to close them, but it takes me over, and the next time I wake up, I'm sitting up, tied to a chair with cold water being splashed on my face.

"Good morning, homewrecker," Mia hisses at me, her arms crossed over her chest as I blink my eyes open wider.

"Jayden..." I whisper. "Jayden, help me."

"Beg all you want," she taunts, laughing at me. "Jayden was on my side the entire

time. Feeling pretty foolish now, aren't you?"

I can't believe what I'm hearing. If Jayden wasn't standing next to her, I wouldn't buy it for a second, but he's watching her in amazement. Oh my God. He loves her!

"What do you want?" I finally manage to ask, pushing myself to focus and stay alert.

"What do you think I want?" She takes a step closer toward me and her voice drops to a low tone. Each word is spit at me between gritted teeth. "I warned you. I warned you and you didn't listen."

"What are you talking about?"

"You put Drew against me with that silly little restraining order and ruined my life! Now, I'll ruin yours."

I shake my arms, trying to release the rope around my wrists when I realize my ankles are also tied. I think about screaming, but Mia would just shove something in my mouth. I'm panicking and she knows it.

"This is all your fault, Courtney. You have no one to blame but yourself. You should've listened the first two times I warned you, but three strikes, you're out."

I swallow as she takes another step closer. Jayden is right beside her. She grabs something out of her back pocket and exposes a pair of scissors.

"I bet you want to know what I plan to do with you," she mocks. "I've been thinking about my revenge for weeks...for the perfect moment...the perfect rebuttal. And then it came to me as soon as Jayden told me you invited him to this conference. You made it way too easy." She laughs with an evil grin. "Cutting off all your hair is just step one. By the time I'm done, Drew will want nothing to do with you."

My eyes shift to Jayden, wondering how he could betray me—how I missed all the signs.

“You’re living in an alternate universe if you think Drew would ever go back to you,” I spit back. “He’d rather die than be with you.”

She raises her brows in a challenge. “Is that so? Because if memory serves me right, we were just in bed together a few months ago. I believe you saw it?” Her lips tilt up, proudly. What a bitch!

“Oh, you mean when you snuck into our hotel room, laid in bed with him without his knowledge and then proceeded to touch him without his permission?”

“Oh, darling. The way his hands touched me and the way he moaned was all the permission I needed.” She bites her lower lip and releases a moan.

I feel like throwing up at the way she talks about them together. “You’re a psycho,” I hiss at her. “And you’re a fucking piece of shit,” I direct at Jayden, who stands tall and unaffected. My anger has reached a level I don’t even recognize.

Mia smiles as if she’s won the game, but if that bitch brings those scissors near me, I won’t think twice about standing up and ramming her with the back of this chair. I may be tied to this thing, but that doesn’t mean I can’t use my old horseback riding skills. Getting bucked off a horse is something I trained for as a teenager, so if Mia wants to play a round of Russian roulette, she’s going to have to get her hands dirty.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DREW

I knock twenty minutes off the travel time by speeding, but I still feel like I’m too

late. After driving through a clusterfuck amount of traffic in Union Square, I give the car keys to the valet and ask them to not move it just yet. I slip him a fifty and he nods his head in understanding. Once inside the hotel, I see the signs for the annual marketing conference and before I open the door to search the room a woman at the check-in table stops me.

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“Sir, can I help you?” She’s smiling and has a list of attendees in front of her on a clipboard.

“Yes, actually I’m looking for my girlfriend. There’s a slight emergency and I need to get in touch with her. She’s with King Marketing. Her name is Courtney Bishop and she has blonde hair. Tall. Pretty. Was with a scrawny man.” There’s panic in my voice and the woman searches her list, but she’s not moving fast enough.

“Oh yeah, she checked in this morning. Actually, now that I’m thinking, I remember her accent. She came out here not too long ago. The guy she was with said she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Fuck,” I say under my breath and try to get a hold of my emotions. If I were a prick ass little bitch, I ask myself what I’d do. I need to make sure they’re not still here before I leave.

Calming myself as best as I can, I walk up to the check-in desk and request to speak to the manager on duty. When an older man walks up, I slide my badge across the counter. I know I shouldn’t use my position for things like this because it’s a personal matter, but I have to double-check. I have to know one hundred percent that she’s not here before I leave. And every wasted minute is a minute she could be hurt.

“I need to check to see if a person has a hotel room in their name. It’s an emergency.”

The manager looks at my badge and doesn’t hesitate. I’m thankful for that. Time is crucial.

“Courtney Bishop or Jayden Rooks.” I almost add Mia Montgomery’s name to that list, but I decide to hold off and wait for a response first.

After a few clicks on the computer, he nods his head. “Jayden Rooks booked a room for the night less than an hour ago. Fourteenth floor. Room fourteen twenty-three.”

After quickly thanking him, I tell him to call the San Francisco police and have them come to the room then jog to the elevators.

The elevator feels like it’s moving through quicksand, and every time it stops on a floor, I’m tempted to get out and climb the stairs. I try to call Courtney’s phone one more time but it goes straight to voicemail. My heart is beating hard in my chest and I can’t help but think the worst.

Once the elevator doors slide open, I rush down the hallway and almost freeze when I hear Mia’s voice followed by Jayden’s laughter. Adrenaline rushes through me as soon as I hear Courtney whimper. I back up and kick the door open with every ounce of strength I have.

Mia freezes just as she leans over Courtney with a pair of scissors pointed in her face. As soon as I see Jayden, I move toward him and grab him by his collar and slam him against the wall.

“You piece of shit,” I hiss as he wraps his hand around my wrists. “I knew you were a shady fuck.”

“Fuck you,” he spits back. Unable to contain my anger any longer, I crank my arm back and punch my fist into his face, releasing him to the floor.

I hear Mia from behind as she runs out of the room before I can catch her, but I don’t chase after her because all I care about right now is getting to Courtney.

“Oh God, sweetheart...” I say, falling to my knees to release the washcloth in her mouth. “Are you okay?”

Tears begin streaming down her cheeks just as the police—along with the hotel manager—enter the room.

It’s all commotion. More officers fill the room and they notice Courtney right away tied to a chair, mascara streaming down her face, and they immediately pull Jayden from the floor and cuff him. I untie her arms and legs, rushing to get her free. She tries to stand but stumbles and I tell her to sit back down. She looks weak and worn down, and I can tell she’s been drugged again.

“Would you like us to send her to the hospital in an ambulance?” an officer steps up next to me and asks.

Courtney shakes her head. “No,” she says urgently, but her voice is so hoarse I can barely hear her. “I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? It might not be a bad idea to get checked over,” I encourage, wanting to know what the hell that asshole slipped her this time.

Searching her face, I can tell she’s insistent on not wanting to go, so I don’t push it further.

“I just want to go home,” she tells me, and I nod in understanding.

Once Jayden’s been escorted out of the room, officers follow out and only a few stay behind to get our statements.

A female officer steps up to us with a notepad and asks if we can give her a detailed statement of what happened. I can tell Courtney is struggling to hold her weight. I

stand up and carry her in my arms then set her down on the edge of the bed where she can lie back if she needs to. I brush her hair away from her face and study her.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:04 am

“Are you okay to talk?” I whisper and she nods slowly.

The officer begins to jot down Courtney’s story and all I can do is stare and listen as all the pieces begin to fall into place. She’s talking slower than usual, but she’s very clear with what happened. Mia and Jayden had been working together this entire time. From Jayden applying to King Marketing to Mia stalking us in Vegas to the video she mailed me for my birthday and showing up at the house to now this. She got Jayden to give her insider information and used it against us. I have a feeling this is no longer about getting me back, but something far beyond that.

“I’m pretty sure he put something in my drink because within the hour, I felt horrible,” she says. “Not drowsy like I did in Vegas, but like sick and dizzy.” She blinks a few times. “He did get me a couple drinks from the bar. He could’ve easily slipped something in there before he brought it back.”

The officer continues writing notes and then she points her pen to Courtney’s shirt, where the top few buttons had been ripped from their threads. “Did they do anything to you? Did they hurt you?”

Just the thought sends me into a blind rage, but I wait with a bated breath as she answers her.

“No. Just a lot of threats. Mia had a pair of scissors and was getting ready to cut my hair to my scalp. She went on and on about how I was the reason Drew left her, and if I were bald and ugly, he wouldn’t love me anymore. Then she kept mumbling about how she was getting her revenge and Jayden just stood there mesmerized by every word she spoke.”

Anger rushes over me as Courtney's expression goes blank. She bends over as if she's going to be sick. I drop to my knees and tilt her chin up until our eyes meet. "Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital? We can go and get you checked out."

"No, I just need some water," she insists. I stand up and check the mini fridge. I pull a bottle from the fridge and walk back over to hand it to her. She drinks it as if she hasn't had water for days and forces a smile, but I know better.

"I think we have everything we need, Officer Fisher. Detective Knight called the LVPD and the judge issued a warrant on Jayden Rooks before they called us and filled us in on the restraining orders and warrants against Mia Montgomery. We already had officers on the way, but still lucky you showed up when you did. No telling what they would have done to her." The officer's eyes are sad. "I've seen way too many incidents like this end up with a not-so-happy ending. Now that we've been informed about Ms. Montgomery, we'll be on the lookout for her as well."

When I look down at Court, I let out a breath of relief because she's okay, but I can tell she's ready to get out of here.

"My stuff..." Courtney points to her computer bag and that's when I see her phone is powered off, sitting on the desk in the room. I grab it for her and throw it over my shoulder.

An officer takes pictures of the ropes, chair, and scissors while the rest of them leave. They sent a handful of people and I'll be forever grateful to the SFPD and Logan. Fuck, so many horrible things could've happened.

"Can we go now?" Courtney asks and tries to stand and I give her a nod and wrap my arm around her to steady her. We move slowly past the officers, down the hallway and onto the elevator. As soon as we walk outside, she shields her eyes from the sun

but doesn't say much as I open the door to the unmarked car and place her inside. Cop cars line the valet parking and once I get in, Courtney lets out an angry groan. She's at a level of pissed off I haven't seen in a long time.

I place my hand on her leg. "Sweetheart."

"Mia and Jayden know each other," she forces out. "I told him so fucking much. I basically served myself on a platter for him and Mia."

"I know, and there's a lot more I need to tell you."

COURTNEY

"What the fuck!" I say, pissed beyond belief. I feel like I need to throw up and my head is pounding but other than that, I'm okay. I'm not unconscious and Drew saved my life. I have no doubt in my mind they would've hurt me and gone too far. It wouldn't have happened without a fight—I would've found a way to push back—but I've watched enough True Crime shows to know the possible outcomes.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:04 am

Drew pulls onto the street and as we're waiting in downtown traffic in San Francisco, he shifts his body and looks over at me. "Court," he begins, his voice low and gentle. "Jayden was the one who helped Mia in Vegas. They've got video of him carrying you out of the room and down the hallway."

My mouth falls open and my eyes begin to water. "Wait, what?" I ask with flared nostrils. "What did you just say?"

"Logan called this morning to tell me that the LVPD sent him a clear shot from the video footage of the guy, so I went to the station to see what information he had. As soon as he showed it to me, I noticed the mole on his chin and instantly realized who it was. I went into a panic. You were with him almost two hours away and within a matter of seconds all the pieces finally came together. I called and texted you to warn you to get away from him, but you weren't answering, and then when the calls started going straight to voicemail, I knew something was wrong. I'm so fucking sorry. This is all my fault." Drew is visibly upset, and I can see he's holding back his rage. He blames himself because of Mia, but I won't let him take the blame for her psycho behavior.

"Babe, I'm okay," I say, placing my hand on top of his. "I would've broke that little twig in two, had he not drugged me like the bitch he is, but fortunately, you came to my rescue and did that for me," I tell him, and he lets out a small chuckle. "Like a true prince charming."

"I would've been tempted to do a lot more if a single hair on your head would've been out of place." He interlocks his fingers with mine. "He's lucky the SFPD showed up when they did." Pressing the outside of his lips to my hand, he kisses it.

“Actually, I don’t know what I would’ve done if you would’ve been hurt. It’s kind of scary to think about. The adrenaline took over and the minute I saw him, I wanted to bury him into the pavement.”

“I know. But I’m okay. I feel like shit, but I’ll live.” I know I need to convince him that everything is fine so he doesn’t blame himself for their actions. “Do you think they’ll find her?” I ask, referring to Mia.

“Well, three departments are now after her on top of her warrants, so maybe not right away, but I suspect they will eventually.”

Throwing up after I began to feel sick helped me greatly, and I’m glad my body instantly rejected it. Once we’re through the backed-up traffic and over the bridge that leads to Berkeley, I watch the smile fade from his face.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Drew shouts and makes a last minute turn on to Grizzly Peak Boulevard.

I turn around to look behind us and see a white car and a Mercedes symbol tailing us.

“It’s Mia. I memorized the license plate of the car that was outside of the house. Hold on,” he says as he hurries and passes a car slowing in front of us. I was stupid to think this was over. After what happened today, I realized she’ll stop at nothing. I knew this when she placed sharp scissors to my chin and forced me to look into her eyes that were as dark as her soul.

The road has no shoulder and is only two lanes. It’s twisting and turning as we ascend a mountain at high speeds. It’s as dangerous as the back roads in Texas, and my heart is hammering in my chest. The only thing that comforts me at this moment is knowing Drew has trained for situations like this, but that does nothing for the anxiety and fear that’s surfacing.

Drew quickly pulls his phone out of his pocket and hands it to me, then puts both hands on the wheel and drives even faster. “Call nine-one-one,” he instructs in a rush.

My hand is shaking and my stomach starts to feel sick again, but I force it down. I have to focus as I dial the numbers. It rings a few times and cell reception drops. I hurry and dial it again and am connected right as she bumps the back of the car—hard. We lurch forward, barely missing the car in front of us.

“Son of a bitch!” Drew yells, looking in the rearview mirror.

I’m speaking frantically into the phone, giving the dispatch all our information and where we are as the Mercedes pulls beside us and rams into the side of the car. The car slams into the railing, and I can hear metal against metal, but we’re still moving. She suddenly stops in front of us and Drew quickly jerks the steering wheel to go around her, ending up only inches from slamming into a car in the next lane.

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I close my eyes tightly because I can't watch anymore. I don't want to watch. I'm so fucking scared, and I wish the police would magically appear. Today was never supposed to be like this.

Mia continues to try to run us off the road, speeds are dangerously high, and we're switching lanes to get away from her. I glance over at Drew and all I can do is tell him how much I love him. He swallows hard. "Tell me when we're safe, sweetheart."

As we're passing traffic and slipping in between cars, I watch in the side mirror as Mia cuts people off just to stay on our tail. Another curb and we pass the front vehicle and pick up dangerously high speeds. Drew knows what he's doing and I find comfort in knowing he's trained for this, but in this moment, I know it can't end well.

A quarter of a mile ahead, there's a stop sign and Drew looks both ways as he runs through it. Continuing forward, we're hugging corners and on one curb as she comes around us to push us into trees, Drew slams on his breaks and kicks up gravel. The Mercedes hits the guardrail along the curb, loses control and flies off the outlook. I let out a scream, frozen in place as I watch the dust from the gravel blow away. I glance over at Drew with horror as I realize what just happened.

Lights and sirens blaze behind us as Drew gets out of the car and runs to the guardrail. Smoke is blazing up from below and I rush out toward Drew just as a big explosion erupts from down the cliff.

"Oh my God!" I cry out, barely holding myself together. The car is completely engulfed in flames and there's nothing either of us can do. Black smoke blows up the cliff as the sirens get louder behind us. Soon fire trucks and police cars take over the

street. Drew holds me in his arms and I rest my cheek on his chest as we watch everything unfold. It all happened so fast. Firemen run the hose down the cliff as police officers redirect traffic and get people who stopped to watch off the street. It's as if we're standing still in the middle of a movie being played at full speed. All the noise fades around us as the beating of my heart gets louder.

Mia's dead.

There's no way she survived that crash.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DREW

Three Months Later...

The fall breeze and bright sunny sky makes for the perfect day. It's just the right temperature for a cookout. Burgers, brats, chicken, and steak are all prepped and ready to go on the grill, and all our friends are here to help us celebrate the first cookout in our new house. I just finished expanding the deck and I surprised Courtney with a brand-new patio set for her to sit out on when she lays out here with Buddy and Reed.

"Drew!" I hear her yell from inside the house. "Your folks are here looking for you."

I set the pan of meat down on the table and head back inside to greet them. Dad's stealing the grandkids away from Travis and Viola as Mom rubs Viola's growing baby bump. I smile as I remember the day Travis called me in a panic shortly after Viola announced they'd be expecting a third baby.

After about a week, Travis started to breathe again and although he was scared at

first, now he's so fucking excited he never shuts up about it—mostly about the super sperm he contributed—but I'm happy for both of them.

"I'm showing so much earlier this time around," I hear Viola groan to our mother. Mom assures her it's normal since it's the third time and that she should embrace this little miracle since it'll be the last one. That was another thing Viola made sure to let us all know. Travis will be getting snipped to make certain Viola doesn't get knocked up again. I kind of find it humorous, but given that I thought Courtney was the one pregnant at first, I sort of feel for him.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Larry." I give them both hugs, thanking them for coming. My dad walks in next. Today's a special day and I'm so glad to finally be moving on from the past that's haunted over us this last year. The accident that led to Mia's death shocked all of us, but I can't say I would've done anything differently. I did what I had to do to protect myself and Courtney and that was all I had control over. Jayden's behind bars serving his time. Courtney's happier than ever at work, and I'm back on day shift with weekend rotations. Life couldn't get any better right now.

Well, I lied. It can.

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The girls stay in the kitchen and finish seasoning the food. I hear Courtney and Viola chatting with my mother and Kayla's in there too, talking about a dog that'd be just perfect for my parents. I walk away laughing, knowing they won't be able to leave without agreeing to adopt at least one of her shelter dogs.

Larry, Dad, and I walk onto the deck where Travis and Logan are hanging out. I offer them a couple beers from the cooler and hand them over. My palms are starting to sweat as my plan starts to move into motion. The pan of meat is on the table, ready to go, but before I do, I lift the lid of the grill and set a single blueberry muffin down in the center. I look inside the house through the patio sliding doors to make sure Courtney isn't coming out yet and when I see the coast is clear, I shut the grill down and pretend to light it.

"Fuck," I curse just loud enough for my words to echo into the kitchen. The guys huddle around me as if they're trying to help me figure it out. After a minute passes, I open the screen door and poke my head inside. "Hey, Court?"

"Yeah?" she shouts from the kitchen, although it's only a few feet away.

"Were you messing with the grill? I can't get it to light," I tell her.

"No, I didn't touch it. Not since the last time you had me light it."

I smile at the memory of a few weeks ago when I pretended I couldn't light it so I wouldn't make her suspicious. Now she just thinks I'm incapable of lighting the grill.

"Well, it's not working. I double-checked all the knobs and tubes." I make sure to

sound extra annoyed.

She comes around the kitchen island and meets me at the patio door with a scowl. “How is it you can kick down hotel doors, shoot guns, and keep control of a car going ninety miles an hour, but you can’t light a freaking grill?”

I lower my lips into a pathetic pout and shrug my shoulders. “Why must you make fun of me?”

She presses a kiss against my lips. “Because you make it too easy, Deputy.”

I smile and pretend to agree.

She pushes through me and steps out onto the patio. “Move out, boys. Time to let a girl show you how it’s done,” she shouts proudly.

We all step out of the way as she makes her way to the grill. I stay behind her so she can’t see me, and I kneel. Everyone is standing on the patio in a half circle, anxiously waiting.

“Now, you turn the igniter knob over here to the fire icon, okay? Then you put the burner to high and click this button until it lights.” She goes through the motions as she explains herself, except I’ve already disconnected the propane so it won’t light.

“What the hell?” she curses to herself and when she goes to lift the lid, my heart pounds loudly in my chest.

She’s playing with the knobs as she lifts it all the way up and it takes her a second to notice the muffin. “What in the world, Drew?” she shouts as if I’ve pranked her. “We’re grilling my muffins now?” It’s not until she lifts it and takes it in her hand does she see the engagement ring sitting on top. “Oh my God.” Her body stills and

we all wait in silence as she finally turns around and sees I'm down on one knee. "What are you doing?" she asks as tears surface in her eyes.

"Sweetheart...there's not a day that goes by that I don't thank the Lord for putting you in my life at a time when I needed it the most—even when I didn't realize it—you were always the one. You know me better than anyone, you're my best friend, and the love of my life. I'll even go as far as saying my soul mate. This past year hasn't been easy for us, but one thing always remained. Loving you has and will always be effortless. I can't see my life without you in it—nor would I ever want to—and there's nothing in the world that'd make me happier than you becoming my wife."

"Oh my God," she cries out, covering her mouth with her hands. I can tell she's smiling by the way her cheeks lift to her eyes.

"Courtney Rose-Marie Bishop, will you marry me and make all my dreams come true?"

She nods her head furiously before any words come out. I stand up and wrap my arms around her before she finally says the word just loud enough for me to hear—yes. I cup her cheeks and bring her mouth to mine, kissing her fiercely as tears of joy fall down her cheeks.

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“You’ve just made me the fucking happiest man alive,” I whisper against her lips. “I love you so much.”

She swiftly wipes under her eyes and whispers back against my lips, “I love you, too. I can’t believe we’re engaged!”

“Oh, wait.” I pull away briefly, grabbing the muffin from her hand and pulling the ring out. “We have to make it official,” I say with a grin. I brush the excess muffin off the band and grab her hand to slide it on her ring finger.

“Wrong hand,” she whispers.

“Huh?”

She quickly swaps her hands out and places the left one in my palm. Viola and Kayla chuckle softly behind us and I play it off as I totally did that on purpose. I watch as she smiles and I slide the ring onto her beautiful ring finger. I hold her hand in mine and place a kiss against her knuckles. I flash a wink at her before holding our arms up in the air and turning us around to face everyone watching.

“She said yes!” I scream and everyone erupts into applause and cheers. “The future Mrs. Fisher.” I wrap my arms back around her and kiss the hell out of her. “I love you, sweetheart. More than I ever thought was possible.”

COURTNEY

This past week has been a complete dream come true. I hadn’t expected Drew to

propose—at least, not yet. I had always hoped, of course, that one day we’d be on the path to getting married, but he took me by complete surprise. I couldn’t be happier.

After everything that’s happened in the last year, I’m still not sure I’ll ever recover from the events that led up to Mia’s death and Jayden behind bars. She was so threatened by me and our relationship that she went as far as drugging and kidnapping me—twice. I won’t lie and say it didn’t affect me emotionally, but having Drew by my side for those dark days and nights made getting through the nightmares much easier.

Having Drew on day shift has been such a blessing. He rotates weekends, but on his off weekends, we always make plans—cookouts, visiting friends or family, working on the house, decorating and re-decorating the house, spending the afternoons at the dog park, or just lounging on our patio and reading. I don’t think I could ask for anything more right now.

This weekend is his work rotation, so Kayla, Viola, and I are all getting pedicures and manicures. Viola looks like she’s ten months pregnant, but I couldn’t be more excited for another little one joining their family.

“I can’t even see my feet anymore,” Viola whines as we sit in the massage chairs. “I look like I’m having twins this time around. I can barely fit into my fat pants.”

Kayla and I chuckle, but clamp our mouths shut as soon as Viola gives us her death stare.

“Well, maybe you are having twins,” I suggest with a grin. “Perhaps one baby was hiding behind the other.”

“Not possible,” she insists. “Do you know how rare that’d be to find out you’re having twins halfway through your pregnancy?”

I shoot her a look. “Says the girl who got pregnant after having her tubes tied.”

“Okay, valid point. If two babies come out of me, I’m giving one to you,” she says dramatically.

“Deal.” I smirk.

“She’s allowed to sling babies like drugs, but I get shit for doing it with dogs?” Kayla chimes in.

I snort. “To be fair, I now have two dogs, thanks to you.”

She smiles proudly. “You’re welcome.”

“I still can’t believe you’re engaged to my brother,” Viola says, taking my left hand in hers. “He picked out a nice one, too!”

“It’s gorgeous,” Kayla adds. “Now if only he could nudge that friend of his, the three of us would be all set.”

“At this point, I’m starting to think Logan doesn’t swing that way,” Viola states matter-of-factly. “You just might not be his type.”

“Then why not just say that? Why keep this weird thing going between us? I mean, he texts me sometimes and we hang out when all of us are together and it’s not awkward at all. He’s making me believe there’s a chance, yet at the same time, he pushes me away anytime I text too much or we end up at the same place.” She leans back in her chair and sighs. “Men are so confusing.”

“So, I take it you’re really broken up about you and Tyler not working out?” Viola teases.

“No, I mean, yeah, it sucked it didn’t work out, but I should’ve guessed it wouldn’t. Not when I’m still hung up on Logan, which doesn’t make any fucking sense considering there’s never been anything to stay hung up on.”

“So, who ended it?” Viola asks.

“Technically I did, but he’d been pretty distant before that, so I think he was thinking it, too.”

“So, why didn’t it work out again?” I ask since the last time I saw them together, they seemed pretty handsy.

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“Truthfully, he didn’t do it for me...” she begins, and then leans over her chair close to the two of us, “...in bed,” she whispers. “I had to go into the bathroom and finish myself off because he just didn’t get me excited enough.”

My eyes widen in shock because up until right now, Kayla’s been pretty conservative about her personal life. She doesn’t share much, and if she does, it’s super vague.

“You mean he needed a map under the hood and in typical guy fashion, refused to ask for directions?” Viola blurts out.

“Exactly.” Kayla laughs. “But even when I was clear about what I wanted, he was just too...sweet.”

“You broke up with a guy for being too sweet?” I scold her. “You’re one of those good girls that only dates bad boys, aren’t you?” I tease.

“Actually...” She holds up a finger. “I’m a good girl who dates guys that are sweet in the streets and bad in the sheets. There’s a difference,” she gloats. “And Tyler was sweet and gentle and didn’t know the definition of harder.”

Viola and I both crack up laughing, especially when Kayla’s voice rises and the woman painting my toenails overhears her and shifts uncomfortably in her chair.

“So, what you’re really saying is you like rough sex?” I arch a brow and she immediately blushes. “How rough are we talking?” I inquire with a smile.

“Can we stay on topic here?” She tilts her head at me and narrows her eyes.

“Okay, fine.” I grin. “Well, for the record, I could definitely see Logan fitting the bill. He’s got that rough around the edges yet charming and kind type of personality. He’s mysterious, yet caring,” I say matter-of-factly. Not that I know Logan super well, but after interacting with him and watching him around Drew, those are my best assumptions about him.

“He’s mysterious, all right,” Kayla pouts. “Mysterious and confusing and has split-personality disorder.”

“Has he ever mentioned a Skylar to you?” I ask Kayla and she shakes her head. “I’ve overheard him and Drew talking about it a couple of times, and it sounded kind of serious, but I have no idea who it is or if it’s even a girl.”

“I bet you it’s an ex,” Viola chimes in. “He could still be hung up on her, which is why he might not be ready to move onto another relationship.”

“I don’t know. By the way Drew acted weird when I asked, it seemed way more serious than just trying to get over an ex. For as long as I’ve known Drew, he’s been single, so that’s at least a year he’s been getting over this ex.”

“So, if not an ex, then who?” Viola asks the question we’re all thinking.

“Well, whoever it is and whether it’s the reason he’s not ready to date or not, why can’t he just be a big boy and just say that?” Kayla asks with annoyance in her tone.

“Well, have you ever thought about maybe stop chasing him? I know he saw you with Tyler and got agitated about it, but what if he thought you were completely over your fascination with him? Stop giving him the time of day, let him know you’ve moved on from guys not showing interest in you, and see how that unfolds,” Viola suggests and I nod in agreement.

“How do I pretend to not be into him when I’m so into him?” Kayla asks and then squirms when the nail technician starts filing her toenails.

“Girl, we will teach you,” Viola says, waving her finger between me and her.

“I don’t know. That all sounds like some kind of childish game.” Kayla’s shoulders fall in defeat.

“There is nothing childish about the kind of games we’ve played. Isn’t that right, Lola?” I smirk as I hold up my left hand and show off my new engagement rock. “Sometimes in order to get the guy, you’ve got to create your own rules to win the game of love.”

“So, you think by pretending to be over my feelings for him, he’ll suddenly realize he likes me?” Kayla asks doubtful.

“No, I think he’ll suddenly realize he should’ve acted on the feelings he clearly has for you but is choosing to ignore.”

“Yeah,” I agree with Viola. “Sometimes guys just need a good kick in the heart to come to terms with what’s right in front of them.” I grin. “Like me. I knew he wasn’t available, so I became his best friend instead. And might have paraded around in sports bras and baked extra muffins, but he came to terms with his feelings all on his own. He just needed a little push.”

“Don’t you mean alcohol?” Viola blurts out, laughing. “I take credit for the two of you.”

“What? How?”

“Well, for starters, I introduced you two and you slept together on the night of my

wedding. I all but sent you two away with a baggy of condoms.”

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Kayla laughs and I shake my head at both of them.

“Okay, fine. You may have assisted in the creation of our relationship. Happy now?”
I tease and she nods with a pleased smile.

The rest of the day is filled with girl talk, coffee, and a long list of Netflix shows we all want to start watching together. I finally head home just before Drew’s shift is done. It’s only been a week since he proposed; yet it feels like it’s been forever. I’m so deeply, madly in love with him, I can’t wait until we finally say I do.

“Sweetheart?” I hear him yell as he opens the front door.

“In here,” I shout from the master bath.

“What are you—” He stops in his tracks as soon as he sees I’m soaking in the tub, which is one of my favorite things about our house. “Ooh, a guy could get used to coming home to this.” He begins stripping from his uniform, unbuttoning his shirt and undoing his slacks. I watch with a smile on my face as he eagerly gets naked.

“Wow, Deputy. You’re stripping time has effectively decreased. You’ve been practicing without me?” I tease, moving the soapsuds around to cover the tops of my breasts.

“Never. I’ve just learned the faster I get naked, the faster I get between your legs.” He smirks, pulling off his socks and stepping into the tub.

“Every girl’s prince charming,” I mock, moving forward to let him slide his body

behind mine. He pulls my back against his chest once he's settled and wraps his arms around my waist as he buries his lips in my hair.

"You smell good," he purrs against my neck. "I bet you taste even better."

I arch my head to the side and he captures my mouth with his. His hand cups my breast as the other cups my cheek and our tongues tangle together in a heated dance. No matter how much time we spend together, it never feels like enough. I want him—all day and night—all the time. I can confidently say I'm marrying my best friend, and I know it's only going to get better from here.

His hand slides down my stomach and finds my pussy. He continues kissing me as he rubs circles over my clit, adding pressure and working me up more as he deepens his kiss. He knows what he's doing to me, and I'm too weak to stop him. Not that I'd ever want him to stop, but the last time we tried having sex in the tub, half of the bath water ended up on the bathroom floor.

He slides his finger inside and begins working me until I nearly beg him for more. His mouth moves down my jaw and he feathers kisses down my neck as my head falls back against his shoulder. Increasing his speed, my hips synchronize with his pace and move with his rhythm. I feel his cock push against the small of my back and I know he's as worked up as I am.

I reach an arm around my back and wrap my palm around him. Water begins moving in waves around us and I know if we don't stop, we're going to flood the bathroom.

"We haven't christened the shower yet," I tell him. "I think it's overdue."

"Smart thinking." He smiles against my lips. "Maybe we can add some whipped cream since we won't have to worry about clean up. Or chocolate sauce. In fact, let's just put a mini fridge in here so we have them stocked at all times."

“Don’t use me as an excuse to cheat on your diet,” I snicker. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed a shortage of my muffins in the freezer.”

“Dammit,” he mutters. “Working days is really messing up my gym routine. By the time I get done with work, I just want to come home to you and the minute I start kissing you, I can’t stop.”

I smile. “So, you’re saying it’s my fault?”

“Yup. If you weren’t so addictive and taste so good, I’d be able to leave for an hour or two to get a workout in.”

“Hm...yeah, I can see how that would be a problem for you.”

“It is. A big problem,” he says, arching his hips and pressing his cock further into my palm, throbbing and ready to explode.

“Perhaps I can make it up to you.” I stroke his dick faster. “I’m thinking in the form of where I’ll let you come.”

“Where?” he asks, his pace slowing.

“Mm hmm...I’d say it, but I know how your dick acts up when I do...”

It takes him a moment to remember what I’m referring to. He must finally remember that day in the truck where I gave him road head because in less than five seconds, he jumps out of the tub and is pulling me out with him.

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I lean my body against his chest and he presses a sweet kiss against my lips. “You better not be messing with me, woman.”

“Would I do that?” I smirk and wiggle my naked body against his.

He arches his brow and narrows his eyes. “Is that a trick question?”

I chuckle and wrap my arms around his neck to pull his mouth back down on mine. “Get me in the shower and find out,” I say against his lips.

Just as he turns on the water, scratching on the door grabs our attention. Reed sticks his little paw underneath the door as Buddy scratches, begging us to let them in.

“Sorry, boys! Daddy needs to teach Mommy a behavioral lesson.” He pulls me into the shower and slaps my ass.

“Don’t tell them that!” I squeal as he brings my back against his chest.

“You better obey, too, or else I’ll have no choice but to use excessive force,” he teases in a low voice.

“You got it, Deputy. I would never intentionally break the law,” I reply in a mock tone. The water streams over us, the heat causing steam to form on the shower doors.

“Good girl, because I’d hate to have to punish you and hold you for forty-eight hours. But then again...”

“I always knew you secretly liked the bad girls.”

He spins me around while holding onto me and places a hand on my spine to arch my back. I place my palms against the wall as he spreads my legs apart with his foot. “And I’m about to show you just what I plan to do with a bad girl like you.”

EPILOGUE

COURTNEY

Six Months Later...

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, lived a queen who ruled her own kingdom. She didn’t need a king beside her because she was confident, strong, and smart without one. But if there ever was a man who could stand beside her, he’d be the strongest, smartest, most protective guy she could ever ask for. He’d be her best friend and The One.

...and he is. Drew Fisher, my best friend and soul mate.

For as long as I can remember, I wished for a man who is as caring and loving as Drew and here we are now, only an hour away from becoming husband and wife.

So much has happened since that first day we met. I was a tongue-tied girl who could barely speak when I saw Drew in his uniform. We started as strangers, then became friends and roommates, and then we evolved to best friends—and now here we are—getting married. Who knew after everything we’d been through, we’d finally make it this far? It’s as if all the pieces finally fell perfectly together, and now I’m about to walk down the aisle and become Mrs. Drew Fisher.

The wedding day jitters started a few days ago, but I’m more excited than anything. It

took a team of Mama and some of my bridesmaids to get me into my wedding gown, and once I'm finally all put together, I look at myself in the mirror with my hair and makeup all done, it really begins to feel real.

With a huge smile on my face, I glance over at Viola, who's standing beside me while Mama stands on the other side of me, already wiping tears from her cheeks, then excuses herself to pull herself together.

"You look so gorgeous, Court," Viola whispers as the sequins on the bodice of my dress sparkle in the afternoon sunlight. "I'm so happy you're going to officially be my sister."

"I know." I smile. "It's like a little girl's dream come true." My eyes start to burn, and I look up and try to wave the tears away.

Thankfully, Ginny grabs my hand and pulls, distracting me from the tears that were threatening to surface. "You look like a pwincess, Aunt Courty."

I bend down as best as I can and wrap my arms around her little body and she flings her arms around my neck. I seriously love this kid so much, and I love it when she calls me her aunt. When we release our hug, she starts giggling.

"You are a little princess, Ginny. You even have the crown to prove it." I tap the little tiara that's clipped into her hair and she smiles really big. Viola picks her up and Ginny twirls her fingers in her hair. "Aunt Courty said I was a pwincess!"

Viola grins and places a kiss on Ginny's cheek. "You are," Viola agrees, and I smile because that's the nickname Travis gave her when they were kids.

Kayla walks up to the other side of me and it hits me hard just how much I love them as I see the three of us stand in front of the mirror. They are my everything, the best

friends a girl could ever ask for, and they've been with me through it all. I couldn't imagine life without either of them.

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“I love y’all,” I say and pull them both in for a big hug.

“Don’t you dare start crying,” Kayla scolds, blotting under her big brown eyes with a tissue. “If you do, I’ll lose it. I don’t know why I’m so emotional.”

I smile at her because weddings do the same thing to me.

Just as I turn to say something to Mama, Benita bolts in, followed by Aunt Charlotte and Aunt Patsy.

“I’m sorry for being late. The boys needed to eat, again. Then an emergency diaper change and had to redress one,” she says, winded and out of breath as she makes a beeline for me and gives me a huge hug. “You look amazing!” she gushes when she leans back and looks at me.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay,” I reassure her. “You made it just in time.” She looks so great in her bridesmaid dress. You can’t even tell she just had the twins seven months ago.

“I can’t believe there are hundreds of people out there already! I think Aunt Rose invited the entire county!” she beams.

“I wouldn’t doubt that,” I say, chuckling.

“I’m just so happy you’re having the wedding here. I don’t think I would’ve made it all the way to California with the boys at this age.”

“I am, too! It wouldn’t feel the same if we didn’t,” I say honestly, remembering how we always talked about our big Texas weddings when we were just kids.

I always dreamed of getting married on the family ranch under the big oak tree in the backyard. I’d tell my cousins all these elaborate stories of how I’m going to get married under the tree to my very own prince charming. We’d play with Barbies and have Ken and my Princess Cinderella doll get married. It was one of our repeat playtime scenarios, but even as I grew older, getting married on the ranch was still in the back of my mind once I found the right guy. The way the old tree overlooks the rolling hills and how much room there is has always been the perfect spot. However, making that dream a reality was far from easy.

Planning everything from California made life a little hectic, but thankfully Mama, Aunt Charlotte, and Benita helped make it all happen. From the chairs and tent rentals to the orchestra and food catering, I didn’t have to worry about a thing. Mama even baked our cakes, and I begged her to hoard me a sheet cake that I wouldn’t have to share with anyone, because I know there won’t be any leftover.

When Drew and I arrived a few days ago, the tent was being erected in the backyard along with electricity wired for the lights. Today, it looks like an actual wedding venue with wooden chairs decorated in tulle and fresh flowers lined along the aisle that face toward the tree that has floating lights strung throughout. Silk and fresh flowers mixed with a western theme make it look like a photo-shoot straight from a country wedding Pinterest board. Even Kayla commented on how beautiful it looked, and she’s a snob about decorations. Mama outdid herself planning, but as she said, she only has one daughter to spoil. I couldn’t be happier with the outcome, but I’m most excited to see Drew at the end of the aisle.

Just as Benita steps out to go check on the boys, my brothers come storming into Mama’s bedroom she’s turned into the bridal suite. They look showered, shaved, and are dressed in their groomsmen tuxedos. I haven’t seen them this cleaned up

since...well...never.

“What are you doin’?” I shout at them with a smile, but they keep walking toward me.

“Shut the hel-, I mean, heck up,” Jackson teases, pulling me into a hug and basically passes me down the line of them. John, Evan, and Alex all tell me how proud they are and how much they love me. It’s completely unlike them to be so mushy.

Once I’m able to breathe again, I take a step back and look at the four of them. “Did Daddy put you up to this?” I speculate, narrowing my eyes at them. Mom stands behind me and eyes them as well.

“Maybe.” John shrugs, keeping a straight face and doesn’t give anything away, but I know better. Alex nudges John and John nudges him back. Jackson then pushes Alex and he pushes him right into Evan, causing a domino effect.

“Boys!” Mama scolds them like they’re toddlers. “Y’all did what you came to do, now get outta here,” Mama demands with a pointed finger and they all just stand there.

“We just had to come see it for ourselves. Our baby sis in an actual dress.” Alex teases me and I pinch under his arm where I know it’ll hurt.

“Wearing a dress or not, I can still kick your ass,” I fire back, and right before he can get me back, Mama stops him.

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“Out. Now.” She points a finger toward the door. “We don’t have much time left.”

They continue messing around and I can tell it’s working Mama up.

“Y’all are going to increase Mama’s blood pressure if you don’t get out,” I tell them. “We have to line up soon, anyway.”

They finally head out, but not without commotion. Right as things quiet back down, the door opens once more and the rest of my bridal party walk in all dressed and ready to go. Summer, Morgan, and Imani are my cousins I grew up with, and although we’ve lost touch since I’ve moved to California, it wouldn’t feel right not including them.

They circle around me and give me hugs and compliment my dress. We take a few selfies before Mama sends them off downstairs. The room isn’t big enough for all of us to be in here. Once the room is cleared out besides Kayla, Viola, and Ginny, Mama grabs me and pulls me into a hug. When she moves away, I wipe a few tears from her face.

“Those are tears of happiness, baby. Don’t think I’m upset. Just happy you found a man that’s going to treat you right.”

“Thanks, Mama.” I smile. “I couldn’t ask for anyone better.”

“Good. I’m glad you found him,” she says so sincerely, it almost makes me tear up again.

“Me too.”

“I’ve been waiting to give you this and now it’ll be perfect for your something old.”

Mama digs through her bag and takes out a black box. She opens it up and inside are a set of pearl earrings. I look up at her with wide eyes.

“These were Grannie’s earrings. Lord bless her. I wish she were here to see how beautiful you look right now.”

She pulls one out and removes the back. “Me too, baby. I was thinking there’s no other day that’s more perfect for you to wear them. Mama wore them on her wedding day, and I wore them on mine. It’s a tradition for us strong women. And if you have a daughter one day, you’ll know what to give her on her wedding day.”

I place the earrings in my ears and tuck my lips into my mouth because my emotions are really starting to take hold.

“Now, don’t you start cryin’ and ruining that pretty makeup you have on.” Her thumbs catch the tears before they can fall. “You’ll always be my baby girl. No matter what. Now, it’s about time for you to get out there.”

“Crap,” Viola says and lifts Ginny up. “I need to make sure TJ is doing okay with my mother and that James is doing okay with Travis. I’ll see you down there!” She quickly gives me a hug. “You’re going to do great. I love you!”

“I love you, too!” I smile down at Ginny. “I love you too, princess.” I flash her a wink and she smiles in return.

Kayla’s the next one to smother me in hugs. “I guess I should get out there, too. So rude of you to put me with Logan when you have four hot single brothers,” Kayla

teases with a smile on her face. “Don’t think I don’t know you did that on purpose.”

“I’ll never tell,” I shout as she walks out the door.

Mama swipes a piece of loose hair and repositions it with a bobby pin. “I’m so proud of you, Court.”

“Thanks, Mama. That means a lot to me.”

She releases a breath and kisses me once more on the cheek. “I’m going to go find your father and send him in before you head downstairs.”

Once Mama walks out of the room, I adjust the veil on my head and try to get myself together. This is happening, right now, and it all feels so surreal. Before I get too caught up in my thoughts, there’s a loud knock on the door, and I turn to see my father smiling proudly.

“Pumpkin,” he says, and I can tell he’s starting to choke up, but never in my life have I seen my father cry. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” I suck in a deep breath and smile as he wraps an arm around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head like he’s always done since I was little.

“Drew’s a good guy. I just hope he knows what he’s getting into,” he says with a smile.

I snort and shake my head in agreement. “He does, Daddy.”

“Did you know he asked me for permission before he proposed?”

I make a face, wondering what he’s talking about.

“That day when you guys came down for B’s shower, your brothers were giving him shit and playing pranks on him, and he stood his ground with them. I took him out alone on the four-wheeler to help him escape the boys, and as we stood out there, looking out at the rolling hills and the cows in the pasture, he asked for my permission. That was almost a year ago. I told him if he ever hurt you or if you ever got hurt on his watch, I’d drive to Sacramento, and...” He glances over at me. “Well, you get the picture. The boy kept his word. And I want you to know that I may only be an old cowboy, but I know love when I see it and I’m happy for you, Pumpkin. I’m really happy for you.”

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“Daddy...please don’t make me cry.” I can barely speak. My throat is tight and I hate how emotional I am. We exchange a long hug and when we pull away, his face is back to being stone-cold. I can hear the music playing in the background, which is our cue that it’s starting.

“Time to go!” Aunt Charlotte yells on the other side of the door and Dad gives me a nod.

It’s time.

From around the corner, I watch James walk down the aisle next to Ginny, who’s throwing flower petals up in the air instead of down on the ground. A few people chuckle, and I smile at her cute innocence. Logan and Kayla are standing like statues next to one another as they wait for their turn to walk down, and it’s not until Aunt Charlotte forces them together does Kayla loop her arm in his. I want to laugh at how silly they are both being right now.

Alex, Imani, John, and Morgan have all made their way down the aisle. Guests on both sides are watching with eager expressions as Jackson and Benita begin walking down next. She laughs the entire way down, and I can only imagine what shenanigans he said to her.

Evan and Summer follow behind and then Logan and Kayla make their way down the aisle. Kayla flashes a wide smile while Logan stands steady like he’s back at the police academy.

Travis leans over and kisses Viola before they walk down, and then it’s just Daddy

and me as we wait for the music to change, and when the guests stand, that's our cue.

We step out, taking our time, and as soon as I see Drew standing under the oak tree and his eyes meet mine, happiness and love overcome me. My cheeks begin to hurt from smiling so much. The leaves on the tree rustle and the wind lightly blows, and it's almost as if the heavens are giving me permission to marry my best friend.

Daddy leans in for a last hug and kisses me on the cheek before giving me away. I flash a quick smile at Kayla and Viola before Drew takes my hand and brings me up to the altar with him. Though most of the town, Drew's and my family, and our friends are all here, it seems like the only two people in the world right now are Drew and me. Nothing else matters, nothing else has ever mattered, and as we exchange our vows, I'm completely entranced in him.

He whispers I love you and I whisper it back as the pastor continues with the ceremony. When we're finally able to kiss one another as husband and wife, my entire world feels like it stops spinning. Drew holds my face in his hands and takes his time as he kisses me like no one's watching.

It feels like a dream, and if it is, I never want to wake up.

After we take numerous photos with our wedding party and families, we walk over to the huge tent where the party's already started. The DJ announces us and as we walk in, everyone starts hooting and applauding. Drew takes the opportunity to swing me around and dip me to the low beat of the music in the background. When he pulls me up, I burst out laughing.

"Now you're just showing off, Deputy."

"Showing off my new bride." He winks.

We barely get a chance to eat before we're pulled in all different directions. Guests walk up to us and give their congratulations and tell us how much they love all the sweet touches. Viola and Kayla went Google crazy and searched everything about Southern weddings to make sure we had everything perfect. From the tulle and lights hanging inside of the tent, flowers and tulle tied on every chair, the old barn doors and windows as decorations, to the mason jar table centerpieces, they had ideas flying out of their eyeballs. Mama only added to all of that, but it all came together perfectly. Everything is simply gorgeous.

Drew steps away to grab us some champagne, and I search around the room, trying to soak up the scene. Over in one corner, I notice Alex with a chick I've never seen before who's dangling off his shoulder, which shouldn't surprise me at all considering he's never had a serious girlfriend. He's flashing her his infamous flirty smile and all I can do is shake my head at him.

When I glance over to the other corner, I see Jackson with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, Sophia. Guess they're on—for now. Next week or the week after, it'll change again. It always does.

I let out a laugh just as I turn to look for Viola and Kayla, when Evan comes to me and pulls me into a tight big brother hug. "Happy for you, little sis."

“Are you really?” I’m smiling.

“I really am. And I’m happy I haven’t been called in to the hospital, but if I disappear, you know where I’m at.”

“You didn’t get off tonight?” I ask, hoping he doesn’t have to leave.

“I’m on call. We’re shorthanded at the hospital, which seems to be the normal these days.” He purses his lips together and offers an apology. I don’t take it personally, because I know how much he loves helping others and his job.

Drew finally comes back and hands me a glass of sparkly champagne.

“Congratulations, brother,” Evan directs at Drew, offering a peaceful handshake to him.

Drew leans over and gives Evan a hug, and I’m smiling that he hugs him back. John walks up, and I can tell by the look on Drew’s face he doesn’t know which brother it is.

“How’s it going, Court?” John asks. “Everything you ever dreamed it’d be?”

“Pretty good, Johnnie boy,” I give him a nudge in the stomach. “And yes. Everything and more,” I say, turning to smile at Drew.

“You know I hate it when you call me that,” John scolds, but I ignore it.

I nod and sip my champagne. “And you know I hate it when you annoy me, but that doesn’t change anything. Have you seen Mom and Dad?”

John points across the room where my parents are dancing to Strawberry Wine. Just as I plan to walk over to them and cut in, Benita stops me with the boys. Drew is occupied by John and I instantly grab one of the cutest baby boys I’ve ever seen.

“Oh my goodness, Beni. They’re so adorable.” I offer kisses on their chubby cheeks and when they smile I see they have her dimples. “Now who is who?” I chuckle because they’re identical and I can’t tell them apart at all.

“You’re holding Reagan and this one’s Beau. They both have their own little quirks, which helps me tell them apart, I think.” She laughs. “I wish you lived closer, Court. I miss you so damn much.”

“I know. Maybe one day when I’m old and ready to enjoy the smaller things in life. But I promise to come and visit several times a year. If you guys ever decide to come to Cali, you and Aaron and the boys are always welcome! I’ll volunteer as tribute to watch these cutie pies.” I rub my nose against Reagan’s tiny nose.

Aaron walks up and gives me a side hug and wraps an arm around Benita. “Aww, look at y’all being the most perfect family,” he teases as he looks back and forth between the babies we’re each holding.

Benita smiles at me. “Now it’s time for you to have some kids and join us in parenthood.”

Just as she says that, Viola walks up with TJ—or Travis Jr. as Travis finally got his way to name one of the kids—in her arms and agrees. “I think you should have twins just like Benita. Keep the family tradition going.” She grins. “Plus, then I’d get two nieces or nephews.”

“Have I told you how much I love her?” Benita laughs.

“Yeah, yeah. She’s pretty lovable.” I roll my eyes, pretending to be annoyed. Married less than a day and already being hassled to make babies.

Just as Viola scowls at me, TJ starts fussing.

“You tell her, TJ,” I say. “You’re the only little man I need in my life.” I speak in a high-pitched baby voice to try and calm him.

Travis comes over and takes him from her arms. He immediately stops crying and Viola stands there shaking her head.

“I have the magic touch,” Travis gloats.

I lift my eyebrows at Viola and laugh. “Apparently, that’s not the only thing that’s magic.”

Viola gasps and Travis lets out a hearty laugh. “That’s right.”

“Excuse me, but I need my bride now.” Drew grabs my hand and pulls me away from everyone and we walk to the dance floor. His hands find their way to my hips and we sway to the music.

“Have I told you lately how much I love you?” The corner of his lips tilt up in a bright smile.

“I think you mentioned something about it earlier?” I scrunch up my nose, pretending to think about it.

“Thank you for marrying me.” His words send shivers down my spine, and even after

all this time, he still affects me just like he has since that very first day.

“Thank you for asking me.” I smile up at him and he brushes his lips against mine. He kisses me deeply and then trails his lips down my neck and nibbles on my ear. He’s interrupted by a clearing of a throat, and I turn around and see my father, who cuts in.

We dance for a couple songs and once we’re done, he walks me over to where Drew’s standing with Travis. “She’s officially all yours now,” my father tells him, and Drew gives him a firm handshake.

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Before we head over to the cake table, I notice Kayla and Logan dancing together. Guess she decided against playing hard to get. I smile and nudge Drew.

“Look.” I tilt my head to the dance floor.

Drew sees exactly what I’m looking at and shakes his head. “You’re still playing matchmaker?” He gives me a boyish grin.

“Of course I am.”

“Well, as long as Logan’s preoccupied with other things, I don’t think it’s going to happen,” Drew states matter-of-factly before taking a swig of water.

I remember overhearing Drew and Logan talking about something earlier, but I never asked about it.

“Other things such as Skylar?” Whoever that may be.

He just flashes me a smile, not confirming anything.

Whoever it is, they could really get in the way of my matchmaking abilities.

“It’s not my story to tell, babe,” he says, even after I give him a pouty face.

The rest of the evening flashes by in a blink. Between taking pictures in the photo booths, dancing, and talking with everyone, the evening comes to an end and we’re being sent off by everyone waving sparklers in the air. I hug my mama and daddy

once more and thank them for everything before Drew escorts me into the passenger side of a 1957 Chevy Bel Air convertible that John's been restoring for years.

We wave goodbye to everyone as Drew drives us up to the bed and breakfast and carries me inside. Benita recruited Kayla to come with her to decorate our honeymoon suite. Although we'll be leaving for our actual honeymoon in a couple of days, it was sweet of them to think about helping make our wedding night just as special.

As soon as we lie down, I realize how exhausted I am. Drew helps me out of my dress and even takes my blue cowboy boots off my feet. They're so swollen, I'm surprised he can remove them.

"Even your panties are blue?" He raises a brow as if he's impressed.

"You bet, cowboy. I had to coordinate." I smile.

"Well, let's coordinate your naked body to mine and see what happens." He leans over me and I bust out laughing as he climbs on top of my body. "Let's hope these beds aren't as squeaky as the last B&B we stayed at, otherwise we're about to let the entire ranch know what we're doing." He flashes me a devilish grin, and I willingly let him strip my panties off.

We sleep in the next morning and enjoy waking up together for the first time as husband and wife. The staff brings us breakfast in bed and we just enjoy being together without the rush and hassle of the busy lifestyle we have in California.

It's everything perfect and more than I ever imagined. The following day, we catch our flight to Hawaii and spend the next ten days soaking up the sun, exploring the island and swimming with the dolphins, as well as utilizing the quiet beds they offer. By the last day, I'm sad to leave such a beautiful place, but I'm also ready to get back to my fur babies.

As soon as we land, I check my text messages and see several from Kayla.

K: I did something bad.

K: REALLY BAD.

K: I met up with Logan this morning and looked at something I shouldn't have.

K: UGH. I'm so ashamed of myself. *bangs head*

K: But that brings me to my next dilemma. I found out who Skylar is. Now I know there really isn't a chance between us.

K: CALL MEEEEEE.