



Peaches & Cream (Spice in the Mountains #6)

Author: *Elena Dawne*

Category: Dark Erotica

Description: Sweet temptations and ruined reputations...

A small town is a hard place to have a secret affair, and our remote mountain village feels the smallest.

Everybody here knows everything about everyone else — at least they think they do.

If I was like them, I'd probably think Daryl Winters is too old and perverted for me to have a relationship with. But I see the kind, caring, and lonely man behind the smoldering gazes and defensive humor, and I can't help falling in love.

He may be the only person in town who acknowledges the light inside me, and I wish he wouldn't keep his distance.

Trouble is, thanks to my overbearing father and the many watchful eyes he's got me living under, Daryl's as convinced as the rest of the town that I'm an off-limits sweetheart who must remain depressingly chaste for all eternity.

But I'll show him.

I'll show everyone.

I'm tired of living small so others can feel big, and I'm done being Daddy's good girl.

It's time to rise up, claim my desires, and become the woman I'm meant to be.

This is MY life.

I'll do whatever I want... including Daryl.

Total Pages (Source): 18

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CADENCE

I gaze out the window at the same green hills I've seen every day since I can remember. If I try hard, I can re-imagine the view to be full of skyscrapers, honking traffic, flashing lights, and crowds big enough to get lost in — all the things that I'll never experience in Beaumont City, population 3214 and shrinking.

The founding brothers Beaumont and their ilk obviously had delusions of grandeur when they declared this little patch of fertile dirt a city . Or maybe the name was aspirational, and they dreamed of growing into it one day. I wish they had.

Imagine if they'd succeeded and this place had become a bustling metropolis? Would I be living in a high-rise with my bedroom in the clouds, close to the heavens? A tiny apartment would come with an even tinier list of chores, which would leave room for me to read a lot more books or maybe live a larger life with someone ultra-romantic and sexy... that certainly sounds like heaven. Would I like city living better or worse than a tiny cabin in the woods?

Maybe one day I'll stretch my meager savings to try one or the other. It's taking forever to get ahead with the pittance I earn between my work at the library and the allowance I get from dad to help out around the house with Mom. I'll need a third job, if I'm ever going to be able to get where I want to be, but I don't know where I'd find the time for that. Or the energy.

I sigh. Life's hard enough without adding more strain. And I guess I'm lucky to be

able to save as much as I do. At least I don't need to buy food or pay rent while I'm living at home, and Dad generously pays for my car's gas... I should be more grateful.

The brush in my hand snags on a knot in Mom's hair, and the sudden loll of her head pulls my wandering mind back into awareness. I apologize at once and pay special attention to making sure the bristles run more smoothly. Unbothered, Mom stares straight ahead, her expression blank. Any ability to complain about her care was silenced over a dozen years ago, but that doesn't mean I can't do my best to treat her well.

"There you go," I say, as I pin the last loose end of her fading auburn hair into its signature bun. "All done."

With the task of readying her for the day complete, I move around to view her from the front, but after one look at her appearance, there's no denying that so much is still missing. There's no light in her eyes, no color in her cheeks, and no warmth radiating from her in waves of love. It's been so long since she looked like the woman I remember. She doesn't even smell the same.

I lift her discontinued perfume from the dressing table and hold it to my nose. It doesn't smell the same straight from the bottle as it had when I used to catch a whiff of it on her skin when she hugged me. The sheer absence of her soul these days makes my heart ache all the more for her once-comforting presence in my life. I lean forward and spritz a little of the precious scent below her ear, where her steady pulse pretends she's still with us. I breathe in as I kiss her cheek and then lean back to view her again. If only she looked more alive.

I set down the fragrance bottle, open her long-untouched makeup drawer, and pull out her old blush and the bright lipstick she used to apply religiously each morning, as if nobody — not even her own family — was ever allowed to know the true nature of

her smile. She doesn't smile anymore, but if I could just make her look the way she used to...

She neither agrees nor disagrees to my request to make her over, so like every other task I perform to care for her, I do it anyway. It's the only way to get through the days, and the longer we live this Groundhog Day lifestyle, the more I believe it's for Dad's benefit more than it is mine or Mom's. We'd probably both be better off if she was in a home, but Dad would never agree to it. In sickness and in health has gripped him by the balls with love and guilt and grief. He won't let go; can't let go.

And so here we are. Stuck. Every day the same, spent trying to preserve someone who's long gone, while my own life passes by unlived.

I sit back to assess my work, but if I was hoping for some semblance of warmth or animation in my mother's face, I've only disappointed myself. Her blank expression is as vacant as ever, leaving no trace of her true essence.

The back door closes below. "Cadence?" My father's voice calls before the lowest step creaks and his footsteps climb in an approach.

"I'm upstairs." But he already knew that. Where else would I be?

The door swings open, and he gasps. "What have you done?" He marches over to the tissue box and yanks out a couple. "She's got physiotherapy this morning. She can't go into Morrinsville looking like one of the back-alley tramps that roam the streets there. People will think we're mistreating her. How could you be so disrespectful?" He holds Mom's head in place and rubs at her mouth, smearing the lipstick and making everything so much worse.

I push up from my stool and head into the adjacent bathroom to wet a facecloth. "I just wanted to see her face the way she made it up every day. She never looked like a

tramp .” I say it quietly and keep my head down. Disagreeable eye contact will only be perceived as insubordination, which will incur wrath I don’t have the energy to suffer today. There’s no arguing with my father — well, no winning, anyway — so why bother fighting when I can smile, nod, and let it blow over? It’s the fastest, easiest path to regaining my peace.

“Are you accusing me of insulting your mother?” His tone expertly holds both a warning and a pre-judged admonishment, which I know from experience not to fuck with. Everyone in town who’s ever found themselves called into his office at the high school knows not to fuck with him when he uses his principal’s voice. It’s always followed by an ending the receiver won’t appreciate, because he has a knack for knowing exactly what you want and how he can ruin it for you.

“No, Daddy.” I shoo him away from Mom, brush the larger remnants of broken tissue from her lips, and gently wipe away the mess he’s made. “I know you want her to look respectable and dignified. I want that too.”

“Then don’t ever do that again.” He growls, snatches the lipstick off the dresser, and shoves it deep into his pocket. “Her oatmeal is cooling on the table,” he says once I’m done. “She doesn’t like it cold.”

Didn’t , I think to myself. I’m not sure Mom’s taste or temperature receptors in her mouth have been connected to any level of comprehension since Dad’s horse kicked nearly every functional ability she had clear out of her head. It was a horrific thing to have happened, and time hasn’t lessened the impact it’s had on our family, but out of love, we strive to keep our care for her as close as we can to the way she preferred to live. She was our everything, so what else can we do, right? This is a question I’ve been pondering a lot lately.

I move out of Dad’s way, and he lifts Mom into his arms for the journey downstairs. I can tell from the strain in his face and neck that it’s getting harder for him. I don’t

mention it, because it'd only incite another argument, where he'd accuse me of disrespecting my mother by making her live below us on the bottom floor, like a peasant , but I'm going to finish clearing out the downstairs bedroom this week. At some point, his back is going to give out on him, and he won't be able to defend his stubborn behavior.

If he feels guilty about her being alone on the ground floor, he could share the downstairs room with her — if he wanted to. He doesn't, but he'll never admit to it. I'm not sure he could handle being any more confronted by his loss. He can barely be around her as it is.

He sets her into the armchair at the table, and then, chore done , he grabs his car keys from the counter. "Michelle will be here to collect her for her appointment before you have to leave for the library."

I nod and watch him kiss the top of Mom's head, his supposedly loving gesture more driven by routine and duty than actual desire or emotion. There's a resounding emptiness in it that makes me want to cry. Mom doesn't even blink.

"Have a good day at work," I say, putting on a brave smile.

"You too, Cupcake." He pauses at the door. "Is that loathsome man still reading his way through the shelves?"

He's talking about Daryl Winters, Beaumont City's very handsome and incredibly misunderstood scapegoat for everyone's misplaced judgments, and one of the only men in this county who's curious and worldly enough to read beyond the realms of sports biographies and thrillers. He's basically the only guy in town worth talking to if you want to hold a decent conversation, and our talks always leave me hopeful of one day experiencing even a fraction as much of the world as he has. It's refreshing to share time with someone who thinks outside of boxes; who's not limited by

conventions or what others may think of him.

Nearly everyone around here disapproves of Daryl, but I'm grateful every time I see his face. Generous with his time and his smiles, that well-read mountain man makes me feel seen and valued like nobody else, and his brief visits to the library are always the highlight of my day. He's my guiltiest pleasure, and if it wouldn't shatter the fragile, hard-won stability my family has recreated since Mom's accident, I would gladly strip myself bare and stroke that sweet and clever, silvering fox from his bearded face to his big-footed toes.

He is so many wonderful things. He's smart and kind and thoughtful. And a retired rodeo champ, a computer whiz, a philanthropist... but none of that matters one bit to my father or the people of Beaumont City, so my secret yearnings will remain a fantasy. While he may come with a head full of intriguing brains and delightfully low-slung jeans full of promise, he also comes with a reputation — one that clashes violently with the protective layer of enforced chastity my father has built around me.

Daryl Horndog Winters is a filthy, perverted, womanizing ass-fucker, and the whole town knows it.

And that's why a walk of shame from a night with him doesn't just last the time it takes to walk a few blocks home the next morning, it lasts a lifetime. Any woman caught within arm's reach of him is assumed to have questionable morals simply by association, so we're all very aware that any local woman who actually succumbs to his salacious charm will suffer a far worse fate.

Sally Carruthers hooked up with him nearly four years ago and still can't make eye contact with any of us for longer than two seconds before her face turns beetroot-crimson. She used to be one of the happiest, liveliest women in town. Now she's basically converted to nun-hood in an attempt to redeem herself in the eyes of her neighbors, but no matter how she tries to rid herself of people's judgment, she's

forever been tarred with a prickly shame-brush for willingly participating in Daryl's debauchery.

Just last week, I asked if she'd like to see any of the new romance novels I received into the library. Like me, she used to love a good stack of smut, but instead of leaping for a chance to get at these rare, fresh reads, she ran straight out the door and left her uninspired quilting book on the counter, unissued. It's so sad.

I once hoped to broker a friendship over our spicy common interest and dreamed that one day, we might be gal pals who shared our darkest and most intense secret desires. Then maybe I could've found out what it was like to be fucked in the ass. Or fucked at all, for that matter. Much to my annoyance, although my imagination is wild, I'm lacking any actual experience. I'm desperate for any crumbs of insight that'll help me piece together the truth that must lie somewhere between the rumors I've heard and the plethora of spicy fiction I consume. But considering Sally no longer wants to admit she reads erotic tales, I doubt she'll ever want to share her own.

I'd love to find out why, because apparently, sex with Daryl inspires a deep, permanent sort of remorse. Whatever he offers in the bedroom must be the very definition of true depravity. His allegedly non-missionary — and therefore too unorthodox for this small town — ways, are often spoken about in hushed whispers and giggles, and I would have managed to ignore it, but it's really the only interesting thing anyone in this town ever talks about.

Which is one of the biggest fucking problems with small towns.

There's very little a girl can do to escape her boredom around here without sending up a giant signal flare that brings in the gossips. They blow everything out of proportion, and then crank up the old rumor mill, to produce enough shit to smear your reputation in a campaign that'll get you shunned six ways from Sunday.

If you want any peace or privacy while you're stuck in Beaumont City, you must live like a saint. You can't do anything too wild or fun or exciting. And you definitely can't do Daryl.

Especially when your father is the highly respected school principal, who somehow still wields an unsettling amount of power over everyone who has ever graduated through the doors of Beaumont High, and their parents, and their parents' parents. People speak of him as if he's the backbone of this community, and he may well be, considering the effort he invests in others. Every man and his dog loves Vander Malone, and it's really fucking confusing that lately, I find myself struggling to feel the same.

Whoever he manages to be around them; it's not the same guy I see at home. If he treated me half as well as he does everyone else, I could see their point, but he doesn't. I get constantly poked with the stern end of the principal stick, and I can't actually remember the last time he did something supportive. He has not been the loving father and husband they all believe him to be in a long time. These days, he feels more like a thief who's slowly but surely stealing my will to live, and he spends so much time avoiding his wife, I can't understand how anyone could still think he cares for her at all. Nearly everyone seems to be under some illusion that he's the best husband any woman in a vegetative state could ask for — if she had the capacity to speak — but it's a lie.

The good townsfolk of Beaumont City are looking through a rose-colored mirage he's painted over the truth, so they perceive things the way he wants them to. They seem to think he's home all the time, devoted to Mom's care, but he's always elsewhere, earning his reputation as a pillar of the community instead of being around to prop up his own family. I would have thought actions speak louder than words, but it seems most people would rather believe his cheery narratives over what they see with their own eyes. And the worst part is, their warped perceptions and insane reverence of him have overflowed into my life, making it impossible for me to build

any kind of sustainable bond with another human.

On those rare occasions when I get a break from Mom, if I try to be with anybody in a way that might subtly progress toward a bedroom, I end up back at home, isolated, and sighing my ass off in failure. Nobody in this town has the balls to besmirch, disgrace, or defame Vander James Malone's sweet, innocent Cadence. Even strangers passing through get redirected and run out of town if they look my way with any interest. It's like the whole town decided that poor man has been through enough, and they've collectively rendered me off-limits so he doesn't acquire any added stress that may come of his helpful daughter needing to divide her time and loyalty between her family and some new love. I'm so cloaked in this town-wide protective layer of prevention, that I may be the only girl in town who can be alone Daryl Winters without everyone assuming we're fucking.

Apparently my reputation as the most virtuous, untouchable goody-two-shoes in town is iron-clad enough to brush away of the deviant fuck-boy rumors that swirl around Daryl like flies. I mean, Daryl comes to the library every day it's open, so there should be all sorts of shit being said about us, but there's nary a whisper about his D going anywhere near my V — or my A, as would be assumed with him involved. I'm pretty sure the general belief must be that I would ever engage in that sort of activity with him, which is both a blessing and a curse, because despite nobody believing we'd hook up, I'm pretty sure we'd both be into it. I know I would.

So far, Daryl's been too sweet to cross that line though. He knows the judgment a woman falls under by being with him, and he'd never allow me to befall that kind of aftermath.

I give my father a shrug. "If you're talking about Daryl Winters, he's still showing up to get a new book every day. Like clockwork." I intentionally keep my tone far more nonchalant than it'd be if I expressed what I actually feel toward my favorite bearded eye candy. "He's about halfway through his first wall of books. It's kind of

impressive.” I keep any real appreciation from my voice, but Dad still jumps on the tiny amount I did express.

An angry eleven creases deeply between his eyebrows as he plunges them downward. “There is nothing impressive about that man, Cadence.” His warning tone is back, and I sigh inwardly, where he can’t hear it and accuse me of active rebellion. “He’s not to be trusted, and if he tries anything with you — if he so much as looks at you the wrong way — I want to hear about it immediately. You understand?”

“Of course,” I say without pause, to avoid an unpleasant reaction. My father thinks he gets to decide what the wrong way is, but I’ll be the judge when it comes to how people treat me, and I happen to like the way Daryl looks at me. I wish he’d do more than look. I’d beg him, if I was bold enough, but it wouldn’t do any good. My father is an intimidating man in these parts, and it’s in his best interest to keep me single and home taking care of Mom through whatever means possible, so single and home I am. I’ll be the first to admit that I’m an acquired taste and not some stunning creature men fall instantly in love with, but I could be a legit fucking princess with a magical pussy and beer flowing from my nipples, and there still wouldn’t be a man in town willing to come up against the great, all-powerful, Vander James Malone.

“Good girl.” He lingers a moment, studying me, and then he smiles. “Your mother would be so proud of you, Cupcake.” He taps the doorframe a couple of times, as if there’s more he could say but can’t quite express. Instead, he nods once and heads out the door.

I wait until his tires are crunching the gravel on the driveway before I look Mom in her dead eyes and sigh. “Without me, he’d have to accept you’re gone and never coming back. He’d have to stop pretending this is all okay. He’d have to grieve you and let you go, the way I have. And he’d have to realize that even though your life was stopped short in the middle, it’s possible for our lives to move on, for mine to begin.”

I collect a spoonful of runny oatmeal and take it to Mom's lips. Some vague muscle memory makes her receive it, and I wait until that same sort of reflex makes her swallow. "Oh Momma, it would be best for everyone if you went into a full-time care facility. He acts like it's a kindness to keep you here, but the only person that's serving is him." I stir the oatmeal, feed her another spoonful, and sigh as I wipe the bit that dribbles from her mouth.

"He loves you so much, and I can understand why it might be hard for him to look at you, but that only leaves me to carry most of the burden for the decisions he's made. He doesn't want to be here, and I can hardly breathe out of line, let alone speak my mind. I love you, Mom, but I have to believe you would have wanted more for me. I feel like I'm trapped in one place, while time keeps moving on without me, and I'm terrified I'll wake up in ten years, or twenty, or fifty, still having been a side character in someone else's story instead of the main character in mine. How do I break free?"

I'm not expecting a response, but I get one. It doesn't come from my mom or from anywhere outside of myself, it comes from within. It's the one word that's been circling in my mind for years now.

Leave .

"Easier said than done," I mutter at the bowl of slop in my hand. "Who's going to make sure Dad doesn't flip out? What if he has another total breakdown?" The emotional rollercoaster was bad enough when this first happened, and things have finally settled into something manageable. Sort of. I let my head fall back with a growl. "The only one doing what they want here, is him. Did you always have to be the strong one before I unwillingly fell into the position?" I ask Mom. "I can't remember; I wasn't even twelve."

I search her sweet face, trying to recall a time when the sparkle in her eyes wasn't so glaringly absent. "It drives me crazy, Mom. Dad and I both had our hearts equally

broken that day, but I had no other option to handle the repercussions as best I could because he refused to. How is it okay that a child was made the crutch for his masculine fragility? I was made to become an adult overnight — in every regard except gaining any actual authority over my life.”

I snort out my frustration and scrape the surplus oatmeal off the bottom of the spoon before taking it to Mom’s mouth. “His absolute minimal input around here is driving me mad. I swear, he’s used my kindness against me to create a system where I’m too exhausted and scared to challenge him about it. He knows I don’t want to have to put his already busted heart back together again any more than I want to be the one to break it beyond repair. So, I’ll just sit here and do my daughterly duties, like the good little girl everyone thinks I am, and he’ll never have to face his problems or take accountability for them. Gah! Why the fuck does he have this much power?”

I slam the empty bowl down on the table and push back my chair with a screech, because I know the answer.

He has that power because I fucking give it to him.

And suddenly, I’m done.

I’m done giving everything I have, only to get nothing in return. Worse than nothing. I’m being left in deficit. Drained. Robbed .

I support other people all the time, but there’s nobody supporting me. The one person who claims to love me, intentionally denies my needs and reinforces a narrative of charitable expectations, to keep me trapped in a never-ending cycle of giving, and it’s chewing through years of the life I should be out enjoying.

Well, no more.

I'm breaking out, and I know exactly who I want to help me do it. Daryl- the-horndog-ass-fucking-Winters, you had better be ready to swing your big-dick energy my way when you come to the library today.

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DARYL

I rinse my hands under the faucet, inspect them, and then scrub at my nails again. My morning grooming routine has become more stringent by the day. I may actually be bordering on OCD with this shit, and it may going to get worse, because no matter how hard I try, this dirty old man may never feel clean enough to be in the presence of Cadence Malone — aka the untouchable Miss Malone, Beaumont City's poster child for virtue and grace.

Sweeter than fresh strawberries still warm from the sun, she caught my interest in a heartbeat, and I've been trying to curb my obsession ever since. Young and beautiful and far too sweet for a roughed-up, roguish son of a bitch like me, I knew she couldn't be more than a guilty pleasure, but she quickly became my only pleasure. My entire routine is now based around the times I'm able to see her, and I know that seems unhealthy, but every time I'm in her presence, I feel like my best self, and it's a potent drug. In those brief moments of bliss, I'm wrapped in her warm glow of acceptance, where I'm both free from my past and wide open to the infinite potential of my future. She's like crack mixed with warm cocoa. Medicine for my soul. And my heart never stops pounding when I see her.

I'm in love. It's the truth. And there's nothing I can do about it. I've tried to look the other way — to find love in more appropriate places, but out-shone by Cady's radiance, other women have become invisible to me now. I haven't even been with a woman since I properly fell in love with her.

Which is an issue in itself. It goes against everything people assume about me, and I'm paranoid people will find out I've gone cold turkey and wonder why. What could possibly be the reason Daryl Horndog Winters would swear off women? Diseases, homosexuality, or involvement in a secret affair are the only three I can think of, and all three would fuel rumors that leave me in a worse position than being the town's resident ass-fucker of women.

So what can I do? I keep appearances up and suspicions low. I travel out of town for short stints and brag a big game about what I did while I was gone — fuck , I've even lied to my friends about it, so they don't worry about me throwing my life away on a woman I can't be with. But the truth is, I'm smitten as fuck and fixated beyond return. I know I'm not good enough for Cady, but I'll never stop striving to be. Not a day goes by that I don't think about her and wonder how I can bring the same kind of joy to her life that she brings to mine.

I've drawn cautiously closer over time, hoping to learn all there is to know about the woman who lives rent-free in my head, where she sits on the throne I've built her, surrounded by offerings I'd set at her feet in real life if it only felt right to do it. But the more I learn, the more I love, and it's torturous to feel so secure in the knowledge that she's The One , when the barriers between us seem insurmountable, but I'm invested now. I'm a man on a mission to be who she needs, and now that I'm close enough to study the intricacies of the masterpiece, I can see through the layers of illusions that have been painted over the original, to portray an image of Cadence Malone that serves everyone else but her.

It's not all true what they say about her.

She's a good girl, for sure. And I'd bet my eye teeth that she's a virgin to boot. I'm not sure if she's ever even been kissed. She dresses like a nun, is spoken of in revered tones as if she's a saint, and if you ask anyone in town, they'll tell you their librarian is an angel — a literal godsend . A local icon and treasure, who is to be protected at

all costs. She loves her family, dedicates her time to helping others and giving back to her community, and doesn't have a selfish bone in her body. From the outside looking in, she may well be the purest twenty-six-year-old anyone has ever met.

But her cheeky smiles, twinkling eyes, and increasingly smutty book recommendations suggest there are deeper, darker, and far more saucy layers hidden beneath the innocent facade she's been coated in — layers that keep me up all night wondering if she'd like to experience some of the carnal acts from those same erotic stories.

When she first questioned my borrowing of romance novels, I told her — tongue in cheek — I enjoyed the happy endings. Her eyes had lit up. Me too, she'd said, and she soon began setting her favorites aside for me. While I don't think she'd meant it in the same way I had, I haven't been able to stop wondering about it since. I started visiting the library more often, and now I'm hooked on going every day I can, for a little banter, a few smiles, and another gem for my erotic To Be Read pile.

The first few love stories she recommended were fairly tame, but over time, she's really come out of her shell, and the heat levels in the romance books she's currently endorsing have climbed into the thermosphere. It's almost as if she's flirting with me through the pages, and I'll consume each of them in one sitting, while I stroke my cock, and wonder which bit of the action she enjoyed reading most. And then I spend the rest of the day berating myself for being a filthy fucking pervert who's obsessed with a woman half my age, and I do my best to focus on non-sexual thoughts about Cadence Malone.

Which is also an issue.

The more I observe of her life, the more enraged I become at the injustices she willingly endures.

It feels less like her cockblocking father and the other townspeople are preserving her virtue and more like they're holding her hostage. Every time she sneaks a foot outside the box she's been put in, she's met with resistance, judgment, and isolation. I remember the day when she swapped her long skirts for a pair of jeans that hugged her curves, there was no end to the questions she faced — even though the jeans were more appropriate attire for the situation — and she's never worn them since.

On the rare occasions I've seen her around town on her own, she's not praised for the excessive hours she's spent taking care of her mom, she's told how good her father is for allowing her some free time. Desperate for connection, her eyes always light up when anyone talk to her, but too often she's let down. Her eyes sparkle when I talk with her, but this town has her earmarked and destined for spinsterhood, because the minute I, or any other single man, goes near her, some Good Samaritan shows up to make sure nothing untoward is happening. In a public place, there are eyes on her constantly, so she's never left alone in the company of a man. In less populated areas, it's easier to talk to her alone, but an interruption is inevitable, and so predictable it can be timed. If there's nobody in the library when I arrive, I usually have no more than seven minutes before someone shows up.

It's fucking weird — and clearly a conspiracy. One she clearly doesn't enjoy being forced to live, if her regular jokes about packing her favorite books into a suitcase and escaping to some anonymous city or a cabin in the woods are anything to go by. People have been boxing her in and isolating her for so long, she's started to do it herself. She wants to be free, but with the world seemingly pitched against her, she can't quite reach the key to escape her captivity. She's tired. And I know why.

Her dad's an asshole.

He's got her trapped in a cycle of servitude and people pleasing, day in and day out, and it's taking a toll on her spirit. She'd have been a child when it started, so that cycle is ingrained too. He's raised her to be his doormat, and she's become like a

creature conditioned to obey its master — but I've seen her gaze wistfully beyond the bars of that prison to where freedom lies. She's thought about what it'd be like, but she's drained, alone, and afraid to leave the devil she knows.

I'm not sure anyone else even sees her struggling with the weight of her loneliness as she carries the lion's share of her family's obligatory load. If they do see, they're either pretending not to or they don't care. It could be that they're blind to the whole Malone Family charade. I'm certainly not. I've seen this kind of thing before. Hell, I've lived it. Despite every effort of my father, I survived to tell the tale. I can't unlearn all the valuable life lessons his abuse pounded into me, so I'm wise enough to know a narcissist when I meet one, and Vander James Malone is most definitely that brand of devil. Which is why I've made it my mission to keep an eye on Cadence and give her spirit a boost when I can see she needs it.

It's not like I can offer her assistance in any other way. I can't touch her, and I doubt she'd want me too. She's perfect and pristine and half my age...

I grip the edge of the countertop and hang my head. There are few things in this world more torturous than an unending desire for forbidden fruit. Itching powder on a body with no arms, perhaps? The image of a bear scratching himself on a tree comes to mind, and I sigh. At least an armless person could relieve themselves that way.

Where is my relief? Death? Ugh . Though, if I can outlast Vander, there'll be no real barrier to declare my love for her after that. We're practically the same age. How's his health? I've vowed to keep myself in good shape so I can be around longer for Cady. I'm definitely fitter than him.

I puff up my chest in the mirror, tweak my nipple piercing, and assess my abs. Not too shabby. I could wait him out.

The air rushes out of me, deflating my chest through another defeated sigh. Even

dead, Vander James Malone would leave a legacy of protection behind. I can already imagine what people would say if the guy died and I stepped in to care for Cady the way she deserves. He'd roll in his grave . His precious only daughter — the last in her family line — tainted. By a low-down, dirty, cradle-snatching ass-fucker. Poor Cady would be shamed and twice as resistant to any advance I could make. She's not the kind of girl who'd run her family name through the mud, least of all for someone like me.

She's a good girl, and she loves her father. Loves him. Why else would she suffer for him the way she does? She works tirelessly to please him, and for what? A frugal pat on the head here and there? Permission to leave the house, but only go to approved places, like her second job? It's not good enough. She deserves so much more than that.

I wish I could pull her close, hold her tight, and tell her that I see how hard she's trying. I want to steal her away from it all, and tell her that even though putting herself first for a change may seem scary, everything's going to be okay . But I can't. Not unless she sees the mess for herself and intentionally chooses a different path. Until then, all I can do is carefully support her however I can, while I subtly help her realize her worth. It's like walking a tightrope, or playing a high stakes chess game. If I make one wrong move, the game is over, and that's an ending I can't tolerate. As her self-appointed servant and protector, her triumphs are personal to me. She's an angel caught in a battle full of demons, and I need to see her win.

My heart races with the passion inside me, and my thoughts get loud.

What happens then? She'll love you back? Idiot!

Now I'm back to the start of the same argument I have with myself every time. I try to let go of the hopelessness of the situation. As much as I want to climb up on that beautiful woman and leave her dripping with my love, I'm destined to love her

unrequitedly from afar.

“Why do you have to be such a stupid, worthless asshole?” I ask my reflection angrily, until I see my father’s frown creasing my face. Intentionally rubbing the lines away, I rumble at him in frustration. “You’re dead to me. You don’t get to make me feel like shit anymore. Only I get to do that now, and I choose not to. I’m a good person, and I’m not hurting anyone by loving Cady from a distance.”

I meet my own gaze in the mirror and hold it steady. “Stop overthinking. The truth is simple, and nothing will change it. It doesn’t matter if you never get to be with her. You love her, and you’ll do whatever she needs you to do to make her life easier and happier, because it’s what she deserves. That’s the decision you’ve made. You don’t need reciprocation to make that commitment to the woman you love. Maybe in the next life, you’ll find each other in different circumstances, and then you can be together. She’s worth waiting for.”

I see the pain in my eyes before I turn away. I look like my friends all had when they’d been pining for the loves of their lives. And now they’re all living happily ever after with their wives and kids, and I’m... me. I’m different .

I’ve always been the last in our group to do everything, so I’m used to it, but it doesn’t get easier to be me. If life’s developmental milestones were properly mapped out beyond infancy, I’d have failed to complete any of them on time. I walked late and talked late; was late to every class at school. Once there, I met every learning task with a different perspective than was instructed, which caused further delays, until I could prove that my way worked fine too. I was last to swim. Last to grow pubes. Last to drive. Last to fuck. Last to find my way home .

I didn’t even know what home was until I met Cady. It doesn’t matter that we’ll never marry. It doesn’t matter that I’ll never see her belly swollen with my child or see our babies grow to sit around the family fire at Christmas. She’s already given me

more than I ever hoped to have — a ray of sunshine on every cloudy day. She's proof there's good in this world, and that's all I need to know in order to survive it.

CADENCE

The Beaumont City Library doesn't have the same kind of quiet as its busier cousins in more populated areas. Our library has the kind of quiet that comes with a lack of patrons. Unless the school kids have a project, the preschoolers come for story-time, or the elderly get lonely and need to see a human who'll talk with them a while, there may as well be crickets chirping.

Except for once every day, around lunchtime, when a certain tall, darkish, and gorgeous older man walks through the doors and offers me just a little glimpse of something different. Something that makes my heart beat faster. A thrilling gift of forbidden excitement edged with danger.

I wipe my palms down on the boring fabric of my conservative skirt. I wish my clothes could be sexier, but with all the resistance I met from Dad, I gave up fighting for that freedom years ago. My collar is high, my skirt is long, and I look every bit the part of the chaste woman he prefers I be. The world will surely end if I show a little leg or — heaven forbid — I let anyone glimpse just how ample my bosom truly is. The second my buds began to bloom, I've been made to feel as if my garden should remain the secret kind. Every authority figure I've ever had has pressed upon me that such intimate knowledge should be reserved only for my husband — the husband I will never have, because thanks to the invisible, burdensome, virginal good-girl tower walls my father has built around me to serve his own needs, nobody ever dares pursue me.

I'm so sick of it all. I'm tired of the thankless hours I spend caring for my absent mother, while my father over-commits himself elsewhere, to avoid his home. I'm tired of doing as he says, dressing as he says, and living as he says, just because it's easier than constantly fighting for my right to be free and then having to retract my words out of guilt when he breaks down in tears.

I'm sick of pretending I'm fine, and I'm done with the endless people-pleasing. As much as I love my family, I want more from life than to serve them. I have no desire to be held prisoner by guilt and emotions that aren't even mine to feel, and I'm ready to challenge this town's belief that I'm nothing more than my father's untouchable daughter. I'm my own person, with my own dreams, and I want to be touched, damn it!

I know exactly whose hands I want on me, too.

I glance at the big clock. It's nearly lunchtime, so Daryl will be finished his work for the day. How many dreams has he already made come true this morning for the kids in his scholarship programs? Passionate, nurturing, and charitable... could this retired cowboy be any hotter?

My heart beats a little faster, and I pull my hair over my shoulder before sitting up straighter. Perched on the edge of my seat, I rub some color into my cheeks and wait almost breathlessly for the big, green door of the library to creak open.

Right on time, Daryl pushes into my lair, announced by the squeaking hinges. He carries an easy smile and his latest read to return. The man enjoys e-books more than print, but he decided a while back that he wanted to read every physical book I have. He started with the wall shelves by the door, and now he's halfway across the room, which is where he pauses now to collect his next book. He's very open to consuming information on all kinds of topics, so it's no surprise that he knows so much about so many things. He's traveled, too, and I appreciate that immensely, because besides

these books, a conversation with Daryl is the closest I ever get to experiencing life beyond the county line.

“Good afternoon, Miss Malone.” He slides both books across the counter to me and withdraws his hands before I can complete my absolutely pathetic school-girl fantasy of our fingers brushing against each other. It actually happened once, and the thrill of it had me floating for an entire week.

I offer him a polite smile as I nod. “A pleasant afternoon to you too, Mr. Winters.” I flip through the pages of the book he’s returning. “Any good?”

He gives me a playful, irresistibly sexy smile. “A bit dry, actually.”

I chuckle softly and nod. “To be expected, for a book about a desert, I suppose.” I pick up his latest selection — a book about a different desert — and turn the cover to face him as I grin. “Do you think this one will be any moister?”

“Too soon to tell.” His gaze lingers on my mouth a moment before he clears his throat and looks away. “I’m trying really hard not to judge it by its cover. Or the description on the back. Or the fact that it was likely published before my grandma was born, because the tiny fishing village on the edge of that cover photo is now a very grand city filled with extremely wealthy oil tycoons. Luckily, I downloaded all of your latest romance recommendations, so I have excellent backup reading, should it fail to entertain me.”

My face starts to get hot, so I lower my head to study the book’s cover again. “Is it Dubai?”

“Mhm.”

I lift my gaze to meet his. Nobody else traveling our backwoods dirt roads would

have ventured as far as that vibrant and bustling Arabian metropolis, where they magically raise islands from the sea to build palatial gems of architecture, but I bet Daryl has. He's the kind of dream-bird who was raised rugged and rural but grew up and flew off to gain interests beyond farming life.

"Have you been?" I ask, my heart is already fluttering in my chest at the thought of being this close to someone who actually lives the kind of life I want for myself. I'm so lucky to know someone I can live vicariously through. Before he came to town to nurse his estranged aunt, I had nobody real to make my imagined futures seem possible, which made all those aspirations either wishful pipe dreams or dead on arrival.

He nods. "I tagged along with my buddy Jason when he went on business once — he's that investor friend I told you about a while back, when you asked what I did for a living?"

I nod, because of course I remember every detail of every conversation we've ever had. It's hard to forget the things you play on repeat in your head as a coping mechanism. They tend to become mantras and lore.

"And?" I ask, eager for more escapism fodder, so I can imagine myself living his adventures with him.

Daryl shrugs. "It was beautiful, busy, and about a hundred degrees of hot and sticky before breakfast each morning."

There's literally no innuendo in his tone, but if ever there was a day to grab the wheel of my life and steer it in the direction I want, it's today.

"Hot and sticky in the climatic or climactic sense?" I ask. Even if he doesn't recognize an attempt to encourage flirting, he may still share his experiences, which

will still be helpful to me. I'd love to know what kind of hot and sticky things Daryl has done. For research purposes. How am I meant to flesh out my daydreams without gaining some details? I press my lips together and raise my eyebrows to let him know I'm waiting for his response.

Daryl stares at me for one long, deep breath of his and about sixteen tiny gasps of mine.

He tilts his head and views me side-on. "I was referencing the weather when I said it," he says slowly. "And while there were opportunities to become hot and sticky via other means, it felt unwise to behave too liberally within the conservative environments I visited."

"Oh." I look at the book in my hands and gather myself into a state of confidence, so I can explore this territory further. I want Daryl to treat me like we're characters in one of my smutty novels, but if I can't even talk about sex with him, how in the world will I manage to do it? I brace myself and jump boldly into the deep end. "That does makes sense within a conservative culture. The kind of sexual activities you're famed to enjoy are probably illegal over there."

He exhales loudly and slowly, and I look up.

"I didn't really want to find out," he says quietly and averts his gaze. Color rises in his cheeks, and he rubs the back of his neck like it's aching. "Why would you...?" He turns back to me and searches my face. "You're not even blushing."

I frown. "Should I be?"

He presses the back of his fingers to his cheek and clears his throat. "I am."

"Why?" I fold my arms. "You enjoy the act, but prefer not to talk about the fucking

of women's asses?" I ask with a teasing smile. "Are you ashamed about being an ass-fucker?"

He winces slightly at the name he's made for himself around these parts and then takes a step back. With a shy scratch at his beard, he lowers his head to watch his feet. The toe of one of his big boots worries a loose thread in the worn carpet. "No," he mumbles.

"Then why are you staring at the floor instead of looking me in the eyes?"

He snaps his head up and meets my gaze. "Because you're a very respectable young woman, and this conversation is extremely inappropriate," he says, as if he's not enjoying it.

"Is it?" I slam my hands down on my desk. "Daryl Winters, our daily conversations are literally the only escape I have beyond these books. You, and those eight shelves of fiction over there, are what stop me contemplating the sweet relief of a quick death. Yes, I turned up the heat. Sorry if you weren't ready for it, but I'm a curious, twenty-six year old virgin, and I'm tired of you coming in here every day under the guise of needing to borrow another book to expand your mind .

"I see the way you look at me, and I know which part of you is expanding when you do it." I glance at his crotch, where the denim of his jeans is practically wearing thin from trying to contain his chronic interest. "You might try to keep your thoughts restrained around me, but your boners are legit too big to hide, Daryl.

"You obviously like the look of me — despite how much of myself I keep covered — and yet you turn up here every day only to take a dry as a desert book out and have a five-minute chat? Part of me understands that you're probably as deprived as I am of intelligent conversation that extends past the constant comparison of every year's crop yields versus that one bumper harvest back in '68 that nobody alive can even

really remember. Maybe you only come here because I'm one of the few people in town who doesn't treat you like a leper, but I can tell enjoy my company. I enjoy yours too, but whenever I try to show you that I'm interested in more than talking, you take a step back instead of forward, and I have to wait patiently for things to progress again. And frankly Daryl, I've grown weary of this game. You've been coming in here for months, but you never cross an indecent line, and it's frustrating to sit here hoping that you will, so I'm taking matters into my own hands."

He stares at me, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open, but speechless.

I shrug. "Forgive me for wanting to move our cute little chats into more adult territory. You're the smartest, most eligible bachelor in town, and I want you to consider me in an adult way. I know I have a specific reputation, and no matter how I try to change that, I can't, but you have to know that despite what everyone thinks, I have sexual potential, and I'm tired of not being considered as an option. It's incredibly difficult to gain a different reputation or any knowledge of that world when I've had no choice but to be excluded from it. Every man except you avoids me like the plague, so maybe you're immune to my father's intimidation tactics and are, therefore, my best bet — or my only possible ally — romantically speaking. Unless my father corrupted you too?" I ask, giving him a narrowed side-eye.

His jaw tenses, and he swallows hard. "Cady, I..." He closes his eyes for a breath and then looks to the heavens. "Cadence Malone, I can not be having this discussion with you, and I refuse to entertain the idea of us..." He growls and adjusts his stance to conceal his growing erection. Unsuccessfully. Now that he's side-on, it's even more apparent.

"You know how people talk about me," he says, shame-faced, with a touch of hurt in his voice. "You know that'll transfer to you the second someone catches wind that I—" He cuts himself off sharply and changes tack. "If I touch one hair on your head, I?—"

“I’m not asking you to touch my head,” I interrupt, before slumping against the back of my chair with a sigh. “I really thought you’d help me. Are you honestly going to play along with my father’s stupid rules? Are you going to be complicit in keeping me from experiencing my own sexuality?” I shake away the wince that tries to grip my face, then I take a breath and meet his gaze. His hungry, teetering on the verge of giving in to temptation , gaze...

I sit taller, lift my chest, and hope it’ll draw his attention. “Just be real with me, Daryl. I spend way too much time imagining all the ways our obvious chemistry might lead somewhere, and I don’t want to go another day without knowing if it will. So just tell me once and for all. Are you interested in having hot, secret sex with me, or are you going to stand there and deny us both of what we want because you’re scared to get caught tarnishing my reputation? Because at my current level of frustration with the status quo, I’d be open to a thorough tarnishing, Daryl.” I roll my chair backward, to make it easier for him to receive my provocative invitation, as I slowly lift my long skirt to my hips and spread my legs. “Wide open.”

4

DARYL

I came in to check she was doing okay and to sneak a glimpse or two — to fill my heart for another day — and instead she gives me an earful of temptation and an eyeful of her intentions.

The girl is pure heaven and mischief both, wrapped up in conservative clothing and bound by her father's possessive, manipulative wrath. Skirt up, she's half undone, and I want to unwrap the rest of her so badly, but I know I shouldn't. If anyone found out, she'd face humiliation any time she left her house, and she'd be isolated even more. She's crying out for freedom, and it kills me that my touching her would only cause her chains to tighten.

I hate to see her locked up out of reach on the shelf. She deserves better. Cadence Malone isn't the kind of person who should be kept hidden away and made to feel small. She should be held high and encouraged to shine. Her heart is pure love and everyone from babies to the old and infirm want to bask in her heliotropic energy — she's the sun we all want to orbit. To see her constantly kept dimmed and tucked away, unseen, is a crime, against her and humanity.

I find any excuse I can to be near her and spend a lot of my time contemplating the best way to help her escape her invisible binds. I can't stand seeing her made to live a cramped, miserable existence when I know she dreams of a better life. I've accepted that better life can't be with me, but I can't leave her be, either.

I can't stand idly by while her kind heart is being abused, and her potential is going to waste — sexual or otherwise.

I'm a fucking sucker for the underdog. The guys would say it's because I am one, but that makes it sound like I'm fighting for myself, when I know for a fact that I give way more fucks for others than I ever give about me. I have the criminal record to prove it. Not that anyone should have to spend time in jail for stealing a van-load of depressed rabbits from a cosmetics-testing laboratory for the purpose of treating their painful dermatitis. If the justice system doesn't see what's wrong with outright cruelty, then I'll happily sit in a fucking cell to show my lack of faith in their shitty rules and values. Authority should be earned, not dictated, and shoddy leadership doesn't inspire obedient followers.

Which is why it's so fucking hard to walk away from a woman I respect, when she's broken out of the box people have put her in, to behave in a way that's so deliciously forward. She could demand almost anything from me right now, and I'd do it —and that's fucking dangerous.

“Cady...”

What to say? What to do? She's asking for salvation, when I'll only bring destruction.

Unable to tear my gaze from her thick, creamy thighs, I feel heartbroken to know they've never seen the sun. It's a travesty. Even for a precariously fair redhead like her. She should be allowed to feel warmth on her skin. A warmth not of her own making. She deserves to know she's loved, by this world, and by someone in it.

And yet, if we were caught in the simple act of talking like this it could irreparably taint her name in a town she can't leave. My touch would ruin her. She'd be forced to live more deeply into the shadows than she already has to. Who am I to curse her like that?

She's so pure as she is. Bless her mom for raising a good girl before that mind-stealing horse-kick to the head left Cady's father in the driver's seat. While it's hard to fault a man who wants to protect his daughter, somewhere along the way, what started out as protection turned into a need for control that fully impinged on Cady's free-will. Now he uses her big heart against her like a weapon, and chained by love and guilt, she'd never abandon her family in a time of need. I get that's why she's asking for a secret life, so she can have a foot in both worlds without disappointing anyone, but she shouldn't have to live that way. She shouldn't have to feel like it's selfish or too much to want happiness for herself.

"Please," she says in a whisper that crushes my soul.

What kind of guardian angel would I be, if I left her miserable and alone when she's begging for my help?

She gazes up at me, her lips slightly parted, letting out shallow breaths. She spreads her gorgeous thighs a little wider. Enough so her skirt's fabric shifts, and the shadows beneath tease my imagination.

Do my eyes deceive me? Do those pale rose-colored panties actually have a nectar-induced streak of darkened pink down the centerline of the crotch, or is it only wishful thinking that she's soaking her pretty, innocent underwear for me? God, that roseate line is so perfectly pussy-shaped.

I swallow roughly, gulping down the galloping urges within me. What's the best action to take in this scenario? Do I save her from a renowned villain such as myself or break her out of the cage a goddess like her should never have been cornered into?

The right thing to do would be to yank that skirt back down to her toes and forbid her to ever tempt me again, but I can't deny my ravenous desire to push it higher still, to bury my face in her scent and lick that damp mark on her panties until the cotton

wears thin. I can almost taste her on my tongue, and it has my mouth watering.

Strength, Daryl. Stay strong. For her.

“Cady, I wish there was a man alive good enough to experience you in all your sweet glory, but I’m painfully aware that I’m not him. It’s actually causing me a disturbing amount of physical discomfort to keep from leaping over the desk and taking advantage of such a tempting offer.”

I swallow hard and adjust my aching cock, both loving and hating the way she’s staring at it. “I appreciate the offer. Believe me . But I come with a history that’ll taint your future, and I can’t do that to you. You deserve to live in peace and dignity.”

My sweet little librarian folds her arms, clearly unimpressed. “The fact that you can turn me down so articulately, is literally the reason I want you to bed me, Daryl. The other men in this town can barely string two words together if the conversation isn’t about breeding livestock or sowing seed for the next season.”

I try to keep calm, but inside, I’m a roaring bull raking at the earth. Is she using those words on purpose? Does she want me thinking about sowing my seed and breeding her? Because I really don’t need any fucking encouragement. Not a day goes by when I don’t fantasize about it. The amount of seed I’ve lost down the shower drain while thinking about her barefoot and pregnant could have had her impregnated a jumbo-jillion times over.

“I don’t care about your reputation,” she continues. “If anything, I’m probably way more curious than I should be about how you’d even make my ass take a dick the size of yours. I feel like it’ll be enough of a mission to stick it in the more conventional places, but that’s a challenge I’m willing and eager to conquer with you, so bring those boots — and the gorgeous man inside them — over here, and put that magnificent cock to use initiating me into the world of sex before I die of

deprivation.”

I shake my head, fighting for control while I find the right words. “I’m not a guy any girl should cut her teeth on, Cady,” I say carefully.

“Did you just call me any girl ?” Her eyebrows draw down in the center. She pulls her legs closed and lowers her skirt. “And here was me thinking you’d actually read all those erotic books I subtly recommended. If you had, you’d understand that I have expectations about my pleasure being my lover’s priority. I want to feel acknowledged and worshipped and cared for, like I’m the most special woman in the world. Not treated like any girl .”

I release my held breath in an audible rush. “I did read them,” I rumble at her. “I loved every sordid, orgasmic fucking story you casually suggested to me as if they were of equal or greater value than classic literature.” I drop my head into my hands and growl with frustration. “I didn’t mean it like that — like you’re not the most special fucking woman on the whole damned planet. I meant that I’m an acquired taste with a bad rep, and I’m not good enough to be your first. No fucker is.”

God , it kills me to think of some other guy making her first time anything but perfect. Men can be so fucking inconsiderate. The absolutely selfish shit running through my mind right now is proof of that, because how fucking perfect would she look, bent over that cute little desk of hers?

“So, I should stay a virgin forever, then?” She cinches her folded arms more tightly over her chest and glares at me. “I’m not allowed to do anything but look after my mom every day except for the three hours I get to escape here, to be the caretaker of this shitty old building full of dusty, outdated books that are wasted on ninety percent of this town’s population? I have to stay here, trapped into servitude for a woman who doesn’t know who I am, by a man who refuses to let me grow up or live a life he hasn’t molded or pre-approved. Is that it? I should be grateful to have this much

freedom? It's inconvenient and unladylike to complain about the absence of hope, fun, love, or a life worth living, right? Great. Thanks for clarifying. Sorry I mistook you for someone who'd give a shit and help me — or at least be horny and reckless enough to take advantage of free access to some low-hanging forbidden fruit. My bad. You can leave now. Judging by my current level of humiliation, you're clearly not as committed to preserving my dignity as you claim." She pulls herself back to sit at the desk properly and stacks the books next to her, audibly slamming one on top of the other.

My heart is dented by her pain and loneliness, but my ego is shattered that she'd believe me such a hound dog. Horny and reckless? "You thought I'd take advantage of you?" I growl. "Where the fuck did you get the idea I was that kind of predatory asshole?" I stare at her, and she stares right back, not budging an inch toward retracting her words.

I fucking love it when she's hard-assed and sassy. It ignites a spark within my core that's just begging to explode out of my cock. I grit my teeth to keep from smiling and square my shoulders to come across all staunch and intimidating when I drive a firm finger toward the floor, to make my point appear more solid. "I work my ass off to be a fucking gentleman, Cadence Malone," I argue. "Especially around you."

She gives a half shrug and looks out the window. "A true gentleman wouldn't have to work hard to behave, Daryl. It'd be innate."

My breath grunts out of me, and I deflate faster than a punctured tire on an overloaded truck. "Touché." She's so fucking smart, and she doesn't ever let me forget it. The age difference never seems to matter between us when we talk, and it's one of the many reasons I adore her.

She returns her attention to me and snorts softly. "If it makes you feel any better, I've never wanted you to be a gentleman. If anything, I hoped with all my might that you

weren't. I know an honorable man would refuse to do what I'm asking." She shrugs again and looks down at her hands resting stoically in her lap. "It's fine. Commendable, even. I know you're a good man, and I was wrong to put you in a position to go against your values. It's just hard to be me sometimes, you know?"

"I've imagined," I admit quietly.

"You... Well, that's just great." Her tone is exasperated, and her eyes are pinched. "I thought you liked me, but the truth is, you feel sorry for me. Is that why you come and see me every day? Out of fucking pity?"

I shake my head and try to regain my bearings. I don't think I've ever heard Cadence Malone swear like that before. It's both disorienting and exciting. She can be so repressed, and this whole conversation has thrown me into a spin. What's come over her today? Because I'm fucking loving it, but it feels wildly unwise to let myself enjoy her so much. "I don't pity you. I come... to check on you."

Cady narrows her gaze at me. "Check on me for what?"

The nerves in my belly begin to tangle, and I shrug. "To make sure you're still smiling. That your spirit hasn't been broken."

She sits quietly and watches me for what feels like far too long when her guarded expression is giving me no clues as to her thoughts.

After a time, she lifts her chin. "For what purpose would you need my spirit unbroken, if you have no intention of benefiting from it, Daryl Winters?"

I draw my brows down hard. "You think because I won't fuck you, that you mean nothing to me? I come every day to make sure you smile, but I'd be lying if I said I did it out of charity. Seeing your gorgeous fucking face light up is what gets me

through my day. You think I like living in this shitty town any more than you do?"

She scrunches her face into the cutest, pursed, lemon-sucking expression and pushes to her feet. She leans over her desk, grips the edge, and growls at me. And she's so passionate in her affront, her knuckles have bleached white with ferocity. "You're a successful, single, grown-ass man with every ability to leave, Daryl. If you hate Beaumont City so damn much, why the fuck do you live here?"

I grasp at the air in front of me. "Because you do."

She releases her death grip on the desk and straightens. All aggression leaves her face as she pales. She stands very still, devoid of expression, except for the tiny flicker of fire that remains in her eyes. "What did you say?" she whispers, before shaking her head. "No. I heard it. I'm just not sure I understood it. Tell me what it meant."

I close my eyes and release a quiet groan. It's time. I get the feeling this conversation may be the last we have if I leave her hanging now. Breathe . Relax. Be honest . Be yourself. Accept the result .

I open my eyes and zero-in on hers. "It means that I'm madly in love with a beautiful girl I can't ever have. But I'd rather come here and torture myself daily than never see her again."

"You... love me?" she asks, her voice pitched high in disbelief. " Madly? "

"And truly. And deeply." I dip my head lower and try not to feel like a shy, vulnerable kid. "It's hard not to, despite what your father may have you believing. He's scared to lose you, so he does all he can to keep your sparkle small and invisible and safely under control, but your light is brighter than anything he could hope to dim. Cady, I see you. Your heart is too big to miss, and that's probably why he works so hard to keep you protected. You're worth it."

“Since when?” The words seem to choke out of her. “How long have you known this... this information? Felt this... love?”

I fill my lungs, hold it a moment, and then release the breath slowly and surely. There’s no point holding back now. If she wants me to confess my feelings, so I may as well share them all. She chose this day to change the dynamic between us, and I’m going to trust her lead, because I should not be at the helm of this relationship. If I was, she’d be barefoot, pregnant, and screaming her pleasure for the whole town to hear — which would only result in me being dragged to the local jail cell under bogus charges her dad dreamed up. He’s clearly got the locals on his side, so I imagine my wrongful incarceration would likely precede an old-fashioned lynching by an army of torch-and-pitchfork-toting townsfolk, since that’d be the only way to keep me from ever seeing her again.

So. Cady’s in charge. She wants answers, and — gods help me — I’ll give this woman whatever she wants.

“I became fully aware of my feelings about two summers ago,” I admit, too scared to meet her eyes in case she thinks that’s a bad answer. “I saw you down at the pond hunting for tadpoles with the preschoolers. It was a hot day, so you’d unbuttoned your high-necked blouse a little. You were sharing your wisdom in a fun and cheeky, easy-to-learn way, and I have never wanted to know more about the life cycle of frogs than I did right then. Your cheeks were flushed, your smile was glowing, and even the kids couldn’t take their eyes off you. They were hooked on every word, and so was I. I wish I’d had someone like you around when I was little. I mean... that sounded stupid. It’s just... kids love it when an adult is willing to interact on their level, but you could tell they knew it was a magical event to have the town princess splashing around knee-deep in the water with them.”

I bravely lift my gaze to meet hers. “The size of your heart is obvious at any distance, Cady. You operate in this world from a place of pure love, and it’s an absolute

blessing to be anywhere near you. I remember sitting across the pond and thinking that you were everything I could ever want in a woman. What I felt was so much more than a physical attraction, and I'd never had that before. You... you shine like the sun, and it's a constant struggle to tear myself away before my dark clouds get set upon you. You're perfection on every level. In that moment, I knew you were so much more than sexy, but my god, did I love seeing your long skirt tucked up in your underwear so it wouldn't get wet, mud clinging to your calves..."

"Two years?" She flops back into her chair and emits a slow wheezing sound before she speaks. "Two whole years and you've done diddly-squat about it?" She's almost moaning now. "You're literally never going to act on it, are you? You're the only one who sees me as anything other than Daddy's little girl, but I'm still going to die as that shell of a woman they all believe I am."

Her voice has softened into the barest whisper, but after having seen her all feisty and self-assured, I'm desperate to hear her confidence again. She was a woman on a mission when I came in here.

For whatever reason, she chose today to express her sharp observations with her even sharper tongue. She well and truly called my bluff, because of course I don't come in here to read outdated books about shit that means nothing to me. She's known as Beaumont City's golden angel of chastity, but I know the real Cadence Malone is a woman of intoxicating sensuality — if she could only express it beyond a flash of her eyes or the pout of her lips or the way she chooses to recommend erotic e-books that speak to me about her deepest desires.

The way her eyes see right into my soul and her words slice through all the bullshit? I love it. Whenever I see her shrink into helpless victim mode, I want to do things to her that bring her back to the edge of aggression. If we were naked, I'd have her edged so beautifully, she'd be screaming at me, demanding the release she needs. Fenced in by the role she's been given, she never seems to argue or stand up for

herself or ask for anything selfish from anyone. I want her to speak up and demand what she wants?—

Like she has with me.

I groan inwardly. She's literally telling me what she wants. And I'm telling her she can't have it? Who am I to deny such bravery?

I take a step toward her, and her eyes light up.

“You’re not getting my dick,” I warn, before yanking her to her feet and pulling toward the bookshelves that’ll give us some cover if anyone comes in the door. But in my mind, I whisper, “ Yet .”

CADENCE

“Ever?” I ask, trying to get a better look at his face as he pulls me behind the nearest shelf of books. My heart is beating so fast and loud in my ears, I’m not sure what he means. “What do you mean you won’t give me your dick?” I sputter. “I want your cock, Daryl.”

He swears under his breath, spins back to face me, and pins me against the shelf so firmly it wobbles. Without even flinching, he steadies it with his hand and leans in so close, we’re sharing the same breath.

“Not today. Not like this.”

The statement is both hot and cold, but I only want hot. “Why n?—”

“We need time,” he says, cutting me off. “You’re new to this, and I don’t want to rush it. I need to earn your trust, and you need to think about your birth control options, because I’m not having anything between us when we come together. It’s going to be pure sensation and love, and I want to feel everything.” His eyes search mine, and he must see how much I want him, because he doubles down on the deprivation. “We’ve waited this long, Cady. You can wait a little longer.”

His body feels so big and warm and strong against mine, and it’s making it difficult to think about anything else. He has his hand on my hip, and he’s holding me close enough to feel the hard bulge of his cock pressing against my belly. To be captured

by him like this is making me lightheaded. And hungry for more with an urgency I don't want to contain. "But?—"

"Don't you dare beg me to rush this." Still holding the bookshelf, he slowly slides his other hand up my side.

His touch is gentle. A smooth, languid caress. Perfectly measured, it's delivered in a way that declares my body is precious. A heavenly tease I'm forced to experience through my clothing when I'd give anything to feel those fingers dragging along my skin.

The pad of his thumb brushes over my taut nipple, and he smiles at the soft gasp that escapes my lips. "I've been dreaming of this for a long time, Cady."

I nod. "Two years. I know."

He shakes his head. "Longer."

Surprised, I quirk my eyebrows. His smile widens.

"I said two summers ago was when I became fully aware I was in love with you," he clarifies. "But I have wanted to touch you and hear your pretty moans since the first week I arrived in town."

I squint at him. "Huh?"

"The only person ever identified as real and decent by Beaumont City's notoriously eccentric battle-ax, Patty Mad-dog MacArthur, was never going to escape my attention for long, Cady" he says, studying my face with intense interest as he talks about his great aunt, who passed a while back. "She told me you helped her get a box of candy from the upper shelf at the grocer's once, and that you absolutely knew she

was going to steal it when she stuffed it down the side of her wheelchair, but you didn't say anything. You just left money for it at the counter and went on your way."

My cheeks warm, and I shrug. "I figured she needed candy. She was so private and reclusive, that to see her in the store was a big deal, so it seemed really important for her to have it. She may have been the only person in town people knew nothing about, and that makes her a fucking hero in my book, so of course I had her back. And contrary to what everyone used to say, I think she was kind of sweet." I smile to myself, when I think about the renowned hoarder who'd bark at anyone who tried to enter her house. "She was sassy and unorthodox, and her town-given nickname was Maddog . She was definitely my favorite badass before you turned up. Not that I got to meet you properly for a long while."

Daryl's eyes shine at me as he smiles. "I was kept too busy sorting out the damned hoarder house after her doctor rang and told me she couldn't quite manage anymore ," he says, using air quotes. "I didn't know her too well before I came, but I was listed as her next of kin, and there was nobody else they could call. I agreed to come stay for a week and sort out what kind of care she needed."

"A week ?" I ask, almost scoffing. "You've been here four years. And Maddog MacArthur has been gone nearly as long."

His cheeks bloom with color, and he nods again. "It was pretty clear when I turned up to Aunt Patty's, that one of us was going to leave town soon, and it wasn't me," he says quietly. "I wanted to throw a lit match on her house and take her to live with me in the city, but she wasn't having any of it. Luckily for her, I'm a fucking pushover for chicks with sass regardless of how old they are. I didn't expect to be turning up to see her passing, but I was in the fortunate position of being able to stay and make sure she was comfortable for what turned out to be her final few days. And then I had to stay to spend the subsequent months following the very explicit instructions she left regarding her treasures. I was pissed her doctor hadn't contacted me sooner, though

— or made it more clear before I arrived to discover just how tragic the state of her health and her house were, when it should have been glaringly obvious to him. If the excessive spaghetti stains on every fucking one of her shirts didn't give it away..."

"Which explains your first Beaumont City red flag event with the police down at the clinic." I wrinkle my nose in a slow wince. "That's when I got my first warning from Dad to steer clear of the new, unsavory character in town."

Daryl presses his lips together and lifts his eyes to the top of my head. His fingers lightly stroke a wisp of my hair. He tucks it behind my ear, and I shiver with delight at the natural intimacy of his actions. It's as if I'm his to touch. As if I've always been his.

His lips curl a fraction at the corner on one side, and he shakes his head a little. "I barely raised my voice at Dr. Peebles, and nobody can prove I had anything to do with him leaving town," he says calmly. "I have no regrets about my actions. He needed to know he was a negligent piece of shit, and I had a problem with his behavior that he needed time away to learn to fix. Vulnerable people deserved better."

"Okay," I say in a whisper. His passion is a little overwhelming, and not in a bad way. I'm not even remotely concerned about what he may have done to slimy Dr. Peebles, who told me I was being dramatic when I went to him as an anxious and depressed teen. If anything, my panties are more soaked than they were before I heard Daryl's side of the story.

He grazes his thumb over my lower lip. "The new doctor is nicer, don't you think?"

"Uh-huh," I utter breathlessly. He's going to kiss me. I can feel it. My body is tingling all over in anticipation. Every romance novel or movie makes a big deal out of the first kiss, and I'm so damn ready for mine.

He leans in and gently presses the side of his nose against my cheek. The connection isn't the kiss I was expecting, but it's oddly sweet and comforting when our foreheads press together. The way he lingers and sort of intensifies the pressure gives me the impression he's working hard to restrain himself, which makes my heart beat even faster. I let my eyes flutter closed and tilt my face up, waiting for the kiss that doesn't come. He does the nose thing again, meeting mine in a sort of nuzzling slide — like we're horses and he's showing his horse-y affection or something. What the fuck is that? And why is it making me feel so fucking needy?

A deep and desperate sounding hum rumbles from his chest and he presses even closer. "Your skin is so fucking soft," he murmurs "What was I saying?" His quiet words play over my cheek in an exciting tickle, and I rock my body into his.

"I don't know," I pant, practically whining with need. "I'm too distracted by the lack of kissing."

His beardy scruff prickles my skin when his mouth cracks into a smile against my cheek and he chuckles softly. "Ah, yes. I remember now. You wanted to rush this, and I was explaining how long I've been wanting to take my time with you," he says, ducking his head to the side and nuzzling in against my neck. "God, you smell incredible."

I squirm and giggle at the hot tickling sensation as he burrows in, and I gasp when he nips at me down near the base of my high collar. An unexpected fuck sighs from my lips, and he responds with a low, appreciative grunt of approval.

He tugs at my collar with his teeth before letting it settle into position again, and then he leans back to take me in. "These clothes are a total mind-fuck, Cady. They cover so much of you, and yet they can't hide your gorgeous fucking shape. I'm forever imagining you naked, and you have no idea how many ways I've dreamed of shredding all this excess fabric into fucking rags."

Barely able to catch my breath, I stare at him, wanting nothing more than what he just said. “Okay.”

His eyebrows dip in the center, and he eases back even further. “I’m not going to do it.”

I frown too. “Why not?”

He raises one eyebrow. “What would you wear home?” he asks with a smirk as he cups my face in both hands. “Tattered ribbons? I don’t want everyone seeing your pretty skin.” His thumbs glide over my cheeks in apparent reverence, and he sucks his bottom lip before releasing it into a glistening pout. “And how would you hide all the marks I want to fucking leave on you? People will think you’ve been attacked by a wild animal.”

I shiver at the thought and gaze up at his bright and cheeky blue eyes. “People would probably believe I was ravaged by wolves before they imagined a nice girl like me would let you anywhere near me.”

“And that’s how we’ll need to keep it,” he says, adjusting his hands until he’s cradling the back of my skull. His fingers have pushed into my hair, and my whole scalp has come alive with sensation. “If this is going to happen, nobody can know about it, Cady. I know you’re not in a position to leave town right now, and I refuse to make your life harder by ruining your good name with the warped assumptions that would come from getting tangled up with me. Plausible deniability is your only protection. Tell me you can keep this secret — and keep it well.”

“Of course,” I say without hesitation.

Daryl tilts his head to the side as he studies me, and we both startle at the creak of the heavy library door being pushed open.

Before I can take my next breath, Daryl has ducked into the next row of shelves. He lies on the floor, grabs a book from the bottom shelf, flips it open, and miraculously looks so comfortable and consumed by the content, it's as if he's been reading there for hours. Smooth son of a bitch .

Less practiced at shifting from highly aroused to bored and subdued, but just as committed to the ruse, I do my best to follow his lead. I push the proud spine of a nearby novel back into line, as if I've just shelved it and then I return to my desk to greet the new reader.

I stop dead in my tracks the moment I see my father. "Dad?" I cover my mouth as I gasp, and then rush over to him. "What's wrong? Is Mom okay? You never come by the library."

"She's fine." He cranes his neck to look around in every direction. "It's you that I'm worried about. I was just on the phone with Dell over the road about getting his boy some tutoring support, and he happened to mention that man's truck has been parked out front of the library for an unusually long time today."

"What man?" Daryl asks, stepping from the far aisle with a small stack of books he's collected from the shelves there. He comes over and faces my father head-on. "The ass fucker?" he asks, cooler than a refrigerated cucumber. No emotion, no rudeness, but definitely no bullshit pussyfooting around trying to be polite. It's big-dick energy at its finest, when he owns his rep and puts people in their place by letting them know he stands several levels above where they try to keep him, which is below them. "I hear that guy also likes to read from time to time," he adds, veering off toward the issue desk.

Stunned, my dad takes a few seconds to recover, and I have to dip my head to hide my smile behind my hair as I go to meet Daryl at my desk. I clear my throat and reach for Daryl's books. "I don't really appreciate that sort of language in the library,

Mr. Winters,” I say in a firm, short tone.

He meets my gaze but keeps any warmth from his face. “My apologies, Miss Malone,” he says sincerely before he glares at my father, who is observing our interactions closely. “Didn’t mean to offend your innocent ears,” he continues. “I just hear that name so often, I sometimes forget the original.” He turns back to me, sets the Dubai book atop the pile of erotic novels he gathered from the shelf, and pats its cover twice. “These should see me through the next week or two, so until their return, I won’t bother you with my presence or the profanities that accompany me.”

Two weeks? Is he kidding? He’s going to turn me on and then leave me hanging that long?

I punch down hard on the final cover with the ancient date stamp I have to use because the library committee refuses to upgrade to a digital system. “It was your first offense, so I’ll let you off with a warning,” I say, unable to keep my souring mood from affecting my tone or my face. I shift my frown from Daryl to my father and beg him with my eyes not to be such a jerk. “I don’t need my best customer too scared to return.”

Dad rolls his eyes. “It’s a library, not a shop, Cadence.”

I see red. “And by using it regularly, Mr. Winters raises the average IQ around here — something I thought you, of all people, would be in favor of, Principal Malone,” I counter.

Dad’s face sets into a harsh scowl. “Don’t sass me, young lady. I’m not the town’s biggest sleaze-ball jackass.”

“You sure look a lot like him,” Daryl mutters and pulls his issued books toward himself. He gives me a nod of thanks and walks away without looking back.

“Daddy,” I growl, once the door creaks shut behind Daryl. “Did you leave school and come down here just to make that man feel unwelcome?”

My father looks me over and folds his arms over his chest. “I came to make sure you were safe.”

“Safe?” I look around the library. “From what? Poorly written prose? Paper cuts and carnivorous bookworms?”

Dad points toward the door. “From that lecherous sodomite and any scandal that may arise from you spending too much time with him.”

“Oh, please,” I scoff. “This isn’t the 1900s, and Daryl Winters is more interested in books than stealing my rock-solid virtue.”

“Your attitude is especially immature and unbridled today, Cadence,” he says in a warning tone. “I’m not the enemy.”

“Then why do I feel attacked? You’re treating my library like it’s a house of sin, because Daryl Winters took more time to scour the shelves for his reading material today. It’s madness, and I’m certainly not encouraging any sort of salacious rumors to develop from it, so I’d appreciate it if my own father wouldn’t insinuate such a thing. The man’s as old as you are, and if he ever asked to sodomize me — which he hasn’t, just to be crystal clear — do you really think I’m the kind of girl who’d be agreeable to doing that sort of nastiness, in the middle of the public library, during open hours?”

He searches my face and a curious, subtle smirk tugs at the side of his mouth. “I know your mother and I didn’t raise that kind of girl, Cadence. But not all men ask for permission.”

My jaw drops. “If you’re suggesting what I think you are, those are the kind of false

allegations that ruin lives. Daryl is not that kind of man.”

Dad gives me a poor, naive, little Cadence look. “That’s probably what every girl thinks before it happens, sweetheart. You wouldn’t believe how many girls have been in my office in tears over the years because of such things. That man has a reputation for a reason. He’s exactly the sort to overstep the line, and you’d do well to remember it. He’s got a criminal record, you know. Time in prison and everything.”

I gulp. I always dismissed that as rumor, but if Dad’s mentioning it, there’s proof it’s true. No doubt he’s heard it straight from Sheriff Lou on canasta night. “A record for what?” I ask, my voice not nearly as strong as it had been.

“Does it matter?” He targets me with an assessing eye, clearly observing my response to gauge my position in the whole Daryl Winters is the enemy argument .

I shake my head. “A conviction is a conviction. I’ll be more mindful, I guess.”

Dad’s smile is a satisfied one. “Exactly. You have a good afternoon, sweetheart. And, oh,” he says as if he’s just remembered something. “I promised the Thompson’s I’d help clear out their barn for the upcoming fundraiser dance. I won’t be home in time for dinner, but it won’t go to waste. Keep it aside, and I’ll have it when I get in. I should be home in time to put Mom to bed.” He gives me a smile and a wave, and then heads out the door, leaving me standing in a storm of emotions I don’t know what to do with.

I can’t sort my frustration from my rage. If anger is a spectrum, I’m all over it. Daryl left before I could have my first kiss, and now Dad’s got me wondering if I’m in regret or relief about that. Apparently, I will have to wait two whole weeks before I can interrogate Daryl about his past, and it seems only fair that I warn him of the potential threat my dad could pose to his future. And soon, I have to go home, to take care of my dependent mother — alone — while my father gallivants about the

community looking like a hero. And I'll be expected to be grateful when he turns up late for her bedtime, to carry her upstairs in his arms like he's the hero at the end of some romantic movie.

The rage hits me before I can clamp a lid on in. I let my head fall back, and I roar at the ceiling, as my eyes fill with hot tears, and then rage flows through my body, and I let it go.

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DARYL

It's not my goal to be charged with breaking and entering the library, but I can't help chuckling at how fitting it would look on my record, if I was caught sneaking in the backdoor. If the local paper doesn't have a field day with that journalistic gold, I'll lose my last drop of respect for this town.

The old handle finally gives, and I quietly slip inside — just in time to hear Cady cry out before there's a monumental crash.

I rush toward the library's main room, to make sure she's okay, and stop just shy of the doorway, when I see her sink to her knees, next to her upturned desk and all its contents. Her loose hair falls around her bowed head, and her shoulders begin to shake.

I approach slowly and quietly sit next to her. "Did you just She-Hulk your desk, Miss Malone?"

Her head whips up, and her eyes fly wide as she notices me for the first time since I came in.

"How unbecoming of a lady," I say with a grin.

Her lips twitch into an almost smile, but then her cheeks flush and she hurriedly wipes her face as she looks around. She clears her throat, pushes to her feet, avoids

looking at me, and smooths her clothes as if trying to deny there's anything wrong. "You shouldn't be here."

"Should. Shouldn't." I shrug and get to my feet too. "What does that matter, if you need me?"

She meets my steady gaze with a glare. "I don't need anyone."

I nod. "I know it. You're strong as fuck and could absolutely go through life completely alone. It's tough without help, but you're used to doing everything yourself. You're no stranger to struggle. Heck, you were raised by it — trained by it. You're a fucking warrior, who's more than capable of doing anything she sets her mind to. Anyone who cares to look can see that. No matter what you've come up against, you've found a way to survive it, and you've won every battle all by yourself." I right her desk, set it back where it belongs, and look her straight in the eyes. "But do you want to keep fighting alone? Or do you want to know there's someone standing behind you, who's ready to step in front any time you need to rest?"

She blinks and a tear cascades down her cheek. She wipes it away with a harsh sweep of her hand, as if she's disgusted by its existence. It's evidence of the emotion she's trying to suppress.

"It's okay to cry, Cady," I say quietly as I crouch to collect some of the books that have fallen to the floor. "It's okay to feel angry or sad or stuck. You don't have to pretend everything is fine when it's not. I know you're tired. I know it all feels too hard. And I know you don't need anyone." I set a pile of books onto the desk and straighten it while I look her over. "If anything, you probably think everything would be a million times easier if you went to live in a cabin in the woods, so everyone would just leave you the fuck alone, and you wouldn't be wrong."

She keeps her expression blank, like a practiced stoic, but her eyebrows give the slightest hitch, and her red-rimmed eyes bore into my soul, indignant. My words have struck something she's been trying to smother and hide, and she's undoubtedly wondering how I could know those secret thoughts she tries so hard to keep buried. If they came to the surface, life as she knows it would start to change, and change is scary — especially when you've been made to feel like choosing yourself would mean you're a bad person.

“I mean, you'd be lonely out there in the woods, but at least you'd be rid of all the leeches sucking on your energy, right?” I give her a sad, knowing smile, put the last of her papers back on the desk, and set her stamp on top. “You want me to leave?”

Saying nothing, she wipes her cheek, and then her nose, and shakes her head.

“You want a hug?”

She shakes her head again.

I nod and rock back and forth on my heels a few times. “You want me to help you lock up?” I ask, checking the time on the big clock. “I made sure not to damage the latch on the rear door. If I don't break anything on my way in, they can only charge me with entering, right?” I give her a cheeky grin.

She glances toward the back room and when she returns her gaze to me, she tugs her eyebrows downward. “You shouldn't be here,” she says again.

I nod slowly. “I am, though.”

She stares at me a moment before her eyelids flutter, and she seems to be grounded back into her body. The set of her eyes switches up like she's focusing her thoughts, and she starts moving. She strides over to the big entrance door and locks it. She

peeks out the side window, squinting as she peers between the leafy branches of the overgrown shrubs out front. “Where’s your truck?”

“I parked it behind the gym and ran back under cover of the hedge lines.” I hold up my forearms to show her the scratches. “I didn’t want to leave things where we did, but your dad clearly has spies everywhere.”

She walks closer, her eyes assessing the damage from the brambles and briars. My arms are quickly dismissed when she lifts her gaze to my face. She winces, and I reach up to feel what she’s looking at. “Am I bleeding?” I ask as I discover a sore area near my hairline. I check my fingers and see only a smudge of blood. “It’s just a little scratch.”

She looks me in the eyes and then glances at the side of my head. “Your little scratch has a twig sticking out of it,” she says in a flat tone. “Should I pull it out? Or do you want to leave it in and see if it grows?”

I can’t help my smile. “I love your fucking mouth, Cadence Malone. Screw the way your dad tries to silence it, you can sass me any time you want.”

She snorts and pulls her chair over. “You want it out or not?” She points at it, commanding me to sit.

I do as I’m told without delay. “Do I want you to touch me? Yes .”

“Even if it hurts?” she says with a smirk. She leans in close to inspect my damage, and I breathe in the heady scent of her shampoo and the faintest hint of soap on her skin. The nearness and warmth of her is making my own temperature rise.

“Worth it,” I say with a grin.

She tugs her mouth to one side, her expression serious. “We’ll see.” She pokes at my head.

“Ow.”

She meets my eyes. “There’s a build-up behind the stick. It’s acting like a plug, and when I pull it out, it’s going to bleed. I need paper towels.” She starts to walk away but then turns to face me. “We should do it in the bathroom. This carpet has enough stains.”

I get to my feet and follow her to the library’s very tired looking but extremely clean, fresh smelling bathroom. It’s a tiny little country library, so it’s not full of stalls and sinks. It’s more like a powder room in somebody’s house. Small, yet spacious feeling, there’s a toilet, a sink, a paper towel dispenser, and a lot of ugly tiles.

Cady points at the closed toilet, and I sit while she’s extracting towels. She wets a few and sets them aside, and I wait excitedly for whatever surgery she wants to perform. Will she sit on my lap while she does it? If she straddled me, I could pull her closer. She’d feel my cock, swollen beneath her, and I’d feel the heat of her pussy calling me homeward.

She clears her throat, and I blink her back into focus. “Hmm?”

My auburn-haired princess glances pointedly at my crotch and then raises her eyebrows.

Heat fills my cheeks. I’m not usually one to be ashamed of my body and its natural desires, but she makes me so fucking shy sometimes. It’s probably because I’m unworthy of being in her presence. I know it, but I just can’t seem to keep myself away. “Do you want me to apologize?” I ask.

She considers that a moment. “Are you sorry for it?”

“Only if it offends you.”

She looks at the bulge in my jeans again and sighs — and not in a good way. “I don’t know how it makes me feel.”

I frown. “You did earlier.” I search her face. Something has definitely changed. “I think this is where we talk about what happened after I left. What made you flip your desk?” I ask. “What did he do?”

Cady looks to the ceiling and releases another long sigh. “What does he always only ever do?” she mutters, before meeting my gaze and firming her jaw. “Why were you in prison?”

Oh . He’s been filling her mind with horror stories, has he?

I snort softly and look up at her from under my lashes. “He went with scare tactics, huh?”

“He did. Right after the threats of shame, the reminder of his authority, and the usual guilt trip about what my mother would want. Answer the question.”

I study her assertive posture and moody, expectant eyebrows. If she feels threatened by me in anyway, she’s not showing it, so her father can’t have been too successful at branding me as dangerous.

“Which time?” I ask.

She flinches, and the first real indication of fear flashes in her eyes. “You’ve been to jail more than once?”

I remain calm and still and as unthreatening as I can. “That can happen when you continually stand up for the things you believe in.”

“You don’t believe in laws?” she asks, hearing me out, but challenging my truth.

“Not the ones that are wrong,” I say without pause.

She watches me a while and then grabs her wad of paper towels and approaches. “Which laws are the wrong ones?” She presses her makeshift sponge to the side of my forehead and pulls at the splinter lodged there.

“The ones that prevent justice for children or animals or anyone else who can’t stand up for themselves.”

She throws a small, bloody stick in the sink and pushes at my head with the paper towels while she stares down at me. Eventually, she nods. “So which laws did you break, exactly?”

I wrinkle my nose. “You want a list of all of them? Or just the ones they could pin on me?”

Her unimpressed stare makes me gulp.

“The rabbits I stole from the research lab were too unwell to travel, and when they couldn’t prove I was the one who took them, their egos got all butt-hurt, so they pinged me for having too many critters in an urban environment and fought for a harsh sentence. The other time, I was coaching football, and a kid kept showing up with the wrong kind of bruises. I beat up his dad a bit too publicly. That sentence was lighter than it could have been, because other people had suspected it was happening and were secretly glad the issue got resolved. I also did some shit to hold some of those people accountable for their silence, but nobody pressed charges for any of that.

They knew they deserved what they got.”

Cady still has the paper towels bunched against my head, and it makes it hard to see her with both eyes. It’s really hard to read her face, and I don’t know if it’s because I have to do it with one eye, or if she’s just... unreadable. She looks like she’s thinking deep thoughts, so maybe that’s why I can’t tell what they are.

The vibe has definitely shifted between us. The suspicion and mistrust have eased, but there’s a sort of edginess to the tension still lingering between us. It wasn’t there a moment ago, and I don’t know what it means. Does she need more information?

“I’m not sure if you want to know the stuff that isn’t already on record,” I say carefully. “It might make you complicit.”

Her lips give a tiny twitch upward but then flip the other way. “You haven’t ever forced yourself on a woman?”

I lean back, horrified. “What?” I shake my head. “Cady, I would never. No.”

She presses her lips together as she nods and then comes at me again with the paper towels. “I didn’t think so.”

“Good.” I breathe a sigh of relief, and then still. I reach up and move her towel-holding hand out of my face. “He said that about me?”

“He implied it.” Her attention is trained on the twig-extraction site so acutely, I’m sure she’s avoiding my eyes on purpose. “And I think he’d state it as fact to anyone who’d listen if he ever found out you were fucking his daughter, so it’s probably for the best if you don’t start.” She quickly turns away, but not fast enough for me to miss the disappointment in her face.

I try to chase her with my eyes, but she keeps her head low, takes a step back, and puts the used paper towels in the trash.

“Cady...”

She shakes her head. “I’m not risking that.”

I ease back against the cistern. If there’s one thing I know about Cadence Malone, it’s that she’d never willingly hurt a soul if she could prevent it — even if it meant she had to suffer. Her heart is pure, and her convictions are strong. She means what she says, and she’d never put her needs above those of others.

“Is that your firm and final decision?” I ask. “Because as extreme as it may sound, I’m pretty sure I’d volunteer for the electric chair if it meant I could have you come on my cock even once before I go.”

Her eyebrows plunge, and she parts her lips like she’s about to say something, but I raise my palms to show her I don’t need to hear it. “If you’d rather we continue with our current diet of casual chitchat and celibacy, that’s fine too,” I say firmly. “I just need you to know that I’ll do whatever you want, either way. Before today, I was sure I’d never be invited into your life and was content to linger on the fringes — was grateful to be that close. Today, you changed shit up and said you’re feeling a certain way about me, but if you want to retract that information, then I’ll go back to assuming I have no chance with you. Not happily, but respectfully and obediently. Your command is law I won’t ever break.”

She whimpers softly and turns her back to me. “Why do you have to be such a sweet, articulate asshole?”

“Because you need me to be,” I say with sincerity. “I do it for you — and only you,” I clarify. “I’m not sweet for everyone. Only for the people I love. Mostly I’m just the

articulate asshole part.”

Cady snorts softly and faces me again. She wipes a fresh tear from her cheek. “I don’t want to ruin your life.”

“Well, snap , Beautiful. I don’t want to ruin yours either.”

She purses her lips and stomps her sensibly shoed feet. “I want to... do stuff with you.”

I try not to enjoy her so fucking much, but it’s impossible. “I also want us to do that stuff,” I say with a shy smile.

“How?” she asks, her voice high and squeaky. “How do we do that?”

I reach for her hand and pull her closer, until she’s standing in front of me, and I have to tilt my head right back to look up at her. “I imagine, it would be pretty similar to how we’d planned to do it before,” I say, as I slowly drag the fabric of her skirt upward and slip my other hand underneath to stroke her bare leg. “Secretly.”

Her chest rises and falls a bit faster, as her breath quickens, but she doesn’t pull away. “You think we could?” she asks, breathlessly.

“How would protecting my reputation be any different from protecting yours?” I ask, trailing my fingertips up and down the soft skin on the back of her thigh. “Hidden is hidden.” I pull her skirt higher and duck beneath it to press my face to her mound. Her panties are damp with her scent, and I inhale deeply with a moan of desire. “ God , I want to taste you so fucking badly, Cadence Malone.”

She steps her feet a little wider and makes a subtle shift of her hips, to tilt herself toward me. If that ain’t the sweetest invitation I’ve ever had, I don’t know what is. I

swear under my breath, rip her panties downward, and tongue her juicy slit like a man possessed.

Cady gasps and loses her balance, but I grip her tight and keep her steady while I make her gasp again. And again.

“Daryl.”

My name, rasping from her throat like that... The way she'll have felt the shape of it in her mouth... The husky, silken sound of her voice as it dripped from her lips...

I rumble into her sweet flesh with great approval, and I savor the feel of her sweet, virgin clit swelling from the stimulation as I suckle it. Her knees grow wobbly and start to give way, and the perfect weight of her fills my hands, as she has to rely on my strength to keep her standing. It's an absolute honor to be entrusted with that task, and I let her know it by increasing my efforts to please her.

She begins to tremble and whimper, and I urge her onward, rewarding her moans with more attention. She grips at my hair through her skirt, and finding purchase, she then angles herself until she's so beautifully open I can thrust my tongue inside her and drink straight from the source.

She's so fucking wet. Her arousal has soaked my beard and more. It dribbles down my chin, and neck, and I want to rub it into my skin, so I'll smell of her until I next shower.

A gorgeous pre-orgasmic quiver twitches at me, and I nuzzle at her clit while I fuck her with my tongue. Instinct kicks in, and she starts to buck at me. I grip her harder, to control her strength and keep her from breaking my nose, but her squirming hips, and the panted squawks of her pleasure unfolding, make me feel like a fucking hero. I'm going to be the first man to make her come, and I'm going to make damn sure

she knows what a privilege that is. I'll make her understand her worth if it's the last thing I do.

"Fuck. Daryl. Fuck ..."

Her movement get jerky as she crests, and I draw back just a little, teasing her right to the edge, and then I push her beyond it with a force she won't soon forget.

She falls with a climax so powerful, it's a strain to keep up. She gushes into my moaning mouth, and I slurp at her between thrusts of my tongue. Her tight little cunt clamps and releases with a fierce grip, pulsing more juices at me with each powerful squeeze.

God , that's going to feel so fucking good on my cock. Just the thought is enough to make a grown man cry from joy and cream in his fucking jeans. Fuck . I clench my lower abs hard, forcing myself to contain the release. I should have rubbed one out before I came back to see her. I've been celibate too long, and it's got me backed up so badly the floodgates are threatening to open without warning.

I grunt and grit my teeth, cling to her and hold back with all I'm worth, desperate for this moment to be all about her — which is when something amazing happens. The sensation flutters to a peak within me and then explodes in ripples through me on the inside . My whole body jerks with the pleasure of it, and I moan into Cady's sweet pussy with pure gratitude as I'm flooded with orgasmic bliss and enough endorphins to make my brain tingle.

What the fuck is this magic?

Cady's rapid, twitching spasms slow to more sporadic quivers, and as the strength of them fades, she starts to wilt. I throw her skirt off me, reel her in, and cradle her close while he both catch our breaths.

Neither of us tries to speak.

There's nothing we could say that isn't already known between us in this moment.

Cadence Malone is the love of my life, and nothing — nothing — will stop that from being true.

CADENCE

O h. My. God.

The words have been on repeat inside my head since he dove under my skirt and tongue-fucked every other thought out of my head. I would never have guessed my body could experience such an intensity of sensations. I'm still humming with the energy of it all.

I had a feeling it would be awesome, but I came so hard I may actually have blacked out. By the time I came to my senses, I was in his arms, being settled and soothed into a sort of wakeful coma; so perfectly at peace. He shattered me into a million sparkles of brilliant delight, and he's been calmly putting me back together ever since.

And not one part of what we did felt wrong.

We threw caution to the wind and did what everyone else in town would consider unthinkable, and it was the most natural, phenomenal thing in the world. If some part of me had doubts before, they no longer exist. I'm all-in.

I have felt stuck in an inescapable rut, but Daryl Winters just opened a door and showed me a whole new world. A beautiful and promising new view. He's shown me what freedom looks like, and I am one-hundred percent going to grasp it. I am not folding myself back into the box everyone would have me live in. Our coming

together has changed life as I know it. As we know it. He's feeling it too.

As overwhelmed into a stunned freeze-mode as I am, he's the opposite. He's in constant action, and his every move is made with an aura of duty and protection as he makes sure I'm doing okay and looking okay. He carries me out of the bathroom, settles me into my desk chair, and makes sure I'm steady enough to keep my balance before he stands and looks around. My purse catches his eye, and he brings it over before he starts to rearrange my clothes, so they sit as they're meant to.

He seems to understand I'm not capable of getting my shit together just yet and has taken the lead in my much-needed, post-climactic spruce up, because I definitely can't be seen in this state in if we're going to keep our indecent activities a secret. I looked in the mirror as I was carried out of the bathroom. I saw the look on my face. Messed hair, rosy cheeks, and rumpled clothes aside, my expression was a combination of shock and bewildered satisfaction. If my current look doesn't scream the virgin just got some action, I don't know what else would.

Which is probably why Daryl has taken on a very serious, vigilant, and responsible duty-of-care-type energy. I've never known a man to display that kind of behavior, but it's hot as fuck. It's giving doting boss-daddy vibes, and I am here for it.

He frowns with concentration as he studies my blouse. Despite having just re-buttoned and tucked it in for me, he tugs it free of my skirt, yanks it upward, pulls down the thin lace of my bra, and latches on to my hard nipple with a rumbling growl. His suction is fierce, and I gasp before a low, needy moan is pulled from my throat. I rock my body closer, instantly desperate for the relieving friction he knows how to give. "Daryl."

He moans into my breast and withdraws slowly, letting my nipple drag through his teeth with the most exciting, pain-edged pleasure. He drags his hand down his face and groans. "That wasn't helpful," he says, shaking his head like he's trying to clear

it. He re-fastens the three buttons that came open in the flurry of tit illation, and he does his best not to stare at my nipples, which definitely have no hope of hiding away when they're still tingling with desire. "It's really fucking hard to get you ready for the outside world when your gorgeous tits are demanding attention, Beautiful."

"Sorry," I whisper.

He meets my gaze and shakes his head. "Don't you dare fucking apologize for being gorgeous and hot for me."

Heat flares in my cheeks, and I avoid his penetrating stare by ducking my head.

Daryl crooks his finger under my chin and lifts. He searches my face, grunts softly, and kisses each of my cheeks. "This is going to be a real fucking challenge, isn't it?"

I give him a shy nod, and he grunts again — this time, like he's in pain. "You're too fucking sexy for me to play it cool around you, but I'm determined not to let it show when it matters. I won't let you down, and I'm going to do my best not to think so many thirsty thoughts — especially while I get you ready for the public. I need to fix your clothes and hair. Probably reapply your lip balm."

"I can do it myself, now I've had a minute." I rise to my feet and force my wobbly legs to firm up, but Daryl scoops me up and sets me back down in my chair.

"I want to do it," he says, crouching in front of me. "Please."

His face is so serious. Intent.

Unsure of his reasons for wanting to do such basic things for me when I'm capable of doing them myself, I'm unsure of how to respond, but more curious than disconcerted, I give him a small nod.

He bows his head in thanks and tucks my blouse back into my skirt. He then smooths the fabric and straightens my collar — efficient and methodical as he reverses every visible sign of my undoing that he did. We're both so very aware that I need to walk out the door presentable, as if nothing life-changing or scandalous has happened between us.

I sit like a queen being dressed and primped by an incredibly handsome and attentive manservant. I've never had anyone pay such close attention to me. It's half-unsettling, and half-intoxicating, and I'm fascinated by Daryl's ability to hyper-focus on prioritizing my needs, when he looks just as undone.

I can smell myself on him every time he gets close. When I close my eyes, I can instantly recall the feel of his beard scuffing my thighs. A little rough, a little ticklish, and absolutely soaking wet. He needs to wash up and tidy his hair. It's a mess from his enthusiastic foray under my skirt, and I'd love to run my fingers through it. There's a sense of pride and propriety rising within me, for having been the one to have ruffled that thick mane. Maybe I'll get to zhuzh him a little too, before we have to part ways and pretend nothing happened. I both know this little fantasy bubble we're in has to pop soon, but I don't think either of us want it to.

He digs around in my purse and pulls out my lip balm, as if it's the most natural thing in the world for him to be poking around in my personal spaces. Should it feel more intrusive than it does? Because I'm unbothered. In fact, I wouldn't mind him poking around any of my personal spaces. I'd actively encourage it.

His intentions toward me are so caring I can almost feel him holding me in a calm and steady domain of safety — one he's created specifically to provide stability just for me. It's flattering and comforting and so incredibly supportive, I want to stay with him and feel this good all day. I can honestly say that I trust this man without a doubt. Does he trust me?

I raise my hand to touch his short wavy hair, which starts out dark at the roots and grows lighter toward the tips, but I get distracted by the way he starts dabbing lip balm over my pout. I can't help but pant softly at his fingertips while he kneels before me, transfixed on the task.

Mid-sweep, he pauses. My lips are slightly parted, and he's stalled in the center. His finger feels on the verge of entering the portal into my mouth, and my thoughts get so filthy, I flush with heat and curl my lips into a nervous smile. He lifts his gaze to lock with mine, and a charged heat passes between us.

He leans in and gives me a sweet, innocent kiss before he rests back on his heels again. He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth, and his eyes sparkle before his eyelashes flutter sweetly. Is he tasting the subtle apricot shine he's collected from me? Nothing is said, but I'm convinced he's aroused by the flavor. His pupils are so dilated, it makes his eyes look dark and hungry, and I shiver with the thought of being devoured by him again.

A low rumble warns me to behave, and he shakes his head. "That's the opposite of what we're trying to achieve here, Sugar Britches."

He drops my lip balm back into my purse and pulls out my hairbrush. I reach for it, but he meets my out-stretched hand with his much larger one. He carefully curls my fingers into a loose fist, which he presses to my thigh. "Please let me."

It's sort of a question, and he lingers waiting for me to grant permission, but we both know what he wants the answer to be. Even so, he makes no move to push me in any direction. He simply waits patiently for me to decide, making it clear that it's up to me if I want to receive his offer to care for me or turn him down in favor of my independence.

What's the right choice? My insides are a surprising mess of nerves and confusion.

Nobody ever asks me what I want or how I want it done, and they sure as hell don't offer or beg to help me with stuff. I'm the one who brushes the other person's hair. I'm the one who does the caring, the acts of service. I have to fight for every shred of love I get, and most of the time, it's not worth the argument. I've learned to preserve my energy by just doing everything myself, and Daryl's behavior is so foreign, I almost don't know if I can trust it. My eyes start to prickle with heat.

Daryl makes a soft noise in the back of his throat, and his eyes fill with compassion as he watches the first of my tears fall. "It's okay, Beautiful," he whispers with a nod. "I know it feels hard. It's not meant to, but we can fix that, okay? Together. Because you deserve for it to feel easy. I know you're strong, and you can do everything yourself, but I want to lighten your load. You deserve to feel the same kind of love you give to the world."

He rises from his crouch, bends forward, to kiss my forehead, and then begins to brush my hair. Slowly. He gives me time to adjust to the beautiful feeling, and he's so gentle, I feel like some precious, delicate thing he dares not break. Every stroke of my brush is followed by a smoothing pat of his hand, and I haven't felt so treasured in... maybe ever. It's the way I used to feel when Mom brushed my hair, but I'm not sure even she made me feel this cherished.

The rhythmical sound, the sensual dragging of the bristles, and the absolute love radiating from Daryl, lull me into a calm, almost hypnotic state, and still, I can't stop crying. It's not because I hate any part of it. I simply don't want it to end. It's like his touch is stirring up years of emotion I didn't even know I had stored away, and the only way I can release it all is through my eyes.

I sniff and glance at the big clock on the wall. Normally, I'd be getting ready to lock up and head back home about now, to relieve Michelle and resume my position as Mom's unofficial primary carer. The official title somehow goes to Dad, though how anyone could believe that truth when they know he spends so much time doing favors

for everyone else, I'll never know.

Every time I think about the need to go home, I want to shove the thought right out again. I want to call Michelle and tell her I'll be late, though I'm wishing I could say I'm never coming home again. I want to stay in the library with Daryl and pretend the life outside doesn't exist.

But I can't do any of that without arousing suspicion, and now that I know how good it feels to be loved by Daryl, there's no way I'm going to risk losing him. I wipe my eyes and sniff back any more tears threatening to fall. I need dry eyes and a rock-solid facade to show the world if I'm going to have my cake and eat it too.

Daryl notices the change in my posture and comes to stand in front of me. He gives me a nod, sets my brush back into my purse, and offers me his hand.

I take it, and he pulls me to my feet. Both of his big hands cup my face, and he bows his forehead to mine. "You are so fucking strong, and I love your sweet, sassy guts."

I smile and tilt my chin enough to give him a quick, shy kiss. He gives a low moan and seals his mouth over mine in a kiss unlike any I could imagine. There is no sweetness to it, just raw desire — a glimpse into another, more carnal layer of things he feels for me. Things I'm immediately drawn to explore.

I respond as such, and he intensifies the kiss before pulling back with a warning growl. Not now, he seems to say without words, while I'm still trying to recover. The deep stroking of his tongue has left me breathless and dizzy and in awe of both his abilities and his enviable control.

He searches my face, mutters a few curse words, and pulls me back toward the bathroom, where he sits me on the closed toilet and makes me hold cold, damp paper towels over my eyes and mouth, to make the swelling go down.

“All that kissing and crying has you looking like I fucked your mouth and made it hurt,” he grumbles, before splashing water at the sink.

I think about that while I listen to him scrub at his beard, and then I have to see what that mouth-fucked looking face is like in the mirror.

The puffy eyes aren’t ideal, but I like the lips. Rouged and plumped, they’re kind of sexy.

Daryl stands behind me, watching me in the mirror as I angle my face differently while I purse my lips, to plump them more. I meet his eyes and blush at the look on his face. He swallows visibly and clears his throat. “You’re a very beautiful woman, Cadence Malone. It’s an honor to love you.”

My face flushes even more, and I quickly busy myself by holding the cool towels before my eyes. I know I’m not ugly, but I haven’t really had any practice at taking compliments. It always takes an extra effort to believe anyone means them, but Daryl’s so sincere when he speaks, it feels wrong to presume he’s lying. I don’t know about the honor thing, but I like knowing that he thinks I’m beautiful, so I let myself feel a respectable amount of delighted. “I think you’re beautiful too,” I admit quietly as I try to keep from grinning.

He ducks his head and shrugs, but I still see the cute smile he’s trying to hide, and it only makes him even more appealing. He’s obviously stoked that I like the look of him. He clears his throat and puffs his chest a bit, before he runs his hands through his hair and check himself in the mirror.

I frown. “I wanted to do that.”

“Do what?” he asks, pushing at his hair to achieve scruffy perfection.

I pull the children's step stool out from under the sink, stand on it, and weave my fingers into his hair. I drag my nails over his scalp, and his eyelids flutter closed as he moans.

“ Mmm . You're making it very hard for me to leave you alone, pretty girl. I'm seriously considering stowing away in the trunk of your car so I can spend a few more moments with you; maybe pretend you're serenading me when you sing along to the radio.”

A snort of laughter escapes me, and then I pause. “Why don't you?” I ask. “Dad never comes home till late, and Mom's not going to tell anybody about it.” Did I just invite him to my place? Is it too much too soon? He was only joking about hiding in my trunk, right? I need to calm my shit down before my inexperience can mess this up.

“You probably have things to do,” I say, shaking my head at myself. “Forget I said?—”

Daryl's presses his finger against my lips. “I'd love to,” he says. “I will never have anything better to do than being with you, so don't ever think that again. Give me about three minutes to carefully break into your car unnoticed and then leave the library as you normally would.”

I grab his shirt as he makes for the door, and he spins back around. I stare at him. “Seriously?” I squeak.

The twinkle in his eye fades with his smile, and he studies my face. “Not if you don't want me to...” he says, viewing me side-on. “It's too much? You want to change your mind? Because you can. I meant what I said about doing whatever you want. No pressure, Cady. Ever.”

I take a big breath and check my eyes. The puffiness has gone, and although I look a little terrified about the choice I want to make, I still want to make it.

“Don’t you dare break into my fucking car.” I give him a shove toward the door. “There’s a set of spare keys in my desk drawer.”

Daryl turns on a dime, one side of his mouth snagging upward in a sexy smirk. “This,” he says, pointing his finger right in my face. “This right here. If we ever needed to make a list, this is one of the many reasons I love you, Cadence Malone.”

I wrap my fingers around his pointer and lower his hand, so I can step in close to him. “Under what circumstances would we ever need to make that list, Daryl Winters?”

He grins. “I could think of a few, given half a minute.”

“I bet. But I’d rather you spent that time sneaking into my car without being seen, because I need to get home before any more of Dad’s spies let him know my routine movements are off by half a minute or some other garbage thing. How do I look?” I hold my arms out and twirl for him. “Tidy and virginal?”

He appraises me carefully, tilts his head in close and makes a minor adjustment to my collar, before he scuffs my ear with his beard and whispers, “Not for long.”

DARYL

Cady opens her trunk to let me out, and I grin at her. “Thank you, Beautiful. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten I was in here, but I’m very glad you didn’t.”

“Michelle wouldn’t stop talking about quince jelly,” she says apologetically, looking over her shoulder at the taillights of a car, traveling away in the distance. “I know she means well and makes a lot of effort to provide conversation because she knows I’m lonely, but I’d honestly rather be alone than make small talk about things that don’t interest me.”

“She once cornered me in the diner for seventeen minutes of very one-sided convo about peach cobbler when she overheard me say it was my favorite, so I hear ya.” I unfold myself with a groan and take a moment to stretch and adjust my spine. “We need to get you a bigger car.”

“Or we figure something else out,” she says, dusting oats off the back of my shirt. “Sorry about the horse feed. A bag split on me a few weeks ago, and I thought I got most of it, but I’m still finding these little fuckers everywhere. Wh?—”

I clasp her jaw, and she stops talking. Her eyes search mine. “What?”

“I just love this pretty little mouth and all the swears little gems it lets slip,” I say before flicking my tongue at the little gap between her parted lips. “You’re usually so restrained, intent on keeping up your father’s facade, but you’ve really dropped that

mask for me, and I... I just didn't know that I could love you even more than I already did." I release her jaw, press my cheek to hers, and wrap my arms around her in a big hug. "And I know I can't claim to be the cause of this gorgeous transformation, when it's you doing all the inner work to get to that point of believing in yourself enough to be yourself, but I'm so proud of you."

Stiff at first, she soon softens in my arms. "I think you're the only one who ever knew it was a mask to begin with," she says with a sigh. "And it'd be stupid to keep holding it up when you clearly saw straight through the lie."

"Mmm," I agree with a nod. "Regardless, it's wonderful to see you realize what a gift you are as yourself and bless me with the company of your genuine soul. A lot of people would rather live the lie and deny who they are until they die, and I'm very glad that won't be you." I kiss the top of her head. "You want to introduce me to your mom?"

She nods against my chest but keeps her arms around me and makes no move to let go.

I run my hand over her back in big circles. "I promise I'll use my manners and be on my best behavior."

She looks up at me with sad eyes. "It won't matter either way."

I steal another quick kiss of her sweet lips. "Doesn't mean I'll be anything but respectful of the woman who brought you into this world."

Cady flutters her lashes at me. "You say things that make me sound very special."

"Because you are." I flash her a grin and gesture to her house. "After you."

She moves in the other direction, grabs a bag of poultry feed from the backseat of her car, and slings it over her shoulder. “I’ve got some chores to do before we go inside and meet Momma.”

“Hold up.” I step in front of her and make gimme wiggles with my fingers. “Don’t go making me watch you break your back with chores when I’m standing right here. Use me.”

She gives me a cute look, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she dumps the feed into my outstretched arms. “Oh, I plan to use every fucking inch of you, Daryl Winters.”

A charged thrill travels my spine, and my cock stirs with excitement. I look her up and down, and don’t try to hide my interest as it swells. “Likewise.”

I hold the sack of grain with one arm and slap her ass to get her moving. I follow along, loving the way her curvy hips sway with each step. Her long skirt flows beautifully, but it hides her shape more than I’d like, and she keeps having to swish it out of her way to step over and through things. “Do you usually wear these clothes while you’re doing your chores?”

She glances over her shoulder. “You’d prefer I go naked and cold?”

“That would give me good reason and great access to warm you up,” I say with a smirk. “But seriously. Jeans would make this easier for you. And I know you have some. I’ve seen them. They’re the perfect kind of tight and hug your ass real nice, so there’s no hiding your shape.”

Cady looks back at me with drawn-down eyebrows. “They make my ass look fat, you mean.”

I hold the back of her shirt when she tries to walk away, and I lower my face next to

her ear. “What I meant, is exactly what I said. If you’d like to hear the expanded version, it includes the graphic mention of just how hard my cock got when my eyes were lucky enough to feast upon your exquisitely curvy, denim-wrapped rump last month at the rodeo. Do you know how utterly degrading and impossibly counterproductive it is to have to jack off in a porta-potty because you unexpectedly caught your first real glimpse of the absolute glory that is your favorite woman’s ass, and you’re that fucking infatuated?”

Disbelief rules her face, and she shrugs from my grip to move away. “That says more about your perverted ass than it does about my curvaceous one, Daryl Winters. It borders on the ridiculous... or obsession, and neither of those things make you more believable.”

I take one big step to block her path. “Cadence Malone, I admit to being both ridiculous and obsessed. And a pervert. But I’m no damned liar, and if you don’t understand that I want to fuck your gorgeous ass more than anything else in this world, then we have a communication problem.”

She searches my face and purses her lips. She takes the bag of grain from me, dumps it next to the feeder near the chicken run, pulls a knife from God-only-knows where in her skirt — because I sure as fuck didn’t encounter it earlier — and slices it open. She upends the bag into the feeder and then bundles the grain sack under her arm. “What is it with you and asses?” she asks, sliding the knife back into a pocket hidden in the folds of fabric.

I swallow hard and feel my cheeks warm. “I just like them.”

She stands where she is, like she’s waiting for more information, and I sigh.

“I like the way they jiggle,” I explain. “How they feel in my hands, and the way they feel pressed up against me. I also love to give pleasure, so ignoring an area that’s full

of those receptors is silly when stimulating an asshole inside and out means more fun for everyone. I certainly enjoy how hot and tight one feels around my cock, and I enjoy the privilege of having a woman trust me enough to let me inside there. It's a real honor to be that intimate with someone, and people around here might think it's taboo or nasty or a joke, and that I'm just a dirty piece of shit trying to get home, but they're only jealous that I do what I want no matter what they have to say about it. They trap each other with all their opinions, but I'm unapologetically myself, and that makes me free. They can judge all they want, and I'll only ever feel proud of myself and sorry for them."

Cady stares at me and then grabs my shirt and yanks my face down to her level. Her lips are on mine before I can ask what's happening, and I moan into her mouth as she opens for my tongue, suckling gently before matching my hungry strokes. Whatever I said obviously hit the right buttons, because holy shit . My sweet little librarian has definitely become a lioness today, and I have been dreaming about this for so damn long.

I tug her closer, hike up her skirt, grab her substantial ass cheeks, and lift her from the ground, guiding her legs around me. She automatically grinds against my swelling cock and rubs her tits at me, and I'm about to lose my fucking mind. I carry her toward the house. "Which room is your mom in?"

"Living room. Other side of the house," she says breathlessly as I push through the front door.

We make it just inside the foyer before I'm ripping at her underwear. I reach around her ass, tear the soaked crotch of her cotton panties right open, and tentatively stroke her juicy cunt, asking for an invitation. She's virgin. She said so herself.

"What are you waiting for?" She tilts her hips and nudges her cunt at my fingertips. "I may be a virgin, but I'm a pro at reading one-handed. Gimme all the fingers you

want.”

Fuck . The images that play through my head send blood rushing to my cock. It practically lunges at her through my jeans. I push two fingers into her tight little fuck-hole and kiss her harder when she gasps around my tongue.

She rocks her hips, trying to rub her clit at me while my fingers slurp noisily in and out of her wet pussy. I push her back up against the nearest wall, so she’s got the right leverage, and her breathing quickly shifts into high gear. She’s so beautifully quick to fire. I’m going to have so much fun edging her when I can really take my time.

I pump my fingers at her a bit harder, and she gives me a series of pre-orgasmic little quivers.

“ Mmm . You like that, Baby?” I thrust at her, meeting her needy rubbing with a more powerful rhythm while I finger her. She starts to grab at my shirt, seeking a firm hold as she’s wound tighter and tighter by her impending release. She’s as invested in finding it as I am in giving it to her. Her sexy whimpers and panted breaths are music to my ears, and she’s made my fingers so slippery, I can’t help but want to test her receptiveness to ass play.

It’s soon. I know it is. Heck, she’s only learned for the first time today, what it’s like to have her sweet kitty tongued and fingered. But she’s taken both with impressive enthusiasm, and she knows damn well what my intentions are for her ass. It hasn’t exactly turned her off, if her current actions are anything to go by.

She slams herself at my thrusting hand and pushes her fingers into my hair, curling them into fists and tugging hard. I hiss and then growl at her. “ God , that feels good.” Inside and out. Her hands on me in any regard would feel amazing, but to have her touch me with such possessiveness is a whole other level of wonderful and surprising, and I couldn’t feel more blessed. Instead of restraining her desire, she’s unleashed

herself to become who I always suspected she was. This woman has never been the mild-mannered girl others have made her out to be. She's wild and strong and she knows what she wants, and I'm so fucking turned on by her.

I grip her ass and grind her against my aching cock even harder. She shudders and ripples around my fingers, her pleasure threatening to burst at any moment. And I know exactly how I want to send her singing over the edge.

As much as it may terrify my darling, inexperienced girl, I have to know. I have to. I slide one soaked and slippery digit toward her rear and circle her puckered little ring.

She gasps beautifully, but slows her movements, clearly thrown by the new sensation. For better? For worse?

I continue to rub at her asshole, slow and steady, as I curl my fingers inside her pussy and rock into her with enough intensity to keep our rhythm while she seems unsure. I want her to stay on the edge of peaking, where her body will chase what she wants and overrule any restricting thoughts her mind wants to throw at her. I want no room for shame or embarrassment between us. Pleasure doesn't need to be overthought. Not when we both want it.

Cady responds beautifully, relaxing back into the motion and rolling with it. Soon she's tilting her hips to make access to her backside easier, and with that inviting gesture, comes something even more impressive. Pressure .

She's back chasing her pleasure, and she's getting beautifully swept up in it. I'm not sure she's even conscious of the way she's started to thrust her ass at my circling fingertip, but I'm taking it as a good sign she'd be interested in penetration — I mean, she knows who she's dealing with. I'm Daryl the ass-fucker. That's got to be in her head, right? There's no way she didn't take that into consideration before she let me touch her like this.

Fuck . She's definitely thought about me fucking her ass.

My cock strains against her heat through the damp denim of my jeans. She's fucking soaked me. She thinks about my cock in her ass, and she's excited by it. What a gift . If I wasn't already convinced she's my dream girl, I'd be certain now that she's the perfect woman for me. I tune into her body with my full attention, ready to give her the world.

Her breaths are fast and ragged, and she's milling her clit into me with reckless abandon, while thrusting to take my fingers as she pleases. She seems happy with me tickling her asshole, but there's a sense of frustration about her, as if she needs something more. And she's waiting for it.

I gently press inward as I slide my finger over her asshole. Not a lot. Just the very tip of my finger nudges the center of her ring before I pull it back. Her pussy quivers, and she bucks at me harder. For a woman of little experience, she's proficient in body language. Whether or not she knows she's spoken to me, she may as well have cried out, More .

I push at her puckered hole again. And again. A tiny bit deeper and more firmly each time.

Her cunt seizes tight around my fingers, and I grunt with approval. She stops mid-thrust of her hips, as if trying to hold back her pleasure, but I don't let her deny herself. I grind my blocked and throbbing cock against her, stroke at her pussy walls, and push one slippery finger inside her tight ass.

Cady's cunt clamps at me hard, as she fights her climax. “ Daryl ,” she pleads, breathless and desperate. Her fists are clenched so tightly in my hair, the sting is unreal, and I want to tear open my jeans and fuck her so badly I could scream, but I push that down and keep my voice calm. For her.

Her face is tucked close and turned away, so I can't see it. There's no reason for her to hide or hold back when she's so close to crumbling, so I can only assume there's something going on in her thoughts. Perhaps she didn't expect a little ass play to prove so fun. Maybe she's telling herself she's all the things the shitheads in town say about me. Maybe she thinks coming would make those things true, and that makes her bad and wrong.

"You're allowed to like whatever you like, Cady," I whisper in her ear before pressing a kiss to her hair. "You can let go."

She whimpers, and her pussy trembles with the strain her muscles are under to prevent her release.

I slip my fingers from her holes and shrug at her. "Show me your face. I need to look in your eyes."

Slowly, reluctantly, she peels her body away from mine and leans back against the wall. Her face is flushed, her eyes flit about trying to avoid mine, and she looks about one wrong word away from crying.

I pull her in close again, hugging her to me as I look around the entrance foyer of her home. It's decorated with family photos, more of the coats on the rack are her dad's than hers, and when I take a few steps down the hall and crane my neck, I see her mom sitting in an armchair, staring straight ahead, soulless. A pretty, but eerily absent woman, Margot Malone is a ghost. A sadness befalls my heart for her, and for Cady, and for the fading, beautiful home Cady works tirelessly to preserve.

Her house is haunted. At least, this part of it is. "Where's your room, Cady?"

She lifts her head from my shoulder to search my face and then points to the stairs to the left.

I carry her up them and follow her directions until we arrive in a large, airy room with big windows that give a beautiful view of the sun lowering beyond the green hills. I'm pretty sure it feels spacious because her bed is a single. I have to wonder if it's the only one she's ever had, because the cover is the kind of frilly pink and white one that a six-year-old girl might choose.

I lower her slowly to the floor, suddenly all too aware of the massive step she's taken to be intimate with me. It's a bigger leap of faith than I could have imagined, and I look at her, understanding just how strong and brave she truly is, to decide to go after what she wants. The responsibility to support and protect her through the process now rests squarely on my shoulders, and I'm determined not to let her down.

I walk over to the bed and tear off the bedding until only a bare sheet remains, then I return to Cady and meet her gaze. "You're a grown, beautiful woman, and you're allowed to feel good."

She nods. "I know," she says quietly. "And I want to. With you. I don't mean to be skittish, I'm just used to doing things on my own." She walks past me and retrieves a hot-pink vibrator from the bedding I've thrown on the floor.

She look around, sighs, and gestures to her girlish decor with the vibrator in her hand. "And I know what this looks like, but it's not who I am. The innocent way it looks keeps my dad off my back and makes it easier to hide less innocent things in here, so don't go making any other kinds of assumptions."

"Okay." I follow her over to her bedside drawer, where she stashes her vibe. I try to peek over her shoulder, but she closes it too quickly. "What else have you got in there?"

She turns back to face me and snuffles a laugh from her nose. "Just a few good books and a couple of clothes pegs I use for nipple clamps sometimes. I'm saving up to run

away, so my budget won't stretch much further."

"I see." My mind and cock leap for joy, and I look around her bedroom and nod. "It's a pretty good bedroom for an undercover badass."

She gives me a saucy smirk. "I keep trying to tell you I'm not who I've been painted to be. I'm a virgin, but if you're expecting me to bleed or something, you're barking up the wrong bush."

I swear under my breath and lunge at her.

CADENCE

He rumbles, low and moody, as he begins unbuttoning my blouse. Transfixed and short of breath, I gaze up at him a moment before I help. The last button is set free, and I shimmy out of it.

Daryl stares at my breasts, swallows visibly, and I swear his hands are shaking when he reaches behind to unclasp my bra. It drops to the floor, and he seems to stop breathing. Is that good? His eyes say, hungry, so I'm guessing?—

He dives at me and latches onto my nipple with a ferocity that startles me. I cry out in both shock and delight, and I thrust my chest toward him. He growls into my flesh and increases his suction. It's so strong, my knees buckle, but he's right there to catch me.

Not releasing me from his mouth, he carries me to my bed and lays me out. He tugs and sucks and moans into my breast while he rips open his shirt, and then wrestles with my skirt. I unzip it and help him shove it down, along with my torn underwear. The man's a fiend. A hot one, with a burly chest and a nipple piercing. And he who loves fucking asses and sucking on tits, and why the fuck does that excite me so much? Why does it all have to feel so good?

He switches breasts, tugging hard at the other one now, until my nipple is drawn down deep. Is that...? His tongue sweeps at me in hot lashes as he pulls, and I arch my back, needy in response. I want him between my legs, and as if he's heard me

think it, Daryl grips my thighs and spreads me wide.

He thrusts his thick fingers back inside me and mills my clit with his palm. Within seconds, I'm right back on the brink of wanting to come. I move my hips to meet him, wanting his fingers to fuck me harder. He mumbles something and rubs his hard cock into the side of my thigh, roughing my skin with the wet denim.

My pussy gets tight and stretched, and I pant and mewl with pleasure as I adjust. How many fingers is that? Three now? Is this what his big cock will feel like? I writhe and stomp my foot with how good everything feels. "I want you," I say in a husky wail.

He releases his suction, and my nipple slips from his mouth. He licks his lips, breathing hard, and he eases his weight over me just enough to ground me in the sensation of having his body on mine without him actually climbing on top of me the way I want him to. "You have me," he says, looking me in the eyes with intensity. There's no denying I have his undivided attention.

I shake my head. "I want you inside me."

"I already am." He curls his fingers inside my pussy and presses a kiss to my brow. "Do you want more?" He slides a slippery finger over my asshole, and I clench it with a whimper. Why do I like that so much? And why do people in this town make it sound like butt stuff is wrong when it feels so damned amazing? I catch myself tilting to receive more of the naughty sensation, and then I quickly force my hips the other way.

Daryl eases up on my clit and watches me closely as his little finger traces slow circles around my ring. "Whatever you want to do is the right answer, Cady."

I press my lips together.

“Fine,” he says. “Don’t say it. Let your body do the talking.” He dips his head to my breast and suckles gently, then harder. A shock of pleasure strikes through my core, and I buck against his fingers. Uncontrollably.

Daryl lifts his head and smiles down at me. “That’s it,” he coos. “Follow the joy. Your pleasure is for you, Cady. Nobody else gets to choose what you like, only you. You can do whatever the fuck you want right now. The only two people who’ll ever need to know about it, is you and me, and I’ll never judge you for anything.” He kisses me, fast and furious, while his fingers strum all the right notes on my body, as if he’s always known what songs it’ll play.

Oh God , I’m being edged . I recognize the signs from the descriptions in books, and now I’m living it. I’ve been so close to coming multiple times, and the need inside me has grown into an overwhelming monster. My body is like a stacked cache of fireworks with a fuse that has been lit and blown out, lit and blown out, and all I want is the explosion.

Daryl expertly meters the pressure on my clit and sets me right back on the edge of orgasm, and it’s threatening to be huge . There’s a tidal wave built up behind it, like every sensation has already been heightened to its max, and now I’m so needy and ready to fire, I can hardly keep from thrashing about. I clench tight again, to stop myself from doing that, because Daryl’s finger is poised near my asshole, ready to fuck it if that’s what I choose. And I want it. Desperately .

What does that make me?

Definitely not a good girl. It’ll be impossible to pretend I am if I let myself do what I want. I won’t be able to lie to myself — or perhaps anyone else, either. It’ll be harder to wear the mask when I’ll know more of the truth that lives underneath. Because how can I please everyone else above myself, if I’m as deviant and ass-obsessed as Daryl fucking Winters?

But as I break out in a sweat to keep myself from coming, I can't deny that I might be. And why fight it, when I'm safe with him?

I close my eyes, press my head back into the mattress, and open myself wide to receive. I quit holding back, and thrust at that thick, slippery finger until it's fucking me in the ass as fast and hard as the ones in my pussy. Pleasure shoots through me so strongly, my whole body jerks against Daryl's. The weight on top of me intensifies, keeping me in place while I fall apart in a roaring fit of spasms, moans, and moisture.

I feel full and wild and free. Loved and happy. Anchored, but floating, and totally at peace in the bliss that wracks my body in crashing waves of ecstasy.

Daryl shudders against me with a moan of relief to match mine. "Such a good fucking girl," Daryl rasps, his tone hoarse and strained. "Taking what you deserve. I'm so fucking proud of you." He kisses my forehead and my hair, and he leans his head to mine. "Thank you for trusting me."

My body begins to settle, but it won't stop humming.

"Leave those." I nod at the dishes Daryl's rinsing. "I'll do them later."

"I had no idea you were a dancer," he says, loading the dishwasher anyway.

I scoff and turn down the music some more before I carry two dinners to the table. One's pureed, and the other is a double helping. I don't want Dad getting suspicious about there being an extra plate having been used, so Daryl and I can share one. "I'm not a dancer."

He raises an eyebrow. "What would you call the sexy way you've been moving around the kitchen to music?"

I frown. “Was I?”

“Definitely. I couldn’t decide which to enjoy more, your hips or the dreamy look on your face. It’s like you were somewhere else. Someplace nice.” He closes the dishwasher and gives me his full attention.

I sweep my hair away from my cheeks as they warm. “I didn’t really notice.”

“Do you ever dance on purpose?”

I adjust Mom’s chair and make sure her bib is sitting right. “Sometimes. I guess. In the bathroom. I used to go to Morrinsville for hip-hop classes when I was younger, but...” I tip my head at Mom and shrug again. “It was one of the first things that got trimmed due to tightened belts and time restraints. I wasn’t a rising star or anything, and I understood.”

Daryl nods. “You’re a very understanding person,” he says, stepping over to the window. “Do you think my jeans will dry before your dad gets home?” He peeks through the curtains into the darkness again. “Your dryer is different from mine, so I can’t tell.”

It’s hard to take him seriously when he’s only wearing a pair of pink sweatpants that are far too small for him. His nipple piercing twinkles under the kitchen lights, and I hold my hand over another giggle while I rush to finish my mouthful and clear my throat.

“He rarely comes back before nine, and you’ll hear the neighbors’ dogs when he’s close,” I assure him. “Tonight’s excuse is prep work for the upcoming barn dance the Thompson place. It’s a couple of weeks away, so he’ll be able to use that one a few times yet.” I move my overloaded plate toward him and offer my fork. “Have some dinner and tell me how you’re going to avoid setting off those dogs when you have to

sneak back to town.”

“You know they’re excuses?” he asks, sitting back at the table with me and Mom.

“What else would I call every possible reason the man thinks up to avoid having to face what his horse did to the love of his life?” I sigh. “He loved her so much, so I understand why it hurts him to be around her.”

Daryl studies me a moment. “Does it hurt you to be around her?”

I look at Mom. “Not in the same way. I’ve known her like this for longer than I knew her as the woman she was. Mostly it hurts to feel jaded and numb and torn. I can’t shake the feeling that I’m meant to be somewhere else, but I know I’m needed here. It’s a different kind of pain. Heartache and grief related, but different.”

His gaze is intense, as if he’s heavily invested in every word I say. He gives me a small nod and then eats a few things from my plate while I feed Mom.

I wipe Mom’s mouth, and turn back to find him watching me with another strange look on his face. Sort of half-sad and half-amazed, if that’s even a thing. His face is incredibly expressive, and I’m anxious to learn more about what all his little eyebrow twitches and jaw adjustments mean.

I view him through a squinty side-eye. “What?”

He gives me a small smile, loads the fork, and hands it back to me. “Thank you for sharing your delicious home-cooked food and this part of your life with me.”

I furrow my brow and eat my forkful of boring old broccoli and chicken, unsure how to respond. Delicious? I didn’t even make cheese sauce. I should have. It would have been more impressive. “Sorry it’s not anything more exciting. I do all the prep on a

Sunday, and I've fallen into the habit of making the same basic meals out of ease, but now I'm wishing I'd made more of an effort."

Daryl leans back in his chair with a sigh and runs his hands through his shower-damp hair. He slides his gaze toward the plate of food I put aside for Dad for when he gets home. "Why would you apologize for lovingly making a nutritious meal for your family?" he asks.

I frown again. "I don't know. I just wanted you to know this isn't my best work, and next time I'll do better," I promise and take another mouthful, because apparently, orgasms — when shared with another human — are massively amplified and make me very hungry.

Daryl moves around the table, picks up Mom's spoon, feeds her another scoop of mush, and wipes her mouth when some oozes out again. He does it all with grace and a practiced ease that he probably gained when he was nursing his reclusive great aunt on her deathbed. He's so practiced, in fact, that he manages to complete the whole process while staring at me, and although he's silent, his eyes are filled with fire.

I gulp, and a too-big chunk of potato snags in my throat. "Did I say something wrong?" I ask once I've choked it down.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly, as he shakes his head. "Next time, I'm going to make dinner," he says quietly. He sounds like he's trying really hard not to be angry, and I lower my fork to my plate, now sure I said something wrong, or even worse, he doesn't like my food.

"Why are you...?" My voice trails off, and I look around for a way to fix the situation. "You want some dessert? I think there's ice cream."

I push up from the table, but Daryl puts his hand on mine and looks up at me with sad

eyes. “Sit down, beautiful girl. I don’t need ice cream. I don’t need anything at all, and you’ve already given me more than I ever thought I could be offered.” He takes a bean from my plate, puts it in his mouth and smiles. “Please.”

I lower myself back into my seat, and he loads my fork again and sets it in my hand. “Eat. You’re hungry, and you need your strength.”

I accept the fork and watch him as I chew.

He nods toward my Dad’s covered plate waiting patiently on the counter and loads up Mom’s spoon again. “Does he ever say thank you ?” he asks, holding Mom’s bib closer to her chin as he feeds her. “For any of this?”

When I don’t answer, he turns back to see my face. His lips thin into a line, and he nods. “So that’s a no then?”

I shake my head. “He says it all the time when we’re out. And that has more impact, right? If others get to see and hear how proud he is of me.”

Daryl runs his tongue over his teeth behind his lips. “Would it mean as much to you, or more, if he told you he was grateful when nobody else was around to witness it?”

The words hit me like a slap, and I swallow down the lump in my throat. I know exactly what it means if I’m triggered by that question. It means I don’t think Dad’s gratitude is sincere. That he’s happy to say it in front of others to make him look grateful, but when it’s just him and me, he takes it for granted that I’ll always do what’s needed. Because that’s my job. Nothing to be grateful for there, is there?

I scowl at Daryl. His words are making me look at things a different way, and I don’t want to believe my feelings about it. I don’t want to believe Dad’s gratitude is only shared to keep up certain appearances of him being a good father and me being a

good girl. That he doesn't care how I feel, only how I'm perceived. I don't want to believe it, but I know it to be true, and there's no changing that truth.

Tears threaten to fill my eyes, so I look up at the ceiling and refuse to let them flow. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters," Daryl growls. "Cady, I've gained more appreciation for you in the space of half a day than I have in the four years I've known you existed — and I was already a massive fan on day one. It's actually overwhelming how fucking amazing you are, and I want you to know it both in public and in private — even though we only have one of those options right now."

It's hard to look right at him when my eyes are burning hot with my cheeks. My chin trembles, and I quickly firm my jaw and look away, trying to compose myself. "I'm not used to so much praise, Daryl. You're going to have to tone it down a bit."

"Never," he says flatly. "It's not praise. I just give credit where it's due, so you'll have to get used to it."

I turn back, and he shrugs. "It's just how it's going to be, Cadence Malone, so there's no sense in pretending it ain't. I'm going to keep reminding you that you're a wonder until you remember that you are, so feel however you want to feel about it." He feeds Mom her last spoonful and wipes her face before returning his attention to me. "What's next in her routine? Brushing her teeth? You want me to start walking her to the bathroom while you finish your dinner? I watched how you helped her from her chair to the table. I think I could do it."

I stare at him.

"I'll be careful," he promises, apparently mistaking my awe for hesitation. "Or I could clear up and do the dishes while you do it, if that makes you more

comfortable.” He looks me over and nods. “I can do that.” He gets up, moves to the counter, and opens the dishwasher.

My tears burst their banks, and I wipe them away. “Why are you like this?”

“Like what?” He turns back and notices my tears. His brows lift, and his eyes become sad. He closes them, pinches the bridge of his nose, and then comes to crouch in front of me. He takes my hand in both of his and meets my gaze. “Tell me something, Cady. If we were at my house, looking after my mom, would you offer to help?”

“Of course.”

He nods. “Exactly. Because you’re a good person. Anyone who sees you struggling and doesn’t offer to help, is an asshole. Okay? It’s that simple. Your dad’s an asshole. This whole town is full of assholes. Except for Michelle, who does a good job with your mom, but she also gets paid to, so although she might be I’m not going to assume she’s part of the asshole club. But you know what I say to assholes, Cady? Fuck ‘em .”

I snort softly. “Sounds about right.” I reach out and turn the shiny barbell threaded through his nipple. “It’s a pity you’re not an asshole,” I say quietly. “Because I really only want to fuck you.”

He grins. “Oh, I’m an asshole,” he assures me. “Guaranteed. I’m just not an asshole to you.”

Or kids or the little guys or animals.

I give his nipple piercing a gentle tug. “I appreciate that.”

“I can tell,” he says, still grinning. “You also appreciate how fucking sexy I look in

your teeny, tiny, Pony-Pie-pink sweatpants.” He stands tall again, smacks his ass, and sashays back to the sink. “Eat your dinner and tend to your mom, so I can make out with you some more before I have to put my own clothes back on and head home across the fields.”

I pick up my fork again. “I think you mean Pinkie Pie . But it’s still kinda disturbing that you know the color of a My Little Pony character.”

He throws his head back and shakes it like he has a mane, as he puffs through his lips like a horse. “Baby girl, I know so many things about so many things, it would blow your mind. I’ve got a great library, and I’ve been plumbing its depths.”

“Mmm,” I agree around my mouthful before I swallow. “There’s a lot about you that’s mind-blowing, and I appreciate the insights you’ve shared already, and I look forward to learning more... Perhaps tomorrow?”

Daryl winks at me. “Ask Michelle if she minds you staying at the library an hour longer, so you can work on the new searchable database you’re creating for the books.”

I open my mouth, to say that sounds like a lie people will need evidence of, but then I look at his smile more carefully. Not many people know this semi-retired rodeo champ also worked as a coder for a software company, before his pal, Jason, got him into investing. They only know he works from home, for too few hours to be doing anything honorable or worthwhile. But I know this man can ride a bronco, run a self-made charitable foundation and scholarship fund from his kitchen, make my body tingle from head to toe, and do any other damned thing he puts his mind to. “You’re going to help me digitize the catalog?”

“Only if you want me to, Sweetness.”

10

DARYL

I peer through the cracked-open storeroom door, watching Cady work and feeling like a total creeper.

To keep her dad's spies from reporting back to him, I left my truck at home, snuck through the bushes, and broke into the library's back room again. The stalker-vibes are real and gross, but necessary to keep our love a secret, so I'll have to embrace them for now, despite how much I'd like to shatter the illusion this sleepy town is under, by declaring my love for her from the rooftops. It would open a few eyes and a few clattering jaws, that's for sure.

I lean closer, straining to hear what she's chatting about with Danielle Peters.

"... be a fun night. The Thompson's are so generous to offer up their big old barn — though I think they only did it, so they'd get some help to tidy it up," Danielle says, while Cady stamps her books. "That thing is like a museum of old garbage."

"A real piece of history," Cady agrees.

"It would have been easier for them to have it in one of their other barns or sheds. They've got about a million of them, but I guess those don't have the same... character."

Cady nods along. "Character is important."

Danielle ducks down to look Cady in the face. “You don’t sound too excited about the social gathering of the season. Are you not going?”

Cady shrugs. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to. Dad’s been pretty involved, so he’ll want to be there, and I know Michelle is going, so I can’t ask her to stay with Mom... It’ll depend on if Mom’s having a good day or not, if I can bring her along. But I don’t really have anything to wear, and if I’m honest, I’ll probably have more fun at home reading a book.”

Her tone is lifeless and resigned, and I make a mental note to help her find a babysitter for her mom, because even though she does love to read, I think the truth is that she’d actually love to go to a fucking barn dance and let her hair down. I may have to figure out a way to keep her dad from attending, so she can do it guilt-free...

“Well, that’s a shame. It’d be a great place for a sweet girl like you to meet a nice man. I know your father has very high standards, but there must be someone he wouldn’t mind you dating. What about that Miller kid? He’s quite impressive. I heard your father speaking about him the other day — he only had good things to say. Maybe he’d approve?”

Cady looks up from the books she’s ordered into a pile. “Hansen Miller? He’s nineteen . And openly gay, despite everyone very inappropriately trying to deny it and convince him otherwise.” She sighs so loudly, I can feel it as much as hear it from where I am. “Clearly, my father and I have different criteria when it comes to finding me a romantic match, and I don’t intend to turn up to a barn dance, for Hansen and me to be humiliated by the warped intentions of others. So thanks for the heads-up. Social event of the season or not, it’s a definite no from me.” She slides Danielle’s books across her desk in a very clear, We’re done here , gesture.

Danielle collects the books and clutches them to her chest. “You’re a bit snippy today, Cadence. You’re usually so sweet and wholesome, and I’m only trying to help.

I know you won't want to be single forever, and you'll catch more flies with sugar, you know."

Cady gives her a strained smile. "Thank you for the advice, Ms. Peters. I'll remember that gem if I ever find myself wanting to catch and marry a fly. You have a nice day, now." She waves her off and excuses herself from the desk to head my way — to the off-limits back room, where nosy townspeople aren't welcome to pry.

I press myself back against the wall, so she doesn't see me and give a surprised scream or something while Danielle Peters is still in earshot.

Cady enters, closes the door behind her, and leans against it with a frustrated groan.

"Tough day at the office, Babe?" I ask quietly, opening my arms for a hug.

She jumps, snaps her head my way and grins. She rushes toward me and jumps into my arms. "Not anymore," she whispers back, before laying a hot and heavy kiss on me.

I tug up her long skirt, getting it out of the way so she can wrap her legs around me. My hands find her ass bare, and I utter a grunt of approval as I give it a hearty squeeze. "Cadence Malone . You seem to have forgotten to put on underwear."

"Scandalous, isn't it?" Her eyes are sparkling, and there's an energy radiating off her that I adore.

"You're late," she whispers, rubbing herself against me as I stroke her pussy. "I thought you might not be coming."

"I had to go to Morrinsville this morning."

“You did?” Her brow etches with cute furrows. “Why?”

“I needed to pick up a few things.” I pull a folded slip of paper from my back pocket. “This is the latest copy of my bloodwork. Vince knows a guy at the lab there, who could fast-track my results.” I hand them over. “I want you to trust that I’m clean as a whistle, because I am desperate to push my cock inside your sweet cunt and come so hard I could scream.”

Cady’s breath quickens. She flips open the paper, scans the results, folds them again, and passes them back. “Thank you. Is now too soon to fuck me?”

I chuckle quietly. “You want to check if Dani Peters has definitely gone first? She could have her ear pressed against the door, knowing her.”

Cady sighs, extracts herself from me, and mutters to herself as she walks over to the door. “Nosy fucking... She cracks open the door, peeks out, and then hangs her head. She takes a visibly deep breath, lifts her chin, opens the door a little wider, and calls, “I’ll be right with you, Mr. James.” She closes herself back in and presses her forehead against the door. “Half an hour till closing. Half an hour till closing.”

I walk up behind her, dip my face to her neck and give her a nuzzling kiss. “Half an hour until I fuck your brains out,” I whisper.

She gasps and turns around, and I press her into the door with my body. “I also got you a present while I was out.”

“Oh yeah?” she whispers, her eyes huge.

“Mmhm.” I reach for the velvet box I’d set on a nearby shelf and open the lid for her to look inside.

Cady trails her fingers over the collection of sleek, black ass plugs with the flared, diamanté bases.

“I thought you might like to expand your toy collection,” I say, enjoying the marked interest in her expression. “They range in size, so you can work your way up to taking my cock. But only if that’s what you want,” I say firmly. “Do you approve?”

She wets her lips. “They’re very pretty.”

“Just like you.”

She glances at me and smiles, but her attention quickly returns to the training kit. “Can we use one today?” she asks, before clearing her throat and suppressing the excitement she’s clearly feeling.

I smile so hard my cheeks hurt. “Baby, we can use one right now. I’d love for you to go sit at your desk and stew for the next half hour. Turn your ass around.”

Her eyes twinkle at me, as I take out the smallest plug and put it in my mouth. I reach for the sachet of lube in my back pocket and nod my head for her to do as I’ve asked. “Hands on the door and bend over so I can feed your cute little starfish.”

Cady does as she’s told, her breathing fast and shallow. I gently nudge her legs a bit wider with my foot, and lift her long skirt up over her gorgeous, round rump. “Hello, beautiful.” I kneel down to lick at her moist slit, and then her puckered little asshole.

She clenches her ass. “Daryl,” she scolds in a whisper.

“What?” I say in an innocent tone. I chuckle and spread her cheeks to massage some lube into and around her tightest hole. She fights me a little, and I give her a gentle nip on the ass. “Relax for me, Cady.”

She releases the tension in her buttocks, and I reward her by sucking on her clit. She utters a sweet breath and opens beautifully for me. I massage her asshole again and tongue her wet pussy, as I slide the little plug inside her. Her sphincter grabs it in a good hold, and I give it a little jiggle, to make her squirm a bit, before I lower her skirt back down and guide her to stand.

“How does that feel, gorgeous? Good?”

She looks at me and nods, but her eyes are glazed and unfocussed. She’s already panting and shifting from foot to foot, and I’ve got the feeling she’ll be dripping with arousal by the time she’s ready to lock the library door to the public. That’ll be just perfect.

“Good.” I give her a grin and turn her toward the door. “Enjoy your next half hour. I’ll be waiting right here, ready to make you come all over my cock.” I send her on her way with a strategically placed slap on her ass, and I am head-over-heels in love with the way she grips the doorframe for support while she moans. She gives me an I’m going to get you for this sensational tease look over her shoulder when she reaches for the handle, and she walks out, swinging her hips like she’s enjoying herself.

CADENCE

I lock the front door and march as best I can to the back room. The door has been open a crack since I left, and Daryl's grin suggests he's enjoyed watching me squirm for the last twenty-nine minutes it took to convince Mr. James to get the hell out without my using those exact words or worse.

Sitting was impossibly arousing. As was standing. And walking. All of which were mortifying to do in front of an unwitting old man with an all-to-inconvenient new obsession with worm farming.

"Doing okay there, Beautiful?" Daryl asks. He imitates the wiggly way I'm walking and adds some hand jives and hula hips by the time he meets me halfway. "Looks like you're practicing for that barn dance you said you didn't want to go to."

I smack him in the chest, grab his hand, drag him to the back room, where I commence my attack on his belt buckle. "Daryl Winters, if you don't fuck me within the next five seconds, I'm going to have this orgasm without you." His belt refuses to open fast enough, and I growl in frustration.

He chuckles and shoos my hands away. "I've got this, Sassy Pants," he assures me as he toes off his boots at the same time. "Why don't you strip your own sexy ass. I want to see how ready you are for me."

Only too eager for his attention, I throw my blouse to the floor, spin my skirt zipper

around to the front, and yank it down. It clogs with fabric, and I almost scream. “Daryl,” I whine, helplessly needy and trapped.

He starts to laugh but stops abruptly when I glare at him. “Sorry, Babe.” He kneels in front of me to assess the situation, and then he calmly backtracks the zipper before sliding my skirt down my legs. With his massive dick hanging out of his fly at a rather assertive and confronting angle. It’s thick and veiny as fuck, and I’m a little anxious it won’t fit.

A squeak escapes me, but Daryl doesn’t notice. He’s too busy staring.

Without warning, he buries his face in my curls with a moan. He inhales deeply, slides his hands up my calves, and pulls the backs of my knees toward him. They instantly give way, and he expertly controls my descent as I crumple.

I’m laid out on the storeroom’s hardwood floor, and I yelp as my bare back connects to the cool surface, but I forget all about complaining when Daryl thrusts my knees up, pins my legs open, and laps at my soaked upper thighs. I swear under my breath and tilt my hips, to open for him. He moans again and slurps at my clit until I’m kicking him, begging him for release.

He pulls back, his eyes wild and nearly black with desire. His gaze shifts between my face and my ass, and then he looks to the ceiling and prays for strength. He jumps to his feet, shucks his open jeans over his ass, shoves them down to the floor, and steps out of them.

It’s my turn to stare. The man is pure muscle and cock. And I want his bulk on top of me right now.

He sinks to his knees slowly, his full focus on my face. His expression is serious, and his gaze is warm and full of love. “You are so fucking beautiful, I’m almost scared

my heart's going to give out from the sight of you." He holds a hand to his chest. "It's beating so hard," he whispers, sounding as nervous as I feel. He slowly crawls forward until his face is over mine. "Please pray I don't die before I experience this heaven."

"If there is a god, then he wouldn't dare take you," I whisper back. "He'd know that I need you."

Daryl guides my leg around his hip and strokes me between my legs. "Oh, there's a god," he says with certainty as he runs the thick head of his cock along my slick crease and notches it at my entrance. "You're living proof of that, Cadence Malone."

He surges his hips forward, and I whimper as my flesh parts for him with the most incredible stretch. This moment is better than I had imagined — mostly, because Daryl knows his shit when it comes to my pleasure, and he's also loving and sweet as fuck. His eyes remain glued to mine, mindful and questioning. Okay? they seem to ask, and I nod. He smiles and eases back, before he forges deeper, filling me all the way.

It's glorious .

He bumps against my clit, and a shock of pleasure ripples through my core, squeezing at his cock in a preview of what's to come — because holy shit — this feels better than I ever could have imagined. Both of my holes feel full and riddled with sensation, and I'm hit with another quiver almost every time we move together.

Daryl rumbles in approval, and his cock strains inside me " Mmm . That's my good fucking girl." He thrusts into me, again and again, making me dizzy with kisses and the praise falling from his lips.

He rolls with me, until I'm on top, then he grabs my ass and grinds me into him until

my pussy cinches so tight, it's tugging at his cock like we're attached. He swears, tenses up, grips my hips even harder, and pins me in place, despite my every intention to keep moving.

I can feel my orgasm right there , and I want it. I buck and buck at him, until he locks me down with all his might, preventing me from making any movement at all, let alone a pelvis thrust.

"Cady, I need a sec to calm my shit," he says in a rush through his teeth.

Confused, I stop chasing my pleasure and take a moment to really look at him. His eyes are squeezed closed; his jaw is clench tight... Is he holding his breath? "Are you okay?" I ask running my fingers through his hair.

He shivers and groans and slowly eases his grip on me. "Just dangerously close to busting my nut way too soon," he confesses. "You're a wild one, and I fucking love it way too much." He flutters his eyes open and meets my gaze. "Good to go now." He slaps my ass, and I give a soft cry as I clamp around his cock and the plug in my butt. "Push yourself up while you ride me like a cowgirl," he says with a grin. "Let me see you in all your fucking glory."

Eager to take the new position for a test drive, I do as I'm told, and I'm rewarded by a look on Daryl's face that says a thousand words — every one of them being about how fucking beautiful I am and how turned on he is by me. Warmth fills my face, and I rock my hips, finding my new rhythm.

It's good. Fuck it's good. There's something pleasurable for every part of me. My clit's happy, my pussy's full of cock for the first time in my life, and when I rock my hips a certain way, it nudges my brand new, glittering ass plug and sends little shockwaves of delight through my whole system — which of course means I want to do it all the fucking time.

I sit tall, throw my head back, and fuck at his cock until I'm so wet it sounds obscene.
“ Fuck .”

“Damn straight, you fucking goddess .” He eyeballs my bouncing tits like a starving monster ready to pounce on its next meal.

He clenches his abs, and his cock jerks inside me as he sits up. He guides my legs to go right around his waist, grabs my ass, and tugs my lower half as close as two people can get. Then he lunges for my nearest breast. He takes my nipple in his mouth and suckles gently a moment, before intensifying his suction to the point of almost pain.

Pleasure rockets through me, and I buck at him hard and fast, needing everything he has, to soothe the overwhelming need inside me. I fist his hair and dig my nails into his back and thrust for all I'm worth. Daryl grunts and moans into my breast, and I writhe in his arms, as his enjoyment hums and vibrates right through me.

The second he reaches around and pushes at the diamanté base of my butt plug, I'm gone. It may as well be a fucking detonation button, because it sets off a chain reaction of jolting explosions, each more pleasurable than the last, until I come back into awareness, lying limp and trembling on Daryl's chest, in a puddle of our combined making.

He clutches me to him, one hand gripping my hair, as he murmurs praise after profanity after prayer. I smile into his sweat-salted skin and flick my tongue at his nipple piercing. He shivers, and his waning erection reconsiders its potential. It stirs inside me, showing signs of life, and I roll my hips and moan at the warm, wet sensation that has everything soaked. I'm not sure when the plug slipped from my ass, but it's gone, and it has added to the more free and spacious dynamic down there. I feel perfectly broken-in and easy — the exact opposite of my father's good-girl, a buttoned-up librarian or an overly responsible caretaker.

“I didn’t know it would feel this slippery,” I say, unable to keep still when it feels so deliciously naughty between my legs. “It feels like a lot of cum. Is it a lot?”

His belly quakes beneath me. “It does feel like a lot,” he agrees and then swears. “You squirted like a champ when you came, so that accounts for some of the mess, but I was totally fantasizing about knocking you up when I shot my load deep inside you, and I honestly think it made me spurt a bit extra. It felt extra.” He chuckles again and strokes my hair. “Sorry, if that’s TMI — that I get excited by the thought of breeding you. And that my imagination is so graphic, when I’m doing it, that it could manifest as a double dose of semen. If that’s a thing...” He moans, and his cock strains inside me. “You’ve chosen your method of birth control, right?”

The idea of Daryl having the desire or the intent to impregnate me isn’t something I’d thought he’d be interested in, and it’s got me feeling a certain way. My pussy twitches with a subtle aftershock, and I lift my heavy head to meet his gaze as I nod. “It’s my day off tomorrow, so I’m going to take Mom on an outing to Morrinsville. I made myself an appointment there, because I don’t need anyone around here knowing I needed the Plan B pill, or any other kind of prescription filled.”

“Smart.” His smile makes him seem proud of me, and his cock swells more within me, as if my intellect turns him on.

I roll my hips, enjoying the way we slide so beautifully with all the fluids we’ve shared. A shiver trickles down my spine when I recall his use of the word breeding . I rock my hips to make his cock slide in and out of me, but I love the feel of it so much, I force myself to settle down before I get too carried away. “You really fantasize about getting me pregnant?” I ask, suspecting I may be afflicted by the same desire.

“Constantly,” he says with a dreamy twinkle in his eye. “It’s only fantasy, though. You’re young, and obviously, this sneaking around could only last a few months if I

bred you for real. As much as I'd love to see your belly swell with my child, the second anyone else saw you that way, I'd be run out of town, you'd be locked in a tower, and we wouldn't get to do this anymore," he says, rolling me over and making love to me slowly and sweetly. "We'll just have to have a bunch of imaginary babies." His cock jerks inside me and he fucks into my slurping depths with long, full thrusts, making us both moan. "I fucking love the feel of you bred, Cadence Malone."

I rock with him and nod. "Me too. A lot. I'm going to want you to do this all the time. I need this feeling in my life."

"That's good, because I'm about to fill you again," he says, picking up his pace.

I spread myself wider for him. "Do it," I pant, egging him on as I meet his every thrust. "Make us imaginary twins or something."

"Cady ." He gasps and grunts and tenses all over before surging forward and adding to his mess until I'm overflowing again. "Fuck ."

Daryl cleaned me up as best he could at the library, but it didn't stop me from creating a big, damp mark on the back of my skirt on the way home. I had to be mindful of how I stood the whole time I was relieving Michelle of her duties, which took forever and was not easy, but I did enjoy the thrill of having a dirty little secret. I felt like a smug, sexy bitch the whole time, and I'm not sorry for a second of it, but I am in desperate need of a shower — and since Daryl has insisted he wants to give it to me, he's been stuck, contorted in the trunk of my car for longer than must be pleasant.

When I eventually free him, I wince at the sound of his groan as he stretches himself out again. "Sorry. She had a lot of questions about the digital catalog, but I got her away as fast as I could," I swear. "If it makes you feel better, she's offered to stay an extra two hours on library days, while I'm getting the bulk of the books entered into

the system.”

He raises his eyebrows and looks me up and down with a look of appreciation. “That does make me feel better. But know that I would suffer way more uncomfortable places than the trunk of your car if it meant I get to be with you.”

I dip my head and try not to glow too much with giddiness at that praise, but it does make me give a happy little sway. “Thank you.”

His smile grows, and he lunges toward me, capturing me in a huge hug. “And well done on accepting my compliment. It means a lot to me.” He gives my ass a squeeze, smashing the cool, wet cum stain on my skirt fabric to my bare skin beneath.

Daryl stills, pats his hand around my damp rear, and then spins me around so he can assess the situation. He groans like he’s in pain and twirls me like a ballerina back to face him. “You were in there chatting away all natural, while you were sporting this indecent badge of honor?”

“Mmhm,” I say with a proud smile.

He kisses my forehead, picks me up, and tosses me over his shoulder. “We’ll check your mom’s okay, and then it’s shower time for dirty girls who spread their legs for filthy old ass-fuckers.”

I giggle. “Mom’s fine. And if you keep making me feel this good, I’ll be spreading my cheeks before long,” I promise him.

He swears and turns back toward the car with me.

“Where are we going?” I ask, kicking my legs. “Can I not say that?”

He gives a throaty laugh. “You can say whatever the fuck you want, Cadence Malone. But just know what your sweet, sassy mouth does to me.” He lays me on the hood of my car, shoves my skirt up around my hips, and muscles his way between my legs. He pins me open, thrusts his denim-clad cock at my dripping pussy, and kisses me until my breath has been wholly stolen.

I wrench my head sideways, gasp for air, and thrust right back, loving the way he somehow makes me feel powerful and powerless all at once. How does he make me want him again so soon? Before I’m ready for him to move away, he pulls back, and I utter a disappointed whimper as he walks around the car.

Dizzy and disoriented, I start to sit up.

“Stay right where you are,” he warns from somewhere behind me. “I left something in the trunk.”

He returns with the black velvet box of ass plugs, flips open the lid and runs his fingertips over the collection, as if selecting his toy of choice. My heart races as I wait on the edge of delight, because I am a fan of the whole ass-play thing. Daryl was right about it making everything feel incredible.

I watch his selection process with interest.

Surely, he’ll pick the little one? Or am I ready to graduate to the next size up? His choosing finger passes both of those by, and my heart flutters in my chest. He pulls out the one that’s about twice the girth of the one I had in my ass earlier.

My kitty gives a joyful anticipatory squeeze, and I hold my breath as he collects a sachet of lube from the kit. “Am I ready for that one?” I ask in a whisper.

Daryl meets my wide-eyed gaze. “You tell me.”

I look at the plug again. It looks a lot smaller in his big hand. I think I could handle it. Shit, who am I kidding? I think I'll enjoy it.

I give him a nod, and his eyes sparkle.

"Slide your feet to the ground and turn around," he instructs.

I do as I'm told and stand facing my windshield while my heart gallops in my chest.

Daryl comes to stand in close behind me, blocking me in against the grill. "Lower yourself onto the hood," he says in a low, gravelly voice.

I lean forward, until I've flattened my breasts to the paintwork. The position makes my ass lift until I feel open to his bulk as he presses against me.

He grinds at me through my skirt a few times, slowly, before he pulls up the fabric and mumbles a few oaths. "You're looking beautifully well-bred back here, Cady," he says, running his fingers through the cum that's been leaking out of me since he put it in. "You're a little swollen from the action, but you're slick enough it shouldn't hurt when I push back inside. If anything feels too uncomfortable, you let me know and we'll stop. Understood?"

Antsy, I squirm against the hood of my car as I nod.

"Good girl," he rumbles, giving my ass a playful slap before sliding his cool, lubed fingers over my asshole, massaging me there with a delicate, teasing pressure that makes me squirm even more.

I moan as my pussy quivers, and again when a trickle of moisture drips down my inner thigh. I fucking love that I've been full of cum this whole time. It makes me feel positively sinful and so much more like the badass I long to be than the role of

virginal Miss I've been forced to play.

Daryl presses the cool tip of the plug to my asshole. "Ready to be bred from behind with this plug in your ass, Gorgeous?"

I rise onto my toes and lift my rear in response. His words are enough to make me want to come, but I want what he's offering to get me there.

He swears and drags his hand down my back. "You are surely the most beautiful woman in this world, Cady. I feel like you were fucking made for me," he says, as the pressure at my tightest hole intensifies.

The slippery stretch feels easy and amazing, as he pushes it all the way in, and it seems to lock into position. I press my lips together and shift around on my feet as I adjust. "Mmm."

"Beautiful." The sound of his zipper being taken down alights a ripple of excitement low in my belly.

He guides my legs wider and pins me to the car with one hand on my back. I'm so exposed and vulnerable in the position, but there is no fear within me, only an eager readiness. I trust him with my body. And all my secrets — like how much I hate my life, and how much I love him putting things in my ass.

He nudges his cock at my entrance, and I whimper. He feels twice as big as he did before. The plug takes up some of the room I'll need for taking cock. Is this going to hurt? He wouldn't have said it might if it wasn't a possibility, right?

He runs his hand down my back a few times in calm, grounding strokes. "You can take it, Cady," he says, his tone sure and encouraging.

I nod and gasp for my life as he leans forward. He pushes his huge cock inside me, parting my flesh and forging deep until I feel so stretched and full I can hardly believe it.

Praise drips from his lips, and he buries himself to the hilt, bumping against the butt-plug. My insides pull tight with a zing , and I cry out several choice words before panting through my body's reaction to being crammed full of cock and toy. It feels like my heart is beating in my chest, my ass, and between my legs. The sensation is pulsing shockwaves through my core, and I dance around on my tiptoes, trying not to come before Daryl can show me what it feels like when he actually gets moving .

“Fuck me,” I beg, gripping his cock inside me like a fist. “Now. Fuck me. ”

“Relax that sweet little cunt, and I will,” he growls.

I do my best, but I'm wound too tight; too close to coming. It's not until he sets my ass stinging with a sharp slap that I release my fierce grip on his cock. And the moment I do...

Daryl slams into me, over and over again until I'm crying out and clapping the hood of the car to let out all the fucking feelings, I don't know how else to deal with. His cock is pumping wet suction sounds from my pussy, and every time he drives deep, he strikes the plug in my ass. It feels like I'm being fucked in both holes, and I'm almost ashamed of myself for how good it feels.

Almost .

The way Daryl coaxes me toward my pleasure with absolute approval sets the expectation that I fucking deserve it. That I should chase it down and reap the fucking rewards. It's going to be a big reward too. It's building exponentially. I start to shake with the size of it.

“That’s it, Cady. Fucking give it to me,” he roars, as if my pleasure is a gift for him .

I love that idea. And it makes sense when I feel like his is a gift for me. I’m already full of cum, but I feel like I can’t get enough, and I love what he’s thinking about when he unleashes into me. Would he like it if I said so? Have other women spurred him on the way he’s doing to me?

“ You give it to me,” I growl back. “Put a fucking baby in me.”

Daryl’s palm slaps the hood next to mine, and he pumps his cock at me even faster. “Did you just fucking say that?”

“ Breed me ,” I whine, as I pull tight inside.

He swears, crowds his bulk over me, and forces me over the edge with a rush of heat and pressure. My climax rips through me, and I try to throw my body back with the momentum of it, but Daryl has me pinned with his weight, smothering my escape attempts so all that wild energy turns inward instead. He moans long and loud in my ear, while pleasure shatters my insides into a million sparkling pieces.

With no other option but to enjoy myself, I ride the intensity out, rolling with the all-consuming waves of bliss. By the time my body settles, I could swear I’ve left the damned thing, because all I can do, is picture myself draped face-down, limp and dripping on the hood of my car, with the most incredible man fawning over me as if I’m the lucky goddess he’s fated to serve.

12

DARYL

I 'm not sure how long Cady will take to recover from an afternoon of being thoroughly fucked, but she definitely needs more time.

I keep her upright, holding her close and swaying with her under the warm water as I gently bathe her. She moans softly as I gently cleanse her swollen little cunt. Was I too rough? I should have kept myself under harsher control, instead of losing my mind and breeding her hard.

She's brand new to all of this, but she behaves like a seasoned pro, and it's fucking with my head. I used to be all too aware that I had all the experience, and she had none, but in the span of a couple of days, she's shown me an impressive amount of confidence. I aimed to be mindful, and I was hoping she'd feel empowered through the process of her deflowering, but I didn't expect her to be so fully onboard with everything I love.

Considering what I've seen from her so far, she not only shares all of my turn-ons, but she also puts her own spin on them and hands them back to me as gold, like a fucking alchemist. I share my incendiary fantasies, she nods along as if they're cute, and then she strikes a match that turns them into an inferno. It's wicked and wild and I fucking love it, but it's dangerous. Wrapped up in pleasure, I forget myself and charge ahead as if we're both experienced, when really, I need to give her time to adjust without rushing things.

“I like dancing naked in the rain with you like this,” I murmur against her wet hair as I take us for a slow spin in the shower cubicle.

She lifts her face to meet my gaze for the first time since I scraped her off the hood of her car and carried her upstairs. She gives me a sweet smile and rests her head back against my chest.

“Do you want to go to the barn dance?” I position her to be dipped and then study her face when I have her held out.

She gives me an as-if kind of look. “I can’t. And even if I could, I wouldn’t be able to dance with you, so what would be the point?”

I pull her in close again. “I didn’t ask if you could go. I asked if you wanted to.”

She sighs. “Of course I want to. But that’s not realistic, is it?”

I shrug. “I’ve always found that reality is what you make it. If you want to go, I’ll help you make it happen. Maybe we can steal a dance in some dark, out of the way corner, so everyone else can assume life is continuing as they know it, while we create an adjacent alternate reality all of our own.”

Cady pushes back, supporting herself as she stares at me. Her eyes are huge and round, her lips are slightly parted, and her nipples are taut and proud. “I fucking love the way your mind works, Daryl Winters.”

My face warms from more than the hot water. “You do?”

She nods. “It’s a terrible idea in practice, but I am so in love with the theory, I could...”

I rumble deep in my throat. “You can’t take another fucking right now, Cadence Malone. But I will graciously accept any kisses you may want to give me while I get you dressed and dried.”

She snorts softly and leans back against the wall. “I like the way you want to do all my personal cares yourself.”

I flash her a grin, turn off the water and lift her out of the shower. “I like you letting me. Makes it feel like we both know you deserve to be looked after. And after watching you fight that belief for years on end while you slaved away for others, I feel like that’s progress worth celebrating.”

She gazes up at me, all doe-eyed and cute as fuck, as I wrap a big, cozy towel around her. I kiss the tip of her nose, roughly get myself dry, and then I take my time with her. I’m extra gentle with her downstairs, which she seems to appreciate, and then I dress her into the soft flannel pajamas I found under her pillow.

“I don’t normally get in my jammies this early,” she says, watching my every move with interest.

I reach for her hairdryer and duck my head back out from under the sink. “Well, today, you do.” I plug in the hairdryer and set it next to her hairbrush. “I bred you hard, and now I want you to be as comfortable as possible.” I look her over and want to extend the fantasy by saying the gorgeous woman now carrying my child deserves only the best, and I will pamper her as I see fit, but I know how over the top it would sound. What kind of delusional man excites himself by pretending he’s impregnated his forbidden beloved on the same day he pops her sweet young cherry?

I pull on my jeans and zip my cock into a restrained position before Cady sees it plumping again. What this girl does to me... She’s more potent than Viagra. I may actually have to research medicines that make a cock flaccid, so I can be around her

without a fucking bulge in my pants.

I reach for a bottle of lotion, flip open the cap and sniff it. My cock strains in my jeans, and I grain inwardly. It smells of her beautiful, smooth skin. I set it on the counter next to the other things and snap my head up at the sound of a door shutting downstairs.

I meet Cady's bug-eyed gaze. The color drains from her face, and her whole body is tense. It has to be her dad.

"Cady?" His tone is loud and admonishing, as if she's in trouble for not being wherever he thinks she should be.

She looks between the door and me, her expression panicked. I hold up my palms, hoping to calm her. I point at myself and hold a finger to my lips, then I point at her, form a silent beak with my hand, and make it talk.

Her brow wrinkles sweetly, and when I see the spark come back to her eyes, I can tell she's shaken herself out of freeze-mode. She stands and brushes her hands down her pjs. "I'm in the bathroom," she calls out, while looking around. She shoos me into the corner behind the door and whispers, "I'll keep him busy in the living room, while you sneak down to my room and hide."

I tilt my head. "You don't want me to sneak out the back and leave?"

She sighs. "You can't. The stairs?—"

Several creaks announce her father's approach. I nod that I understand and kick myself for not remembering that information from the walk up here.

"Plus, I want you to stay the night," she whispers with a cheeky smile. "I like having

you as my dirty little secret.”

I grin and give her two thumbs up as her dad’s voice penetrates the door.

“Cady?”

She sighs. “Yeah, Dad. Won’t be long. I’m just out of the shower.”

For a moment, there’s silence, and I wonder if he’s walking away, but when he speaks, it’s clear that he didn’t move a muscle. “At dinnertime?” His tone is sort of scolding, and I kinda want to punch my fist through the door and into his face. There’s no harm in Cady having a fucking shower whenever she wants. “Your mom’s waiting,” he says, as if he couldn’t be down there feeding himself right now instead of standing outside the door pissing his daughter off.

The look on her face suggests she’s not going to hold back whatever venom is about to roll off her tongue either.

“Oh really?” Her tone is short and snippy, and my cock is as excited by that as much as it is by the fire in her eyes and the assertiveness radiating off her in waves of heady pheromones. “Did she tell you that?”

“Young lady...” Vander James Malone stumbles over his words but eventually attempts to reposition himself in the dominant role. “Just what do you think you’re doing, Cadence?”

Her eyes flit to me, and I point at my chest and grin. She covers her mouth to keep her giggle contained, then she swats the air in my direction and gives me a warning look, before reaching for the doorknob.

I stay pressed against the wall as she pokes her head out to greet her father face to

face. “Sorry, Daddy. I’m probably moody because I’m on my period and made a terrible mess of my skirt. That’s why I’m in the shower. But if you want to start feeding Mom, I’ll be down to help soon.” She says it all so sweetly, and I just know her dad will be feeling awkward as fuck about now. My heart swells with pride, and my cock is beyond swollen with infatuation. If I wasn’t already overwhelmingly in love with this woman, I’d be well on my way. I cannot wait to spend the night sleeping next to her tiny single bed, like a fucking dog, because my God , am I her loyal follower and willing servant.

It doesn’t surprise me that Cady’s dad leaves early in the morning. Too early to help with the bulk of his wife’s care or the household chores, and far earlier than is required by his job for him to do so. He’s an avoidant asshole who shifted his responsibilities onto a child, and he’s so threatened by her strength while she carries those burdens, that instead of being grateful, he makes her feel like shit.

They argued before he left, and I had to force myself to remain hidden while I absorbed every sick word of it. When Cady mentioned she wanted to attend the barn dance, she was met with resistance in every form. He threw up every barrier he could think of to keep her trapped inside the house, doing his job for him. He gas-lit, shamed, guilted his way through every trick in the narcissists’ playbook, using her kindness as if it’s a weakness and exaggerating everything from financial restraints to societal pressures in order to keep her housebound. He even stooped so low as to demean her body and accuse her of having nothing to talk with people about, because they wouldn’t want to discuss books at a dance. And besides, people expect him to be there, after all the time and effort he’s spent to help make it a success.

And he does all this with such exceptional skill of manipulation, that it doesn’t seem like he’s doing anything nasty at all — he’s doing her a favor , because he’s the one who upholds the community that supports them. He earns the money. His work helps so many people. He’s mindful of her physical appearance and health because he cares and...

It makes me fucking sick.

By the time he left, Cady's ability to be her authentic, sexy, little badass self had been drained and dimmed into subservience. She actually said the words: Sorry Daddy. You're right. Of course, I'll stay home and take care of Mom. I don't know what I was thinking. And the worst part of all, is that she meant them.

It wasn't placation. It wasn't her saying she'd do one thing while she had every intention to do another. It was total submission. Obedience.

It's fucking heart-breaking, and I tell her as much — ending with, “He can't actually stop you, Cady. You're an adult, and you get to make your own choices. If you want to go to the dance, you can go.”

I was aiming for inspirational, but from the look in her eyes, and her stomping away while yelling how little I fucking know about anything, it's clear that I only poked the bear. That I can understand, and honestly, I'd rather she targets me with all the unfairness she's got bottled inside than have her keep it in there festering into more shitty beliefs about being unworthy of having a life of her own.

But my girl is smart. The moment she catches on that I'm trying to help her; she shuts it down. She refuses to hear a word from me — can't take a lick of reassurance or praise, and she definitely can't handle being built back up yet. She's too hurt. Too angry and humiliated. She cuts me off each time I even open my mouth, making it clear she doesn't want what I'm trying to give.

So, I keep my lips buttoned and follow her lead with the chores. I help her with what I can, but it's hard to watch her process her feelings when I can see how much rage she's carrying. Her body's tense with it, and every movement she makes is as sharp and snappy as her tongue.

She rips the soiled bedding off her mom's mattress, storms down to the laundry room, and shoves it into the machine. The detergent pods are fired into the front loader like grenades, and she slams the washer door shut so hard, it bounces right back open. This happens again and again, until she screams and kicks a crack in the washer's door. Only then does she stop. She stares at what she's done, and her eyes well with tears.

I fold her into my arms. "It's going to be okay. I'm going to take the door off and put it in the car with the washing. You can take it to Morrinsville with you, and I'll casual happen upon you at the laundromat there, where I'll take care of both. While I do that, you can have a nice day out with your mom and tend to those personal matters you need to. Okay?"

She sniffs against my chest and nods. "Thank you," she says in a whisper. "I'm sorry for Hulk -ing out again. It's just that every time I try to stand my ground or push back, I end up so frustrated. I hate the pain in his eyes that he can't give me what I'm asking for, and I hate that my being selfish hurts him, so I give up, and I hate myself for that too. I know how hard our situation is, and I do want to do my part to help, it's just... I'm so tired. And I want a break. But it's never the right time, and it sucks, and I didn't mean to take it out on you, and I'm sorry."

"It's all going to be okay, Cady. You're not selfish, and you're so much stronger than you're giving yourself credit for. You deserve a fucking medal for the shit you put up with in the name of loyalty to your family, and that's honorable. Your dad doesn't deserve you, and from the way he's behaving, he knows it. Why else would he be so hellbent on making you out to be someone you're not? He's the one who feels guilty and ashamed and ugly, but he can't handle those feelings, so he projects them onto you. Don't you ever get to thinking you're the problem. It's not you, it's him." I give her a squeeze. "Once you're done getting whatever you need at the pharmacy and whatnot, you're going to meet me in the mall parking lot, and I'm going to sit with your mom while you buy yourself a nice dress for the barn dance. Shoes too, if you

need ‘em.”

She raises her puffy eyes to meet my gaze. “I can’t.”

I kiss her forehead. “Yes, the fuck you can.”

“But...”

“I insist.”

“But...”

I shake my head. “Your dad goes to Morrinsville all the time and buys what he wants, why should you be any different?”

Cady frowns. “What do you mean?”

What I mean, is that if he spent less on hookers, he could pay his daughter more for the work she does, but I don’t know how to put that more delicately.

“I’ve seen him there a few times, having a night out with his... friend,” I say cautiously. “And while every man deserves to have a good time now and then, he does it regularly, using money that should be in your pocket and time he should spend giving you a break. It’s unfair that he’s created a narrative that makes you feel bad for wanting even a fraction of the freedom he enjoys. You shouldn’t be made to feel guilty for the things you want.”

“Why did you say it like that — friend ?” she asks, sharp as a tack.

I take a deep breath. “It’s going to piss you off.”

She studies my face and then scrunches her nose. “It’s a woman ? He tells me he’s out helping every other neighbor with their shit every other day, so he can go hang out with some secret girlfriend ?” She considers that a moment, and then closes her eyes, and the most compassionate, understanding fucking look comes over her face. “Does he think he’ll hurt my feelings? I know he must be lonely. It’s not like Mom can give him that kind of companionship. He doesn’t have to lie to me about it.”

I stare at her, wondering how she can be so fucking forgiving of such a turd of a man.

She looks at me, and her eyebrows plunge. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I wouldn’t call her a girlfriend so much as a girlfriend experience ,” I say with a wince. It takes a moment while she thinks about what I’ve said, for the penny to drop — but when it does, it hits the ground hard.

“Hookers?” she splutters. “I have to accept a shitty allowance and stick to his tight-assed budgets — have to buy the cheap soap and the shitty shampoo and the no-frills fucking cornflakes, so he can prioritize his spending on hookers ?” She stomps in a circle, punches the air, before stopping still and scrunching her face in disgust. “Ewww . I just pictured it. Get it out of my head.” She swats at the air and then at me as she growls at me through her teeth. “Why did you tell me that?”

“Because nobody else is going to, and you deserve to know, so please don’t shoot the messenger,” I plead, with my hands raised in defense. “It’s beautiful that you want to see the best in him, but he’s a lying asshole who is ruining your life, and he doesn’t deserve the loyalty you give him. I told you because I’m angry about that. I told you because I want better for you, and I want you to want better for yourself. He doesn’t think twice about having a good time or spending on himself, and neither should you. When was the last time you did something you wanted to? Something just for you.”

She twists her pouty lips to one side, looks me over, and sighs. “Yesterday. When I rode your cock and climaxed so hard I saw stars.”

I snort softly. “I was there, and I was gunning for the same damned thing,” I remind her. “I’m asking what Cadence Malone would want just for herself if she didn’t feel too selfish to make it happen.”

She thinks about it, and after a while, her eyes light up. She swallows visibly, and I nod as I point at her guilty-looking face. “Yes. Whatever you’re thinking about right now. Something you want, that nobody lets you have. Today, you’re going to give it to yourself.”

Her eyebrows quirk. “But I don’t have that kind of...”

“I’ll give you the money.”

Her face flushes pink, and she shakes her head. “It will take me too long to pay you b?—”

“Cady, it’s not a loan, it’s a sharing of resources. I have plenty, you need some, I want to give it to you. You share your resources with me all the time, and this is no different.”

Her forehead wrinkles. “What resources ? I don’t give you anything.”

“Wrong. You give me hope, happiness, and squishy feelings in my chest that let me know I’m not dead,” I explain with a grin.

Her frown deepens. “You give me those things too.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say, as said squishy feelings amplify and flutter around inside

me. “But remember that I’ve been around for longer than you have. I’ve had time to accumulate wealth and knowledge, and I love to share both, so let me. I’ve already battled and overcome my demons, and it was a hell of a lot easier to do with good friends in my corner. I can be that for you.”

She looks at me intently, as if she intends to penetrate my soul. “Friends like Jason?”

I nod. “That man has literally saved my life more than once, and he’s not the only one, but he definitely taught me a thing or six about how to be strong and resilient. I had a shitty family too, but I was blessed with a damned good team of guys behind me. They caught me every time I fell, they patched me up, and they sent me back out to try again. It didn’t matter what I did, they loved me unconditionally.”

I stroke her cheek and sweep her hair away from her pretty face. “You haven’t had that, Cady. The love you’ve been shown has come with conditions, and you’ve been intentionally isolated by someone who benefits greatly from keeping you in the battered underdog position. Please know that you have a loyal and protective Cane Corso standing right here, with an abundance of big dog energy, who is ready to back you up any time you need to fight for what you want. All you need to do is give the command. You’re not alone anymore. I love you, without expectation, and I have been very clear about that. What I’m suggesting isn’t charity, it’s an investment, because I want to see you reach your potential. You’re worthy of help, I want to give it to you, and I have the means to do so, but it’s up to you if you want to accept what I’m offering.”

She doesn’t answer and still looks uncomfortable with the idea of taking money from me, so I raise my hands in surrender and shrug. “Whatever you want to do is fine but try to understand how much I would love to see you strut into that dance, looking confident and gorgeous. The men will all rush to hide their hard dicks while they’re wishing they had the balls to ask you out, and I’ll stand in the shadows — proud and erect — knowing how fucking perfect you feel around my cock.”

Her lips twitch in a hint of a smile, and I kiss the top of her head. “And maybe I’ll be able to meet you out back for a covert quickie in the nearest haystack.”

She slaps my chest and sighs. “Thank you. For being you.”

“For being the lucky son of a bitch who gets to love you?” I kiss her again. “I wouldn’t want to be anybody else.”

I watch Cady check the clock. She’s wriggling in her chair, so I know there’s a plug in her ass. She’ll be wetter than a mermaid’s back pocket, and I’m thirsty as fuck for her, chomping at the bit to play, but I’m also very aware that I need to have a serious chat with her today.

Her confidence has grown exponentially over the past couple of weeks, which is a marvel to watch, but I can see she’s getting close to seizing the reins of her own life, and that comes with consequences. I want her to feel secure about any choices she wants to make, and I need to check she’s thought through everything she needs to before she dons the eye-bulging, cock-swelling, fantasmic little dress she plans to wear to this weekend’s barn dance.

She’s no dummy, so I’m sure she understands the gravity of a power move like that, but I’m not sure she knows what to expect when it comes to the aftermath. And while I don’t want to scare her into reconsidering the idea she’s worked so bravely toward, I don’t want her walking into the inevitable shitstorm blind.

She issues her last book for the day, and shoos Cameron Douglas out the door, locking it loudly behind him, before she marches straight for me and the back room.

“I’m ready,” she says, already stripped half-naked when she gets in the door.

I grin at her bare, jigglng tits as she shimmies her skirt to the floor. “I can see that.”

She shakes her head and tugs my T-shirt upward, shoving at it until I pull it over my head for her. “I didn’t mean — ” She tilts her head from side to side. “Well, obviously, I’m ready for cock.” She hooks her fingers over the waistband of my jeans and pulls me closer, so she can unbutton them. “I’m wearing the next size up, and it’s got me feeling a certain way, so pull your jeans down, sit your ass on that chair and let me ride you.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Unable to resist such beautiful commands, I do as I’m told, and she climbs aboard.

We both moan when she slides her hot, soaking hole down my cock. The plug has her tight and firm around my shaft, and she feels so good, I want to come within seconds. I strain my lower abs and try to stave it off, but holding back is only made more difficult when she starts fucking me like an absolute fiend. She bumps and grinds against me, hitting all the good spots for herself, and I love it. She pumps her hips, taking my cock, rubs her clit at me, and every so often she scoots herself forward to stimulate the bulb in her ass.

“ Fuck , Cady. What’s gotten into you today?”

“Besides you?” She giggles and rides me faster. Her tits are bouncing like crazy, she’s flipping her hair like a wild woman, and her arousal is soaking my lap. “I’m excited.”

“No shit.” I grit my teeth and grip the chair beneath me. “Me too. You’re gonna make me come.”

“Good,” she says, thrusting at me hard. “Paint my walls and leave me dripping. Seed me, cowboy.”

“ Cady .” My head falls back, as I roar my release. I buck beneath her, filling her cunt

with hot jets of cum until it's squirts out of her with every move she makes. She flings her arms around my neck and clings to me as she sends herself into a series of strong, electric spasms, until she's limp and breathing hard.

Still trying to catch a breath myself, I push my fingers into her hair and curl them possessively around her silky tresses. "What the fuck was that?" I gasp, sensitive to her quivering aftershocks. I blink several times to help clear my blurred vision. "I can hardly see, I came so hard."

She moans and slowly rocks her hips. "Mmm . I needed that."

"So it seemed. Are you okay?"

"More than," she says in a lazy drawl, as she pushes herself back to meet my gaze. "I've decided to leave town."

I search her eyes and nod. "Okay. Which follow-up question do I ask first? When? Where? With whom? I can already understand the why ."

"As soon as I build up the courage to tell Dad," she says proudly. "Well, not straight away. I can give him a week or two to arrange replacement care for Mom. I'm not a monster." She gazes into the distance and smiles. "I'm hoping to do it the night of the barn dance, if I don't chicken out. As for where...? Anywhere but here. There are countless places I want to go and see. I'll pack light, drive to the nearest airport, buy the cheapest flight out, and start there. My savings aren't huge, so I'll get a job first thing, and then reassess. And as for with whom..."

She lowers her head and looks at me all shy, as she flutters her lashes. "You want to come with me?"

My cock strains inside her. "Fuck yes. But only if you don't try to get a job straight

away, and instead, you let me pay for everything while you rest this sexy, fuckable ass.” I slap her rear, and she clenches her pussy around my cock with a moan. “You need a holiday. In fact, you can be on holiday for the rest of your life if you want. I can afford it. Easily. But if you find something you really want to do, I’m not going to stop you from going for it,” I assure her, when I realize I’m getting too excited. “If you want to go to college or train for something, I’ll pay for that too. You do remember that I grant scholarships to promising young students of life, right?”

Cady inhales deeply and holds it. “I don’t know. I don’t want it to look like I’m using you for your money. I don’t need you to be my sugar daddy. I can earn my keep.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t. I just want you to be comfortable, but I’ll happily throw all the money away if having it makes you uncomfortable. As for what anyone else thinks? As long as things are good between you and me, everyone else can fuck themselves. Agreed?”

She nods.

I give her a sideways look. “Are you sure about this? Leaving town? You’ve thought it all through?”

She nods again. Hesitantly. “I think so. I mean, Dad can probably afford care for Mom if he stops splurging on hookers, right?” She groans and drags her hand down her face. “I shouldn’t have to say shit like that.” She sucks in a breath and nods. “Yes, I’m sure. I know Dad won’t be happy about it, but his happiness doesn’t get to be more important than mine, right? And what can he really do? I’m allowed to leave home. I’m twenty-six.” She rolls her eyes and groans. “God, why have I waited this long already?”

“Because you’ve been financially, psychologically, and emotionally abused by a master of manipulation, and it takes time to build the strength and courage you need

to leave a situation like this. It takes time to realize your worth and choose better for yourself when someone who was meant to love you, spent a lot of time making sure you felt exhausted and worthless.” I cup her face in my hands and kiss her pout. “My dad was similar to yours in many ways, and if you’re open to it, I was hoping to share some things I learned from my experience, so you can feel more prepared for what will happen when you tell him your exciting news. Is that okay?”

She looks deep into my eyes and then shifts her gaze between the old scar along my hairline, and the state of my busted-ass nose. Her eyes begin filling with tears. “How similar?”

I shake my head. “I’m not trying to scare you, Babe. Vander’s not going to lash out at you physically — and even if he did, I’d be right there to prevent it by putting him on the floor. He’s not the violent type, but whether he means to do it or not, he’s still an abusive asshole. He and his demons created the current system to cope with the tragedy that befell your family, and that system comes under threat the moment you tell him you’re going to leave. You understand?”

She furrows her brow. “I think so? I mean, I know he’s not going to like the idea.”

“It’s going to be worse than that, Cady,” I inform her. How to explain evil to someone so pure-hearted and sweet? Someone who has caught glimpses of an illusion, but struggled to believe the truth, because how could someone who loved her be so cruel?

“I’ll explain as best I can from what I know,” I say carefully. “Instead of dealing with the trauma of losing his wife, your dad — stupidly — decided he’d shove that emotional and physical workload onto you, so he could carry on without having to grieve or heal. And now, all these years later, he’s still completely dependent on you staying exactly where you are, nicely trapped under all the burdens he refuses to carry. His life can’t go on as it does without you playing your part — the part he

forced you into at the ripe old age of twelve. You're with me?"

Cady nods slowly, her eyes wide and haunted. She's starting to get it.

"Babe, you're the linchpin of the lies he created to survive. You're the truth that's always been waiting to defeat his masks and stories. And when you're gone, he'll have deal with every overwhelming emotion and selfish decision he's been avoiding for years. The thought alone will terrify him. If he'd just acknowledged your worth and treated you right, it wouldn't have been a problem, but we all know he didn't."

Cady sighs. "He's not a bad man. He does love me, and I know he has it in him to be better. He wasn't always like this."

I nod along, having told myself the same words once upon a time — after every bruise, broken bone, and broken nose. After every poisoned drink, betrayed heart, and incident of stolen winnings.

"I know, babe. People respond differently to the things that happen to them. For example, you chose the opposite path to your father's. You lost your mom, and when you were confronted with a deficit of love, you doubled-down on how much you could give. You have so much empathy and compassion, it's easy for you to see and believe in anyone's potential, and that's a beautiful thing. But not everyone deserves the countless chances your kind heart has been willing to give. Some people are self-absorbed energy vampires, and they'll bleed you dry without a second thought if it serves them. Maybe they'll throw you a breadcrumb of love here and there, to keep from losing their supply completely, but they're parasites. When someone shows you who they are by the way they treat you, believe them.

"The second you tell him you're leaving, your dad's demons will be whispering in his ear about how to fix the situation, but they're demons, so they'll never suggest the right solution — which is to take accountability for his behavior and change it. He's

worked tirelessly to fool everyone into thinking he's the hero and you're just a sidekick, and he's done it so long, he actually believes his own story. There's no way he'll be ready to admit you're the star. That would make him the villain, and once that truth is exposed, his cushy, ego-fueled life is over. He won't want you going anywhere, and he'll do everything in his power to keep you under his control, Cady. The abuse will escalate. Ask me how I know."

She places her hand over my heart. "I'm so sorry you know."

"I'm not," I say squarely, doing my best to model calm and remind her that I not only survived the road I traveled to heal, I also thrived on the other side. That way she'll believe she can make the journey too. "It was a shitty experience to have, but I'm stronger for it. I'm so secure in myself now, nobody could ever destabilize me again. I needed to learn that not everybody deserves my love, and once I truly saw my father for the limited, wounded man he was, I understood that sacrificing myself wasn't ever going to help him, it only enabled him to stay blind to the hard truths about himself that he needed to face. He never knew what he had until he lost it, and if I hadn't walked away when I did, one or both of us would be dead. I could never let myself be sorry for what I've been through, if I can use the wisdom I gained, to help you break free from the same vicious cycle. You don't belong in a cage, Cady. You deserve the world, and I'll do everything in my power to help you get it."

She presses her forehead to mine a moment and then kisses me so sweetly it makes my heart ache. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Daryl Winters. Thank you for loving me like nobody else."

I nuzzle against her, feeling such intense affection, I can hardly breathe. "Likewise, Cadence Malone."

CADENCE

I t's been just over two weeks since I could be called a virgin, and I'm not sure if anyone else can tell, but when I look in the mirror each day, I swear, it shows.

Instead of the tired, shell of a girl I used to see, I look positively bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and I'm pretty sure it's because of all the love that Daryl's been pouring into me.

The love, and the cum, I think with a smirk. During our secret sleepovers and extra library time, Daryl and I have been experimenting in wonderful ways. I've taken a liking to having his nutrient-dense seed drip from both ends, and I think that change in my diet is having an effect. I proudly scrunch the curls I've put through my unusually lush and glossy hair and can't help but notice a luminous glow to my skin.

I look myself over in the mirror and turn to check out my ass in the figure-hugging dress. My curves are on full display with the stretchy, deep-green fabric, and there's no denying I'm a well-rounded woman. I move my hips, loving the freedom in the movement the dress gives me and its softness as it slides against my skin. There's no way to wear underwear without their lines being seen, and the thought of everyone knowing I'm bare-assed beneath makes my nipples harden. I can see them through the fabric too.

It's a dress made to make a man drool, as Daryl put it — while wiping his mouth — when I tried it on for him. His usual look of deep appreciation went into battle with a

hungrier, more mischievous gaze, and I smile when I think about it. I had messy hair and no makeup on at the time, so when he sees me tonight, he's probably going to drop his jaw so drastically, his tongue will roll out along the floor, like one of those cartoon wolves who go about whistling at sassy-hipped femme fatales.

I've never been overly impressed with my looks, but even I can't deny how utterly fuckable I feel in this dress. How powerful. I have the ability to turn heads and set them rolling. And that is both terrifying and exhilarating.

I have always dreamed of wearing something like this, but I would never have dared wear it in public — before now. Before Daryl and I truly connected. On every level.

I meet my gaze in the reflection and catch the bright flash of glee in my eyes. I'm in love. Forbidden love. And my secrets look good on me. One look at the vibrant and glowing woman in the mirror, and it's easy to see that I have loved every second of my time with Daryl. Every covert smile. Every whispered word of truth and praise. Every stolen touch, filled with fondness and warmth, and every body-wracking orgasm that has left me sated and yet always hungry for more.

With Daryl's support, I've been lifting myself out of victim-mode, taking the wheel of my life, and becoming the sexy badass I always knew was hidden under all those layers of guilt, people pleasing, and fear of judgment. Wanting more for myself than the breadcrumbs of love I've been given does not make me selfish, unkind, or disloyal. It makes me human. And when I compare my behavior to that of those around me, I'm a damned good one.

"Tonight, I take my first real step toward freedom, and with Daryl backing me up, I'm going to feel safe and wonderful," I tell my reflection, before I head downstairs to check in with the nurse from Morrinsville, whom Daryl hired to give me the night off. I know from the early days of Mom's care how much that costs, and I had concerns it was too generous a gift — to which he pointed out, that's what I should be

getting paid daily, for all that I do. He also said that although we wouldn't be able to go together, the dance was sort of a date, so he gets to pay.

It's hard to argue with the man when he's got his mind made up to treat me like fucking royalty.

I eventually accepted his offer and agreed to the cover story that I've paid for the nurse out of my savings, because that sends a message to my father about how entitled I feel to a fun night out — how ready I am to take the first step out from the oppression under which I've been living. I'm ready to give everyone their first glimpse of exactly who the fuck I am. Standing tall in this dress, with my head high and my hair loose, I finally look like the bad bitch I've always had to keep quiet and hidden, and I'm ready to go out and claim the life that is mine.

I'm not even scared about what my father will say. He's a broken record I've unconsciously been turning down for years, but I don't need to let his music keep playing. I can play a new song —something I like. Happy in my skin and with my choices, nothing that anybody thinks of me seems to matter much anymore. I've already heard it all before, and I can no longer summon the ability to care. Even Daryl will be the first to say that the only opinion I need to give a damn about is my own. Which is why I love him so fucking much.

I've struggled for years to please everyone around me, only to realize I will never be able to do that and still please my own authentic self. It hurts to accept that, but I can't do any better, can't give any more. I've been staring down the barrel at burnout, while fenced in and walking on eggshells, and I can't sustain it. I've done the best that I can, and I've finally made my peace with that. It's time to step away, and if looking after myself for a while makes me an ungrateful child unworthy of love, then that's what I am. I'm going to inform my father that he'll have a week to find a new full-time carer, look after Mom himself, or put her in a facility, because I'm leaving, and I won't be coming back.

My aim is to be fashionably late. I want to blend in before anyone can be too surprised to see me in their midst, and it's definitely dark enough to give me some cover. The sky is clear, but the moon is a quarter after full, and it feels like the perfect night to duck in and out of the shadows however I need to.

Light flows into the Thompson's gravel courtyard from the wide-open barn doors, but the approach from the parking area remains dimly lit, not quite illuminated by the welcoming fire pits out front. Nobody's going to know I'm here until I get inside, and that's exactly what I want. Dad's less likely to cause a scene in front of the people he spends all his time fooling into believing he's a composed man of class and firm but fair values.

I step out of my car, glad I chose to wear my favorite, broken-in old boots, as the ground feels a little soft under foot. The band is rocking a loud, upbeat ditty, and it easily puts a little jaunt in my step. I walk between the cars, swinging my hips and tapping my fingers against my thigh. Will the dance floor be crowded already? How long has it been since I danced outside of my kitchen? That school dance I attended in seventh grade, the week before Mom's accident?

I gasp when a flash of movement catches my eyes, but I grin when I recognize Daryl lurking behind his truck. "You look fucking gorgeous, Cady," he says, taking me in and swearing as he makes the obligatory crotch adjustments to accommodate his erection. "The way you were shaking that sexy ass of yours just now? You're making me want to drag you into the fields and fuck it, so best you get it inside before I set my mind to it." A hungry rumble accompanies a playful slap on my rump, and he then saunters toward the barn ahead of me. He flashes me a dazzling grin over his shoulder before he gets too far. "Save me a dance?"

"Midnight. Over the garden wall."

He gives me a thumb's-up, and I let him get a decent distance before I follow. He's

already been here a while, keeping up appearances, and I wasn't expecting him to greet me, but I'm glad that he did. So glad, I can't shift the smile from my face, and I walk into the barn dance, ready to make it my bitch.

Within three steps of entering, the faces start to turn my way. It happens slowly at first, and then all at once, as the dominoes are set in motion one by one by the nudge of an elbow to a neighbor, or one man's tug of another man's shirt. Eyes widen, mouths drop open, and the music may as well screech to a halt with how still everyone becomes.

I don't try to hide. It would be impossible in this dress. My tits are the particularly proud and pretty centerpiece nestled into the snug, low-cut neckline. In fact, every curve I have is on display. Everyone here can see that all their beliefs about my being daddy's reclusive little good girl are about to be challenged and obliterated.

I see Sally Carruthers in the mix and wave. She looks around as if she's about to be burned at the stake and quickly retreats through the people behind her. I guess my waving could suggest she's in some way responsible for my saucy transformation, and while my first thought is to find her later and apologize for not considering that, my second thought, is that I don't need to give a fuck about how she chooses to respond to a friendly wave.

Weirdly, nobody says anything to me. No-one approaches. They just look at me, like I'm some sort of freak — and to them, I probably am. None of them know anything about me, other than what they've chosen to believe, so being faced with something to the contrary... it's likely a little unsettling. And awkward.

“Y'all act like you've never seen a woman before, but I know y'all have seen plenty. Carry on, everyone.” I swat my hand at the bulk of the group and head for the drinks table.

“Cadence Malone.”

I brace myself and turn slowly to greet my father. “Yes, Daddy?”

“What the hell are you wearing, and who in the world is watching your mother?”

“Well, this is called a dress. And Mom’s at home, perfectly safe, with the nurse I booked to watch her so I could have a night off. I even cleaned out the downstairs bedroom, so she can be put to bed there, leaving no need for you to call your night short to carry her up the stairs. After all, I know how late you like to stay out with your friends, especially the ones in Morrinsville.” I throw a challenging glare at the many folk who are clearly eavesdropping while trying to look like they’re minding their business. Fucking small towns .

Dad glowers at me and starts shrugging out of his sports coat. “Cover yourself at once. You look like a damn lady of the night.”

“Well, you’d know what one of those looks like, wouldn’t you?” I take his jacket as if I’ll do as he’s asked, but I throw it over the nearest hay bale instead. “Even the Morrinsville nurse from I hired to watch Mom tonight saw your photo on the wall and recognized you from the amount of time you spend in those parts. Seems you’re allowed to abandon your family whenever you want, to entertain who you please, while I’m stuck at home, treated like a sexual leper.”

“ Cadence .” His tone is low and warning, and his eyes flash around the room, like I’m airing his dirty laundry too loudly. I’m not. I’m actually being kindly quiet.

“What did I say?” I ask innocently. “Are you upset I said the word sexual ? Or did I imply I was judging you when I said that I know you’re out paying for it? Because I actually understand that completely. It’s not like Mom can consent to anything anymore, so you can’t go there. So, are you annoyed that I’m calling you a hypocrite?”

Or are you just annoyed that I'm here speaking at all?" I press the back of my hand to my brow with dramatic flair. "Oh no . What if someone hears the truth." I roll my eyes and walk around him to get myself a drink.

"You're looking exceptionally sassy and voluptuous tonight, Miss Malone," Daryl says, already at the drinks table.

I snort and accept the drink he hands me. "Good evening, Mr. Winters. Read any good books lately?"

Dad comes butting in between us. He takes the drink from my hand and dumps it into the nearby trash bucket. "Whatever argument you're having with me, there's no need to ruin your life over it by becoming this man's next victim. Don't ever accept a drink from this man again. Especially dressed as you are. You're asking for trouble."

I stare at my father. "Are you serious? Did you — in the space of one breath — accuse an innocent man of drugging my drink in the hope of then assaulting me in some way; while also telling me it would be my own fault, because I'm wearing a nice dress? Do you even hear yourself?"

Daryl clears his throat. "Harmful and misguided as his suggestions may be, I believe your father is only trying to protect you from a perceived threat." He steps closer and stands taller, towering over my father a little. "He doesn't want my... reputation to touch a woman of your obvious grace and caliber."

"Well, that's God's honest truth." Dad jabs Daryl in the chest with his finger. "So take your drink and get your shitty reputation the hell away from my daughter, ass-fucker ."

Daryl inhales through pursed lips and then grins. "No need to get so defensive, Vander. I'm not trying to stick my dick in your ass. You're not my type." He gives

me a wink and walks away with a sexy swagger in his step. It's hard not to watch his ass as he leaves, and Dad notices my interest.

"Don't you try and break my heart that way, Cady. You're worth more than that."

"Am I?" I ask turning back to him. "How much am I worth, exactly? A full-time salary with benefits and annual leave? Because that's what you'll have to pay someone when I leave town next week."

"What?" The look on his face is priceless and incredibly satisfying.

I cover my fake gasp. "Oh. Did I not tell you? I must have been too busy arguing for this one, single night off. Wow. It's a good thing I won't have to fight for my human rights anymore. That must be such a relief for a man who cares so much for his daughter he does everything he can to keep her from ever leaving the house."

I'm so consumed by my rant, he actually looks a little scared. He even takes a step back. "Cadence, you're being unreasonable?"

My rage-fires are about to burn this fucker to the ground. "I'm being unreasonable?"

Dad glances around, takes my elbow, and guides me away from the crowd. "Lower your voice, you're causing a scene. People are starting to stare."

"So?" I yank my arm away from him. "Let them look. You know what they'll see? A grown woman having fun at a dance. You have a great night, Dad."

I merge with the dance crowd, moving in time with the music. I take a moment to collect myself, and then really settle into the fun I came here to have. It feels like forever ago that I hung out with any of my peers from school, but it doesn't take long for the smiles to welcome me back into the fold. Are they catching glimpses of who I

used to be?

How unrecognizable to them have I become over the years, as I withdrew further and further into my shell? Do I seem like a stranger to them?

I certainly feel like a stranger. As much as I want to feel connected to these people, I can't. I'm no longer the shell I became under Dad's burdens, but I'm not who I was back then either. I'm something new and fresh; something poised on the edge of an entirely new beginning, where I can be anyone I want and go anywhere I want. Every possibility is now open to me, and as overwhelming as that may feel, I'm excited by it.

I make my way toward an exit, in need some fresh air and a hug from the man I love.

DARYL

I watch her from the shadows. She walks straight past me and keeps on going. She moseys around the dark garden as if she's more interested in smelling the herbs it's growing than she is in meeting me for a secretive slow dance. And I know why.

The Raynor twins are sneaking sips of their Daddy's whiskey behind the woodsheds, and they've seen her walk past — I can tell by the nearby giggles and the quips about how much wood they'd like to store in her shed. Little shitheads. I'll find a way to knock their gourds together later and teach 'em some respect. I'd do more if they were old enough to grow dick hairs, but they ain't, so I'll let 'em live.

Can't fault their opinion of Cady, after all. She's hotter than a stand of Osage Orange on fire, and after watching her cook her dad's goose to perfection, I'm going to need me some of that sweet, sassy heat. Watching her confidently cut him down to size got me so fucking hard it's unreal. What a blaze of fucking glory.

I stay silent and still, watching her pale skin shine in what little light there is to see by. She's luminous despite the lack of moon glow, and she winds through the garden paths, almost dancing each step she takes. She's beautiful. Ethereal. Free .

The twins' mom calls their name, and they scamper away, leaving Cady and I blissfully alone.

The moment they're gone, she trots over to where I'm hiding behind the trees, near

the garden's bricked wall. From what I can tell, she's not wearing any underwear, definitely not a supportive bra, and I watch her every captivating jiggle with a grin.

As soon as she's close enough, I reach out, grab her, and reel her into my secret woodland lair. I pull her in close, kiss the top of her head, and rock us in a slow, sultry dance, even though the music playing out into the night is more up-tempo. It feels like too long since I touched her, and I'm desperate to hold as much of her body against mine as I can.

"This isn't a very good hiding spot," she whispers. "I could absolutely see the size and shape of you standing in here like a creeper."

"Probably because you were looking for the size and shape of me, you sexy little predator." I flash her my best smile, and she smothers a giggle.

I spin her around, tug up her dress, lift her from the ground, and press her to the wall with my hips. "Did I tell you how fucking turned on I was when you bitch-slapped your dad with your verbal badass-ery?"

"Is it as turned on as you are right now?" she asks, rubbing herself against the bulge in my jeans. "Because that seems like a lot."

"I'll fucking show you a lot ." I grapple with my jeans, to free my cock, and then I drive it straight into her slick, ready heat.

My breath rushes out of me when I find her tight as fuck. Holy shit, I know this feeling. No wonder she's squirming and gasping for air too.

"You're wearing a plug ?" Filled with shock and awe, I try to curb my enthusiasm.

" Uh-huh ." She pants and mewls, making a hell of a noise as she rocks her hips and

adjusts to accommodating my cock as well.

“ Fuck .” I clamp my hand over her moans and thrust into her, loving the way the bulbous plug in her ass is forcing her to squeeze my cock so beautifully. “You’re going to have to keep that pretty mouth of yours quiet if you don’t want us to get caught, Miss Malone.”

The second I ease my hand from her mouth, she tilts her head back against the wall and moans again. I hurry to smother it and then keep my hand sealed tightly over her lips. “We’ll just keep this here, then,” I say with a suppressed chuckle as I piston my hips. “It’s hard to keep myself quiet too, babe,” I whisper, low and close. “You feel fucking incredible. And you’re fucking dripping with need. God . You’ve been dancing around all night with this thing in there?”

It’s too much. She’s too perfect. How can I be this fucking lucky? I grind her clit and fuck her faster, grateful for the wall at her back that’s keeping us from going anywhere but Pleasure-town .

I pump my thick cock into her tight, juicy, little cunt, and want to both moan and cringe at how loud the wet sounds of our fucking are. If anyone walks by, they’re going to hear us, and if they come to investigate, it’ll set off the bombshell we’ve been hoping to avoid until Cady feels strong enough to handle it. She’s already lit the fuse with her dad tonight, and although we’re both turned on by the risk of getting caught while we’re sneaking a quick fuck, someone actually catching us in the act isn’t part of the plan. There’s no way to smother the current volume of our gloriously erotic sounds, so we either need to get done incredibly fast or we need to stop until we can get away from here altogether.

A ripple of energy shudders through Cady’s cunt, and she pulls tighter around my cock.

Done fast, it is .

I grin and nip at her ear. “ Mmm . Quick-trigger Cady. That’s my girl.” I pin my hand over her mouth more firmly as she starts to buck, and then I join her in the final dash to the finish. I slam into her slurping cunt as the pressure of my own release rushes to the fore. “Gimme what you’ve got, Babe.”

We crest together. A beautiful synchronistic merging of our souls. I can’t tell if she sets me off, or if the opposite is true. All I know, is the flood of relief and pure joy I feel at pouring myself into her, while she strokes and squeezes and pulls my very essence from my depths, into hers. I send with it, all my hopes and dreams of us creating a family and a future together, far away from here, in some new home we create just for us. “Make us a baby, Beautiful.”

She bucks her enthusiasm and milks my cock with her spasms, taking everything I can give her. Every spurt I pulse into her heat is another shot at getting her knocked up. One step closer to her carrying our baby inside her beautiful belly, and me taking care of her every fucking need for the rest of forever. The fact that it’s only fantasy doesn’t take away from how good it feels. It doesn’t matter that she’s on birth control now, or how, when, or if these things will even happen. What’s important, is that right now, we’re both on board with the idea. In this moment, we’re joined in our minds and hearts.

Unlike any other woman I’ve ever met, Cady sees who I am and accepts me. She welcomes me in and makes me feel at home. The sense of rightness and belonging between us is overwhelming and spiritual, and to bring that same feeling into the physical, I keep our bodies pinned so closely together, I can imagine us permanently fused. These moments, where we connect on every level, are so powerful, it’s hard not to imagine a more fitting result than creating life from them. What greater blessing could come from the culmination of our love? What better proof would there be, that our union was blessed by the universe?

I do my best to wipe away the excess, but she needs a trip to the ladies' room to better tidy up the mess I've left between her thighs. Every time she moves, more cum dribbles out of her. The way it glistens in the moonlight is fucking gorgeous, but I don't want other people seeing it, and I've got nothing decent to clean her up with.

I look her over, and my dick automatically wants to play again. She looks well-fucked. Utterly blissed out and calm, but with a definite need to touch up her hair and makeup. "Best you tidy yourself up a bit more before anyone sees you," I rumble in her ear. "I'll hang around the fire pits until you're ready to head back to your place."

"Will you come over?" she whispers, her eyes pleading.

"Of course." I kiss her pouty lips. "I'm not leaving you alone tonight. You're going to need support you when your dad kicks off."

"You really think he will?"

"Without question," I say with surety. "But you're ready for it. You're strong as fuck, and you've already done the hard part by taking that leap of faith. You told him you're leaving. Now, all you need to do is stand your ground. And I'm going to be right there if you need me."

I lean down and kiss her throat, feeling her pulse pounding beneath my lips. I wrap my arms around her, and sway.

"It's all going to be okay, Cady. Your dad's not going to act out while there are other people around. I don't doubt for a second that he'll blow his stack once you get home, that nurse leaves, and he thinks he's got you cornered, but know that I'll be right there to keep you safe. His demons can't hurt you, and they're not yours to take on. They're his, and your leaving will help him defeat them, but you'll need to stay strong. A demon always screams before it dies," I say, remembering the showdown I

had with my father. “Look it right in the eyes and let it. Once it sees you know your worth and aren’t afraid of it, it’ll have no option but to release your dad, so he can start to heal. You’re doing him a favor by walking away.”

She takes a bracing breath and nods. “I’m ready.”

“Not yet, you’re not. Get to the restrooms and wash up first. I left you a right fucking mess, and your daddy doesn’t need to know you’ve been out here riding a cowboy. We don’t need to add insult to injury in regard to his ego. Let him deal with one crisis at a time.”

I give her a quick kiss and slap her ass, to send her on her way to the restrooms, but she’s in no hurry to go.

She walks a few steps and then pauses to do a sexy little shimmy. She glances over her shoulder at me and grins while she happily slides her slick thighs together.

My heart swells, and I inhale deeply as I shake my head. I pat my hand over my heart, blow her a kiss, check our surroundings again, and make a shooing motion at her. She eventually gets moving again, and from the way she sways her hips as she walks, it’s obvious she’s smearing every drip of cum that seeps from her seeded cunt. With joy .

My chest puffs with pride. That’s my woman .

I wait a few breaths and then leave the walled garden in the opposite direction. There’s no way we’ll keep our secret if I’m caught nearby when she’s looking so beautifully fucked and sated. Best not to make it too easy for any onlookers to make the connection that I’m the man who pleases her into that pretty state of inner peace.

I make my way to where the fire pits are burning, grabbing myself a lemonade from

the ice bath along the way. It's easy enough to make small talk with country folk when you've done it half your life, and it's not that the conversation is boring all the time, but I miss Cady, and the next-level banter we share.

"There he is." I turn around to see Vander James Malone marching toward me with Sheriff Lou. "On your knees, ass-fucker."

I snort and take a sip of my lemonade. "I don't suck dick, babe. And whatever's up your ass, it sure as hell ain't me. I keep telling you, you're not my type. Stop embarrassing yourself."

Vander attempts to lunge at me, but Lou blocks him with a barred arm. "I'll handle this, Van. Go find Cady and make sure she's okay."

I frown. "Why wouldn't she be?"

"Because you're a fucking rapist ." Vander spits at me. It hits my boot, and I restrain every instinct I have to break his face. I have to remain calm or someone's going to get fucked up, and I ain't getting arrested tonight when I need to be around to protect Cady from this asshole.

"Are you serious? I'd never force myself on anyone. Ever ."

"There's proof," Sheriff Lou says flatly as Deputy Dan arrives.

I look around, stunned. The small crowd that was gathered around the fire pits takes a step backward. Deputy Dan ushers them away, towing Vander with him as he goes. He pushes him toward the barn before circling back to join the sheriff, who now has his gun out of his holster.

I raise my hands. "What the fuck kind of proof do you have of a crime I didn't

commit, Lou?”

“I’ll show you, but I need you in cuffs first.” Lou nods to Dan, who gulps visibly as he looks me up and down. I’m twice his size, and if I was a threat, he should definitely be that fucking worried, but I’m not.

“Look, guys. Take it easy. There’s been some sort of misunderstanding here. Shit . Cady will tell you. And I’ll happily wait in cuffs while you ask her.” I hold my wrists out.

“Hands on your head,” Lou says. “Turn around and kneel.”

I do as I’m told and offer no resistance, even though Dan wrenches my arms into position like a total dick. “Nobody fucks with Cady,” he growls at me before shoving me into the dirt. “She’s a Beaumont City treasure.”

“I never said she wasn’t,” I growl back. “And if I were you, I’d be mindful of a police brutality suit for assaulting an innocent civilian, you fucking jackass.”

“Like any judge would believe a convicted felon over a dutiful small-town cop.”

“A convicted felon with friends in high places and plenty of money to take down a couple of entitled redneck fucks who think they’re the law. You’re going to stand there and watch him do this, are you Lou?”

The sheriff crouches next to me and holds a phone in front of my face. He hits play on the screen, and the video on display springs to life. The lighting in the shot isn’t great, but it’s definitely me. Fucking Cady against the wall. Hard. With my hand clasped over her mouth.

Yeah , that looks pretty fucking bad.

“That was consensual,” I say in a stern tone.

Dan kicks me in the side. “Shut the fuck up.”

“Lou ,” I growl through gritted teeth.

The sheriff looks me right in the eye. “I didn’t see anything. But the kids we found crowded around this phone saw more than they should have.”

Dan kicks me again. Harder. This is going to escalate quickly.

“Find Cady,” I growl through my teeth.

“We will. And we’ll be sure to promise her justice.” He delivers a blow to my head, and I fight to keep the darkness from my vision, as I’m hauled away.

“Where are you taking me? I want my lawyer. I have rights, assholes.”

They shove me in the back of Lou’s patrol car and walk away while I yell every foul name I have at them.

15

CADENCE

It's incredibly hard to sneak into the bathrooms when it's half-past-drunk-o'clock and women seem to pee in groups, but eventually I make a break from the nearby bushes and shut myself safely inside a stall. I freshen up as best I can, doing my hair and makeup while I'm behind a locked door, so there's no chance for anyone to see me looking positively undone. By the time I flush the toilet and walk out of the stall, I feel confident that the people of Beaumont City are none the wiser about my secret life.

"Oh my God." Martha Crinshaw and Jeanie Harlow cover their mouths at the same time and stare at me with huge, weirdly sympathetic gazes. I take a step back, and Martha shows me her palms, as if she thinks she's spooked me. "Cady. Everyone's looking for you. Are you okay?"

I frown and move around them to the sink to wash my hands. "I'm fine. And I'm definitely not lost. Why are people looking for me?"

They look at each other and make strange faces.

"What's going on?" I ask again.

"You don't need to pretend to be strong, sweetie. It's not your fault, and nobody's going to judge you. We all know what kind of girl you are, and the sheriff's taking care of it."

“Taking care of what?” I ask, as a heavy, sinking feeling hits my stomach.

“Daryl Winters,” Jeanie whispers, before covering her mouth again.

“That man should have been run out of town the day he arrived. He’s going to get what’s coming to him, Cady. Don’t you worry. You’re safe now. What do you need? Water? A hug? What’s the right thing to offer in times like these?”

“Times like these,” I repeat slowly, terrified of what the fuck may be happening outside the bathroom. I walk toward the door, zombie-like and push out into the chaos. The lights of Lou’s car are flashing red and blue, and I see a familiar figure sitting in the back, his hair a mess, and his head resting an odd angle on the back of the seat. What. The. Fuck?

I look around for Lou, desperate for answers, but walk straight into Dad.

“Cadence. Thank goodness. Let’s get you home before anyone sees you. They’ll only want to start gossip. I told you that dress would get you into trouble, but you wouldn’t listen. Honestly. I have done my best to protect you from the horrors of this world, and then you go and get yourself raped by that vile man. You’ll never be able to show your face in town again. They’ll give you a name, you know. What would you mother do if she knew? Her only daughter, violated by the ass-fucker.”

I pull my arm back from Dad’s grip. “Get myself...? I don’t even know where to—” I point at the cop car behind the barn. “What have you done?”

“What any decent father would. I’ve made sure that man can never touch you again. He’ll get serious time for this.”

“Decent father?” I splutter and storm away to find the Sheriff. “Lou? Lou.”

Dad chases me. “Let him do his job, Cady. We’ve all seen the evidence.”

I stop in my tracks and turn to face my father. “What evidence, Daddy?” I yell at him. “There’s been no crime. I’m a grown woman, and I wanted to fuck Daryl, so I did. I’ve been fucking him for weeks, and I plan to fuck him for years to come. And I don’t use any birth control. I could be pregnant with his child, right now, and I hope that I am. I’ve wanted a new family for years, because I am fucking done with the one I have. Forget me leaving in a week. I’ll be gone tonight, and I’m never coming home again. What do you think about that ?”

I don’t wait to hear his answer, because I can see Deputy Dan having what looks like celebratory drinks. Motherfuckers . I head straight for them, but Dad grabs my hand and yanks me back. “Let them do their job, Cady.”

“Their job is to protect and serve, not do unlawful vigilante shit and be a bunch of fucking idiots.”

“Daryl resisted arrest and assaulted an officer.”

“Why wouldn’t he resist? He’s not fucking guilty.”

“He’s going to prison.”

“Then so am I.” I flip him the bird, march straight toward Deputy Dan, and slap him upside the head. “Daniel Ferguson, you had better have a good fucking reason for locking my boyfriend in the back of that police car.”

Dan spits his beer, “ Boyfriend? ” He looks me over, and puffs through his lips in disbelief. “Cady, there’s no way we’re going to believe that kind of horse shit. Whatever that man’s threatened you with, to make you lie or keep a hush about the incident, it ain’t going to save him. You go home and take all the time you need to

recover. He won't be bothering you anymore, so don't you worry about a thing. We'll take care of it."

I stare at him, dumbfounded. I shake my head. "I'm sorry, what?"

Sheriff Lou joins us and clears his throat. "Cadence, your Daddy's worried you're acting out of character. He suspects you're suffering some emotional — but perfectly reasonable — post-traumatic upheaval, and after hearing you just now, I can see his point. I understand you've been through a lot," he says slowly and softly, "and if you need me to call Nurse Sheila so you've got a woman to talk to about what happened, I'm happy to do it, but we all think it'd be better if you went home and had some rest first. We can take your statement in the morning." He points over at his car. "And if that man made you say that story, it ain't going to help him none. Nobody's going to believe a sweet girl like you was doing anything consensual with a man like that no how, so don't waste your breath. You focus on getting some rest, and we'll talk tomorrow. I've given your daddy the names of some counsellors, and I think doing a rape kit would be invasive and unnecessary at this point. We've got all the evidence we need, and it don't seem right to put you through it."

Ready to pull my fucking hair out, I scream at him. "What fucking evidence?"

Sheriff Lou shakes his head and takes a step back. "Don't make me re-traumatize you, Cady. I can't do it. You're suffering enough. Look at you."

I do look at myself.

I look at myself from everyone else's warped perception and consider assaulting some people myself. But that's not going to help Daryl. I need to stay calm and see everything for what it is and everyone for who they are — a big, fat lie.

This whole town is making my life the biggest fattest lie there ever was, and no

matter how crazy, helpless, or victimized I'm being made out to be, I refuse to live it.

The demon always screams before it dies .

I stand tall, take a deep breath, and nod as I'm the calmest I've ever been. "Thank you, Sheriff, Deputy . As you suggested, I think I will take my leave."

I walk away, forcing my brain to come up with a plan. I see my father in the distance and press myself against the nearest tree in the hopes he won't see me. He stops to talk to Mrs. Peterson, and I can just tell he's lapping up all the sympathy he's getting from this Smear campaign he's created to get rid of Daryl.

While he's distracted, I quickly head the other way, ducking between the sheds, and doubling back to where Lou's car is parked. Those doors to the back are only locked from the inside, so the criminals can't get out, right? And nobody ever locks their cars around here. We're a small town. Everybody knows everybody. It's safe and there's no need.

I creep close and try the handle. The door opens, and I slip into the backseat, where Daryl is handcuffed and bruised .

I pull the door nearly closed and shuffle over to him. "Mother fuckers . They beat you?"

Daryl rouses slowly and smiles when he recognizes me. "Hey, Beautiful. Are you okay?"

" Me? " I assess his swollen face and whimper. "Are you okay?"

He razzes his lips at me. "This is nothing. The way I grew up? I'm immune to this kind of shit." He searches my eyes and plumps his bottom lip. "Don't look all sad,

Babe. I promise it doesn't even hurt. Shit, Patty Maddog MacArthur had a better right hook than Dan — The Fuckhead —Fergusson."

I snort softly and glance out the back window. "They're all against us," I tell him straight. "I think they're trying to make out that I'm too traumatized and mentally disturbed to testify or something. I've tried telling the truth, but they refuse to hear it."

"Sounds about right." Daryl sighs. "I know how to deal with the situation, but it'll take some time, and I'll need you to make some calls for me — if that's not too much to ask? I get the feeling I won't be allowed to do shit until they decide to let me, and that could be a while yet."

"Of course that's not too much to ask, but I've got a better idea." I get into a new position and shove Daryl's legs together.

"What do you want to do?" he asks, doing his best to cooperate.

"You ," I say, unbuttoning his jeans and wrestling them down. "If they all think I'm the kind of girl who'd never consensually fuck Daryl Winters, then I'm going to show them otherwise," I say, straddling him with confidence. "They did us a favor by cuffing you." I rub my wet pussy against his cock and peel the top half of my dress down, to get my tits out. I thrust my firm nipples toward his face. "I want you to suck these. Are you sure you're not in too much pain?"

"If I was, I'd be too distracted to think about it." His cock jerks beneath me in confirmation. "Are you sure about this?" He glances out the car windows with wild, excited eyes.

"Very sure. I think it would be kind of cool to conceive our first kid in the back of a cop car," I say with a grin.

Daryl's cock strains at me in earnest, and he lets his head fall back as he moans. "That would be pretty cool."

"And absolutely possible," I assure him. "I haven't once used any kind of birth control since we've been together."

He lifts his head and stares at me, his eyes dark and hungry.

"I hope those dilated pupils are due to arousal and not head injury," I say, only half-joking.

"Hundred percent lust," he says in a low rumble. "You mean..."

"I want your babies. I've always wanted your babies. Your breeding kink turns me the fuck on, so I'm pretty sure I have it too. Do I mean that we could very well be having a baby nine months from now?" I nod. "Absolutely. But you should definitely come inside me again right now to increase the odds."

His laughter is deep and full of heart. "I fucking love you so much, Cadence Malone."

"Right back at ya, big guy." I slide onto his thick, ready cowboy cock, and start to ride. "Feel free to be as loud as you want when you come. Attention is really the only thing that can help us tonight."

"I can do loud," he says, practically whispering.

"Are you sure?"

He nods. "When it's time. I want to enjoy being fucked by a total badass in the back of a police car for a while first, if you don't mind?"

He doesn't wait for an answer. Instead, he latches on to my breast and starts lapping at my nipple hard and fast. Pleasure rockets through me, and I fuck him faster. "God, that feels good. I fucking love it when you suck my tits like that. It's like I'm actually feeding you or something, and I don't know why that's hot, but it is." He tugs harder with his hot mouth, and my pussy pulls tighter around his cock. "Fuck ." I fist my hands in his hair and grind on him even more enthusiastically, chasing the pleasure he sends spiraling through my body. "Will you do this when the baby comes and there's milk?"

Daryl thrusts his cock at me and moans into my breast before he releases my nipple. He pants at me, wets his lips, and looks me straight in the eye. "That's what I'm already imagining every time I do it," he says in a husky tone before he lunges at my other breast and latches on.

My pussy twitches with more orgasmic inklings, and I roll my hips, making his cock churn my depths while I imagine this big, grown man pulling milk from my breast. My pussy slurps at his cock with an abundance of fluid. A combination of my intense arousal and the volume of his last seminal deluge. The idea of my slicking him with his own seed this way, unlocks another level of enjoyment, and I increase my pace. Is this similar to the way he loves seeing me bred so much sometimes, he gets desperate to take me again?

Daryl pulls back, breathing hard as his muscles tense beneath me. He's close. "Fuck, I love it when you're pre-seeded and primed," he says with a labored grunt. "I want to keep you this way forever."

"Please do," I pant at him, whining a moan as my pussy shudders with the threat of climax.

We're a perfect match. I'm his girl, and he's my guy. Tonight, everyone's going to learn that truth, and the truth will set us free. I kick the car door open and fuck him

like there's no tomorrow.

“Shit . Baby, you're getting so tight.” Daryl slams himself against the backseat as he fights for self-control. “I hope you're fucking ready for some noise, beautiful, because I'm about to go off like a fucking fire hose.”

I break first, wailing my pleasure into the night with all the power and freedom of a woman in charge of her life.

Daryl follows suit, swearing like a fucking trooper at the top of his lungs as he loudly professes his love for me. “Yes . Cady. Fuck . I love you. I fucking love you, and I don't care who knows it. You beautiful, fucking baddie. I'm so glad you're having my baby.”

The car door slams shut, and Sheriff Lou climbs hurriedly into the front set. “What in the damn hell are you two doing?” He starts the car and starts honking at the crowd that's congregating around the car. “Half the dang town is here to watch.”

“Good,” I pant, waving out the window at them with a grin. “It should be pretty fucking obvious to you all by now, that I am more than happy to fuck Daryl Winters. He's still in fucking handcuffs, so there's no way to paint him as anything but my victim.”

“Willing victim,” Daryl says with a grin. “Totally consensual.”

Lou growls and drives toward town and the station. “Well, your antics have earned you both at least a night in jail.”

Daryl flops his head back against the seat and gives a happy sigh. “Worth it.”

“Definitely,” I agree, snuggling into his chest with a shiver that release a trickle of

cum from my depths. I squirm at the deliciously naughty sensation and whimper softly at the resultant orgasmic aftershocks.

Daryl's cock responds similarly, and he rumbles with approval as he moves his hips to stir the mess we've made. I press my lips to his, and coax his tongue into a long, luxurious kiss as we start making slow, passionate love.

"Stop that," Lou commands from the front seat. "I can fucking hear you."

I snort a giggle and bury my face in Daryl's shoulder.

"Sorry, Lou," he says, his tone serious and respectful. "And thanks for getting us out of there. I promise I'll pay to get your backseat professionally detailed," he says with an audible smile. "It's really gonna to need it."

Lou swears under his breath. "Filthy fucking..."

Daryl shakes with quiet laughter beneath me. He kisses my hair and rests his head against mine. "So, I guess your big plan to confront your dad didn't go quite as expected, but I think it had similar results. Would you agree?"

"We definitely shattered some illusions and made it impossible for things to continue as they were." I smile and listen to his heart beating strong and steady, before I push myself up to meet his dreamy gaze. "Thank you."

Color fills his cheeks, and he looks bashfully out into the night. "For what? A chance to experience the superb accommodation facilities at the Beaumont City Jailhouse?" He sighs. "Probably should have taken you for dinner and a movie for our first night out together. Or some other thing that wouldn't end up stamped on your permanent record."

I smile, guide his face back to mine, and kiss his forehead. “I’m not worried about that. Nor anything else. Not anymore.” I kiss him again, so he’ll know he’s the reason I can be so brave when we’re facing the unknown. No matter what, I know he loves me, and that’s a gift I’ll always be grateful for. Nothing can touch the security I feel within myself or our bond.

“I love you,” I whisper, and kiss him again. “This is the best first date I’ve ever been on. And it’s kind of badass to have fucking a sexy cowboy recorded as a first offense.”

Daryl chuckles. “How many offenses you planning to have?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It depends, I guess. Is it a crime to marry an ass-fucker and live happily ever after?”

Daryl looks me over and wets his lips. “Did you just ask me to marry you? ‘Cause I respect you being a strong, confident woman, and all, but I wanted to be the one to do the asking.”

I press my lips together. “Well, are you gonna?”

“Heck yeah, I am.” He strains his abs to thrust his body forward for a kiss, and a shitload of cum squelches out of me to soak his lap even more. I slide around in it as Lou turns a corner, and Daryl looks between the mess and my face, his eyes wide and sparkling. “You want me to ask now? Or you want to let me organize something a bit more appropriate to share with the kids when they ask about it?” His lips give a playful twitch, and we laugh together as I hug him.

“That one,” I say with a nod.

He nods too. “Deal.”

16

DARYL

Not every girl, would crawl into the back of a cop car and fuck you in front of half her hometown, to prove a point and keep you from a long stint in prison.

I smile at Cady, sitting in the cell next door.

I've got myself a damned good woman.

She yawns and gets off her cot to walk around. She looks at the clock again and sighs. "Fucking Lou. You think he made up that no calls till morning rule because my dad told him to, or because of his own perceived justice agendas?"

"I think he's tired and needs time to figure out what leverage he can bring to the deal he'll have to make with me, so I'll stay quiet about the poor treatment I've received. It's all going to be fine, Cady. I promise. I'm sorry it came to this though. I never wanted you to end up behind bars."

She runs a hand through her hair and offers me a sassy smile. "A hot cowboy once told me it happens sometimes, when you stand up for what you believe in."

My cheeks warm, and I feel a glow around me, like a cozy and comforting blanket. "Just how hot was this guy?" I tease.

"Hot enough to tap this sweet, young thang," she says slapping her ass.

I nod in approval. “Must be pretty hot then.”

“Oh, he’s a keeper,” she assures me as she starts pacing again. “You’re sure Vince will bail us out?”

“Of course. If it even comes to that,” I say, trying to minimize the situation and ease her mind. “I’m pretty sure we’ve just been put on ice though. Lou will probably let us walk out tomorrow without a word. But if he doesn’t, all my friends will have our backs, money’s no issue, and I’ve been through enough lawyers to have found a couple of damned good ones. It’ll all be fine and there’s nothing to worry about. Come lie down and get some rest.” I gesture to her bed and then focus my strength on wrenching the last of the bolts free from the brace holding mine to the floor.

I push the newly liberated cot across my cell and park it next to hers.

“Are you allowed to do that?” she asks, as I lie down, reach my hand through the bars, and pat her mattress.

I grin at her. “What are they going to do? Put me in jail?” I pat her mattress again. “I’ll put it back later. Right now, I want to snuggle.”

She giggles softly and lies down on her side of the bars. I loop my arm around her and reel her in. “Closer,” I rumble at her. “I want your well-bred little cunt lined up with a gap in the bars, in case you want me to fuck it again in the night.”

She shivers and wiggles her ass over to press up against the bars. I give her a big squeeze and kiss the back of her head.

“Tell me where you want me to take you when we get out? You want to go home, say goodbye to your mom, and let your dad know there’s a bed booked for her at the care facility in Morrinsville with a trust fund set up to sponsor the cost of her care?”

She shakes her head. “I want him to stew for a few days, and Mom won’t miss me. I don’t know if I’ll ever want to go back to that house.”

I squeeze her tighter. “You don’t have to. Once your mom’s set up in Morrinsville, you can visit her there. Anytime you want. We’ll just fly back from wherever we are.”

She wriggles loose of my arms and rolls over to face me before she snuggles back in. “Thank you for organizing that.”

I stretch my lips through the bars to kiss the tip of her nose. “You’re welcome. I didn’t want to be stressed or feel guilty about leaving her behind, and it was easy for me to do, so think nothing of it. You’d want the same for me if roles were reversed.”

Her lips tremble a little, and her eyes take on a glassy sheen as she nods. “I know. But it’s very generous, and I appreciate it.”

I smile and kiss her nose again. “I know, and you’re worth it. Now tell me where you want to go first, so I’ll know what direction to drive in when we leave.”

Cute lines form along her forehead as she frowns. “I don’t know. Somewhere fun and colorful and pretty... Mexico?”

I roll my eyes and grin. “It’s a little cliché after an escape from jail, but okay.”

She snorts a little laugh, gives me a playful shove, and then reaches through the bars and pulls me in. “I love the way you make my life easy and happy. And fun and hot and full of love.”

“It’s the way I want my woman to live, so get used to it,” I say with a shrug.

“I want the same for you.” She smiles, kisses me sweetly, and then rolls over, tugs up her dress, and presses her bare ass against the bars, so her cum-soaked pussy bulges obscenely through one of the gaps.

“Fucking hell, Cadence Malone.” I shove at my jeans, unable to get them out of my way fast enough. “You’re a gorgeous, filthy, little so-and-so. You know that?”

“ Mmhm ,” she says, all innocent sounding as she grins over her shoulder at me. “That’s why I need a big, dirty, old cowboy like you to keep me satisfied.”

I slide my cock between her juicy cunt lips with a moan. “At your service, Ma’am.”

EPILOGUE

CADENCE

I brush Mom's hair. Not because I have to, but because I want to. The staff at her new home look after her well, but I don't expect they'll complete her cares with the same love I always did, and when I come to visit, I like to dote on her some. I have the energy to do that for her now.

Daryl returns with an empty vase for the flowers we bought her. "They didn't have one to spare, so I had to go down the street and buy one. Well, I got half a dozen and left them at the nurse's station. They've got enough for everybody now." He unwraps the paper from the bouquet and starts to arrange the lilies. "These smell amazing, babe. Good choice."

"They were always her favorite," I say with a smile. "They should make her room smell nice, yeah?"

"Definitely," he says, watching me braid her hair and pin it into a bun. "You're so good with her, Cady."

I breathe a little laugh. "I've had a lot of practice." I walk around to view her face and give her a nod of approval. "Better." I rest my hand on my belly and rub slow circles over the pointy little bump that may be a foot. It's hard to tell. "I don't know if it's the baby coming, but I feel weirdly maternal about her this visit. It's either that, or some deep instinct to seek support during my initiation into motherhood. Either way, thanks for coming with me. I'm not done adventuring, I just... needed to see my

mom.”

“I noticed,” Daryl says with a smile. “And if you want to visit her more often, it won’t be a problem.” He comes to stand behind me and starts stroking my big belly too. “You may not be done adventuring, but it might be wise to pause for a few weeks before we decide which direction we want to go in next.”

“Pause... here? In Morrinsville?”

Daryl kisses the top of my head. “I know it’s close to Beaumont City, and maybe you don’t want to open yourself up to judgment about carrying my baby when people recognize you, but if we get a place on the edge of town where there’s not so many people... You can be near your mom, and we can be discreet. You’ve tried some city living, but what about that cabin in the woods you wanted to try? I saw a picture of a cute one when I was walking past the realtor’s just now.”

My heart alights with the warm glow I’ve started to feel every time I see or hear something I like. It’s sort of an internal radar that I think was always there, but I’d forgotten how to read it. I turn in his arms, and he naturally makes room for the baby between us. Daryl takes one look at my smile and grins. “We could head out there and take a look now, if you want.”

I nod. “I want.”

He kisses my forehead. “Then you shall have. We’ll see you later, Margot,” he says, giving my mom a kiss on the top of her head. “Enjoy your flowers.”

I give Mom a kiss too, and take his outstretched hand. “Let’s go.”

We head out the door just as my father is heading in.

“Cadence?” He stops short, stares at the size of my it-happened-nine-months-ago belly, watches my proud baby- daddy put his arm around me, and then hits me with a glare of derision.

“This is what you wanted, is it, Cadence?” He gestures at the both of us. “You betrayed your family and spread your legs for a man old enough to be your father. I’m so disappointed in you.”

I inhale sharply and the amount of rage I want to scream at him is so massive, it clogs in my throat, too big to get out.

Daryl looks at me and steps forward. “With you as her dad, is it any wonder she went looking for a man who could offer her stability? You failed to provide it,” he states concisely. “She didn’t betray your family. You did. And you should be ashamed.”

“Don’t you talk to me about?—”

“Vander, hush your puckered little mouth before I fuck it with my fist.”

Oh my God. Did he just say that? Fuck, that was hot. That cabin had better have some woods around it, because I’m going to need to ride him under some trees when we leave here.

I step next to Daryl, pat his hand, and clear my throat. “Dad, what Daryl beautifully paraphrased for me, was Please, shut the fuck up . Own your shit and stop projecting it onto me. You’re a weak coward, who let a little girl bear the burden of your guilt because you were too pathetic to handle it yourself, but it’s over now. And stop making out like Daryl’s the villain, when you know it’s been you the whole time. Stop wasting your energy on bringing us down. You have no power here.” I draw a circle around my face with my finger and then expand that circle to include Daryl’s, when he lowers his face next to mine.

We're a team. An attack on one of us is an attack on both, and we've got each other's backs.

Dad's frown lines intensify, and his lips quiver with unspoken spite.

I raise my eyebrows. "If you've got something to say, say it."

Dad shakes his head. "I never would have expected such disloyalty and insolence from you, Cadence."

"Well, what the fuck were you expecting?" Daryl asks with a laugh. "You back a fierce and beautiful soul into a corner and then wonder why she'd resent you and fight back? With all due respect sir, you're a fucking idiot."

I press my palm to Daryl's chest and ease him back a little. "Dad, try to see things from a different perspective. You know, one that's not your own, maybe? You could be proud of your daughter. Your daughter who is a warrior. I am literally strong enough to withstand any pressure life can throw at me, and that's all because of you," I say feeding his immense ego so he'll feel validated enough to listen.

He stands a little taller, but doesn't say anything. He's looking at my baby bump again.

"Did you hear me?" I ask, my tone harsh.

He lifts his gaze to meet mine.

"I said, I'm strong because of you."

He blinks a few times and almost smiles.

“I’m strong because you’re an abusive asshole who needs therapy. It’s your turn to be molded by hard work and emotional turmoil. Make the effort, and maybe I’ll allow you to meet your grandkids one day. Come on, Daryl. I need an ice cream, and you need a milkshake.” I grab his hand and tug him down the street while he’s grinning over his shoulder at my dad.

“That was beautiful to watch, Babe,” he says, adjusting his cock as we walk away.

“Thank you. Now where is this cabin? And can we go look at it on our own? Because my nipples are fucking hard and tingly, and I want to sit on your cock while you suck them.”

He opens my door for me and slips his sneaky fingers inside my panties, as he helps me into his truck. “Anything you want, Babe.”

The cabin is cute as hell. It’s up in the mountains, borders on the edge of a forest, has its own small lake, and lush, rolling pastures, that would be perfect for children and horses...

Daryl takes one look at my face and grins. “We’ll buy it tomorrow. The owners have already moved out, so we’ll be able to talk them into a fast settlement.”

“What?” I look around again. “I haven’t even seen inside yet.”

“If you hate it, we’ll renovate,” he says, pulling me toward a green, sun-soaked field full of wildflowers. “Right now, I need to check the acoustics of these hills.”

I frown in confusion. “Huh?”

He turns back to meet my gaze. “You’re lactating.”

“Wh—?” I look down, and sure enough, there are two damp circles of darker blue on the pale fabric of my baby-blue slip dress.

Daryl pulls it over my head in one movement. My panties are torn off and tossed away, and then he stands there, staring at me. “Look what we did,” he says, with absolute adoration in his voice.

I brush my fingers over my bare belly, and then stroke one of my erect, sensitive nipples. Tiny beads of milk form at the tips, and I look at Daryl.

He strips off his jeans, sits in the grass, and waves me over with his cock so thick and hard, it makes me tremble on sight. I’ve had that thing in my ass — an achievement that makes me feel like a right filthy bitch. I haven’t felt that in a while, but I want to. I stand over him, one foot either side of his legs, as I gaze down at him. “I want it in my ass.”

Daryl’s breath rushes out of him, and he shakes his head. “We’ve talked about this. I don’t want to risk anything bad happening. After the baby comes and you’ve had time to recover, I’ll shove as much cock as you want in there, but right now, I want to suck those milky tits like nobody’s business. Come see if you like it.”

He reaches up, and I take his hand so he can guide me to sit on his fat, veiny cock. My breath leaves me as the size of him stretches me open, but I slide straight on, always wet and ready for him. He hollows his stomach to accommodate the bulge of mine, and kisses me slowly and sweetly, stroking his tongue along mine as he coaxes my hips into a rocking motion.

It’s a bit awkward with the size of my belly, but he soon trails his kisses down my neck, and access seems to get easier for him as he focus his attention on my breasts. He flicks his tongue over my skin and gently laps at the nipple I squeezed.

A pleasurable tremor runs through my pussy at the thought of him being able to drink milk from my breasts. What will it be like? We've both been imagining, but... the anticipation is killing me, as he lingers, toying with me and teasing me with hot mouth and no suction.

His cock strains inside me, declaring his own enjoyment, and his enthusiasm intensifies. My heart rate speeds up in response, just as excited by his play.

I rock my hips back and forth, gushing arousal over his cock. Eager for more, I beg for it. "Please."

He latches on with a moan that I feel through my breast and straight down to my core. I gasp and buck at him as he sucks and pulls, and swallows.

He jolts his hips, shoving his cock upward to fuck me in short, hard thrusts, as he gulps and mumbles into my breast. His host mouth clamps around me in a way that keeps me beautifully trapped as he pulls.

"Fuck. That's so fucking good," I cry out, grabbing his hair and holding tight.

He releases his suction and gazes up at me with wild, sparkling eyes as milk trickles from my nipple. I shiver at the animal-like nature of it. I'm going to be a mother. And Daryl's the reason for it. I know that, but having my body make milk somehow makes it feel far more real.

I gaze into his eyes. Without him, my body wouldn't be making milk. He wouldn't have it soaking into his beard and dripping down his chin while he grins at me.

"You like?" He wets his lips and starts teasing my other nipple with his tongue.

Breathless, I nod. "What the fuck kind of hotness is this? Do it again."

Without warning, he latches on and sends me into a fucking frenzy. I pump my pussy up and down his cock, panting and begging him not to stop. I rub my clit against any lick of friction I can find, and when he strokes my asshole with a slippery finger, I'm done.

I grip him hard inside to make it last, but I can't. I shudder and break my hold on the bliss, and it roars out of me with a rush of fluids. I ride the waves of it, thrusting at him until he grips me hard and surges his release into my depths.

We collapse against each other, and he holds me tight, stroking my hair as we come back to earth.

"Well, that's another kink for the list," I says eventually, when my powers of speech return.

"Mmm ," Daryl agrees, apparently not yet his articulate self.

I press a kiss to his ear and nuzzle my face against his like a pony. We don't need words.

EPILOGUE

DARYL

I tuck little Josiah into his crib and lightly pat his diapered butt like a drum when he stirs and threatens to wake. The heartbeat-like familiarity seems to soothe him, but he's fighting it.

"Come on now, little man. Mama wants something, and Daddy wants her to have it, so I need you to cooperate and get some shut-eye."

He lets out a thunderous toot, squeaks as he gives a proud smirk, and then relaxes his face into a sleepy expression and drifts off.

"Atta boy, son." I chuckle softly and tiptoe out of his room, shutting the door as I leave.

I head down the hallway, to where Cady's reading in the bath. Being a mom is a lot of hard work, so I make sure I do whatever I can to make it easier. She says she's more than capable of doing more, but I don't want her falling back into old ways, so I insist on her taking lots of time to rest and recover and focus on self-care. It's important for her to get plenty of alone time, so I don't plan to linger.

"Bubba's out for the count," I inform her. "How's his sexy little mama doing? Having a good break?"

She turns a page and nods, but doesn't look up.

I smile. “Must be a good book.”

She nods and slips her hand between her legs.

“A really good book.” My smile becomes a grin, and I back away to the door of the bathroom. “When you’re done reading, I left something on the bed you might like to wear. I also left the TV remote control in there, so if you want me to join you, just turn the power off, and I’ll know I’m done watching football.”

She lifts her nose out of her book, and her eyes are sparkling as I leave.

I try to focus on the game, but it ain’t my team, and honestly, I’m too busy straining my ears to hear what Cady’s up too. I turn the sound down a bit more, so I can hear our own sexy little story play out.

The splashes she made getting out of the bath tell me she’s in a hurry.

The speedy footsteps down to the bedroom back that theory up. It’s easy to get a big ego when your woman wants her man like that, but it ain’t my ego I’m stroking.

Her gasp makes my cock harder. She found the jumbo plug I’ve been saving for her, then.

Her subsequent squeaky little grunts make my cock start to weep pre-cum. It wells in the eye of my cockhead, and I smear it over my tip as I imagine her lubing up the plug enough to take it. She’ll have to sit on it to drive herself down with enough force to get it inside, and she’s going to be so beautifully stretched and ready for me.

The moment I hear the breast pumps begin to whirl, I have to grip my dick to calm the jerky fucker down.

I didn’t leave those out for her, but I fucking love that she’s thrown them into the

mix. She fucking loves her tits sucked. They're fucking huge now she's lactating, and I love drinking her milk fresh from the breast as much as my boy does, but I can't be doing it from behind her... is that how she wants it tonight?

She kicks them from low sped to high, and I my rub my cock faster to match, edging myself like a fucking martyr, because the TV hasn't shut off yet.

My sack gets fucking tight, and I stomp my foot and squeeze my abs to keep myself from going over the edge. Come on, Babe. Let me come play.

The little men on the screen have become blurs, but I'm desperate for them to disappear, so I can go and fuck my wife.

The screen suddenly goes blank, and I launch myself off the couch and run down the hall — where I pause before I enter, so I can be calm and smooth for my woman, because she doesn't need me getting too excited with her.

I give a soft knock at on the door as I step through. “Ready for m— Fuck .”

Her ass is facing the door. She's on her hands and knees on the bed with her asshole stretched taut around the biggest plug we have. It's sparkling at me like treasure, while her glistening cunt literally drips honeyed juice down her legs.

Her tits are hanging beneath her, and she has a breast pump dangling from both — each with a nearly full bottle of milk attached. They swing back and forth as she rocks her hips — and she doesn't stop rocking. I don't think she can. She's in some sort of tantric, pre- or post-orgasmic trance.

Her eyes are glazed, her breaths are shallow, and her lips are pressed together in an endless humming moan.

“Oh, Cadence Malone, look at what you've done to yourself,” I coo softly as I

approach.

Her pussy quivers, and I lean in to lap at her slick mess. I sneak the tip of my tongue inside her and flick it around, teasing a ripple from her depths before I spear my tongue inside her, thrusting as deeply as I can. I swallow down her juices with a moan, and she bucks her hips, trying to fuck my face.

I pull back with a chuckle, and shake my head as I give her a gentle tap on the ass. She whimpers and shifts around on all fours, needing something, but unable to say what.

I duck my head and notice the size of her nipples. The suction of the pumps has made them swollen as fuck, and I can't see any more milk flowing. "Baby girl, I'm going to get this slutty pumping station closed for the night. If you want 'em sucked some more, I'm your guy."

I ease the pumps' suction and turn them off, releasing her huge, cherry-red nipples. I don't know how that doesn't hurt.

I set the bottles and pumps aside, and then I lie on the bed and wriggle my way underneath her tits, taking each into my mouth and suckling gently to help soothe them.

Cady swings her leg over me and tries to lower herself down onto my cock, but the plug in her ass is so big, the effect it has on her, is essentially locking off access to her pussy.

"Ain't no way my cock is going to fit in there, Babe." I run my fingers through her crease and test her tightness with a finger. I grunt and shake my head. "“Nope.” I massage her clit instead. “But if you want it in your ass, I think you're ready to swap out your toy.”"

She pants at me and mumbles things I can't understand.

"Is that a yes?"

She nods and I grin. "Okay. But I want to look you in the eyes when I do it."

I carefully help her to roll onto her back, then I thrust her knees up and let my eyes take their fill of her. "Fucking beautiful," I whisper as I reach for the lube. Squirt a generous amount in my hand and enjoy the shivering thrill down my spine as I rub the cool gel over my cock.

I gently ease the giant bulb out of her ass, and massage a generous amount of lube in and around her hole. She's beautifully relaxed for me, and I'm so fucking proud of both of us for her being able to trust me this fucking much. "Grab the backs of your knee and pull yourself wide, Babe."

She does as she's told, and I press the fat head of my cock to her asshole. I meet her gaze, and gently push my way slowly inside her back hole. She's hot and so fucking tight I want to buck around and spurt my load, but this is the kind of thing that takes calm, steadiness, and control.

Cady pants quick little breaths and pushes against the intrusion just as I've taught her.

"That's it. Good girl. God, you're so fucking good. I'm so honored to worship the ass of such a gorgeous, filthy goddess."

"Mmm. Look at Daddy's little virgin now." My cock strains inside her, and she moans.

"Oh, I'm looking," I assure her. I slowly begin to rock back and forth, sliding smooth inside and out with all the lube. I use my weight to offer some friction to her clit, and when I lower my head to suckle at her breast, she starts to get excited. I am too. I

pump my cock at her a little harder.

She tilts her hips up and back, moving with me as I fuck her ass, and she's absolutely soaked my curls in arousal. I pull off her sweet breast with a groan. "That's it, Baby. Show me how much you love taking this big, fat cock in your ass. God, you're so fucking tight."

She starts to shake and twitch, and I do too. We're fucking as one now. "Good girl. Get it. Come get what you want."

She throws her head back against the pillows and cries out as full-body spasms grip her every muscle. I push myself upward to watch her seizing around my cock, and she practically sprays her release at me. I can feel her pleasure pulsing through her, and drawn into the fray, I thrust and growl and lose my mind to pure, fucking heaven. My load jets from my cock, spurting into her hot ass until I'm drained and limp in every fucking meaning of the word.

I can barely keep my weight off her, I'm so tapped out. I ease myself from her ass and bundle her in close for after-care as she shivers and whimpers with aftershocks. "I've got you," I whisper, knowing she'll find as much comfort in the words as I do. "I've got you."