



Playful Summer (Seasons in Montana: Summer #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: Paxton

Watching my brothers find their soulmates had me wishing I could find mine. Who knew that when I found her she would be a romance writer? Having to deal with fans is one thing. But when one of her 'fans' takes it too far, I'll need to call in my Lake Renegade Family to help keep my girl safe.

Piper

My best friend convinced me to finally publish my romance novel. Now I'm doing signings and moving to Wintervale to be closer to her. Little did I know I'd find my soulmate in this small Montana town. But danger lurks when I realize my stalker followed me here.

Will Paxton be able to protect Piper? Or will the stalker finally win his prize?

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CHAPTER ONE

Paxton

Ever since I was little, I've loved building things.

I remember when I was four, I asked Santa for a LEGO set.

I saw a commercial and was convinced I needed one.

When Santa brought me my LEGO set, I played with it all the time.

I hated when I had to take it apart to make something new.

So my parents bought me more sets and I kept building things.

Then one day my dad built me a little workshop and started showing me how to use different tools. I was in heaven. I was never allowed to use them alone. But I didn't care, as long as I was able to build things.

I was lucky because the general store that we own has a hardware department and sells lumber too.

So I had all the tools and wood I wanted to make things.

When I was in high school, I took all the woodworking classes I could.

And when I graduated, I immediately joined our local carpenters union.

It took me three years to become a journeyman carpenter.

It was less than the five years it usually takes because of the woodworking classes I already took in high school.

Five years ago, we lost our parents to a freak avalanche.

We almost lost our oldest brother, Lukas, too.

When we found our parents, they were huddled together with three others in a small cave.

There are days that I still can't believe they're gone.

Before we lost them, I was making a dollhouse for my sister, Felicity.

It's a replica of our home and the store.

I stopped working on it after the accident.

It was hard to look at it and not think of our parents.

The other day I finally started to work on it again.

My sister doesn't know that it's for her.

I told her that it was something I was doing for fun.

I'm hoping to finish it soon and give it to her for her birthday.

That'll give me a few months since her birthday is in October.

I'm even making little people that resemble our family.

I spend most of my days at the store, unless I get called to a job. My union allows me to take the smaller jobs that need a union carpenter. That way I still have time to help my siblings run the store our parents loved so much.

My project for today is to make a book display. My brother Rhett's fiancée is bringing her friend to Winterville. And so I've been asked to make a display because she's a romance author and they want to put her books out. Yay.

Piper

I've decided I'm never listening to my best friend again.

A year ago, she convinced me to publish a book I'd written.

Now here I am at a book signing, staring at all these people walking by my table.

I told her that it was too early to do signings.

I only have five books out, but she insisted that it was the perfect time.

The only reason I'm still talking to her is because she's sitting next to me.

"Stop smiling so much." I frown at Emiko Yamaguchi. My soon-to-be former best friend.

"No, you stop being so grumpy. No one wants to buy books from someone who's not smiling."

“No one knows me. Why would they want to try my books?”

“Your books are going to be on best seller lists soon.”

“Yeah, right.”

I stand up and smile at the people walking towards my table. Some come over to ask about my books, and there's a few that even buy some.

“I'm really proud of you, Piper.”

I bump Emiko with my shoulder. “It's thanks to you. I would never have published that first book without you.”

“I think you would've. No matter what. Your stories need to be out there.”

“I'm always so afraid people will be like ‘what is this crap?’”

“Oh my god. It's not crap. Do I have to smack you?”

I shrug my shoulders at her and stick my tongue out.

Emiko and I met in kindergarten. Back then, she was the shy one and I was the outgoing one.

Somewhere along the line, we switched roles.

When we were fourteen, she met Seth Summers.

Emiko and Seth got pregnant when we were sixteen.

At the same time, my dad got a job in Maine.

Emiko and I talked every week, and she would send me pictures of her baby bump.

I hated that I couldn't be there for her.

Especially when Seth's parents disowned him.

We ended up losing touch for the last few years.

And I hated that too. Seth and Emiko lived with her parents and had their twins, Kaito and Miyuko.

Then a little over a year ago, Seth was killed on the job.

He was a State Trooper. When Emiko called me and told me what happened, I knew I had to come back to be with her.

After the signing is over, we pack up and head to a restaurant to eat.

It's been seven years now and this is the first time I've been able to spend real time with her.

After she lost Seth, it took her a while to find her way back.

Now she's engaged to Rhett and they not only have the twins, Kaito and Miyuki, they're also expecting a baby boy, who they're naming 'Raiden.' I can't wait.

I finally get to be here for her. My plan is to stay in Winterville with her until the baby's here. She's due in five months.

“Are you sure Rhett doesn’t mind me staying with you? You all live with his brothers and sister, right? How do you do that? Just living with my brother, sister and parents was hard.”

Emiko laughs. “I’m sure. And it’s easy to live with them. It’s the house they all grew up in and they love it there. But if you want to, I still have the house I rented, and like ten more months on the lease. We’ve been trying to find someone to sublet it. But it hasn’t been easy.”

“I don’t mind doing that. I can pay the rent there.”

“You don’t even know how much it is.”

“Whatever it is, I’m okay with it. Because it means I get to be with you when you have Baby Raiden.”

“I love that you’re back. And I can’t wait for you to meet my Rhett and our twins.”

“Me too. I don’t know why it’s taken me so long to visit you. I should’ve been there with you before.”

“It’s okay. I know that you would’ve come back if you were able to. Besides, you’re here with me now.”

I smile at her. I love that we are able to just pick up where we left off with our friendship.

Even after we haven’t seen each other in years.

It’s like we never had any time apart. I watch Emiko text Rhett and I suddenly wish I had someone like that.

Someone who would make me smile that way.

Make me feel like I'm the most important person to them.

I'm twenty-three years old and I've been in love exactly one time.

The only guy I saw a future with was Harris, I met him my senior year of high school and we spent the next three years together.

He's the reason I wrote my first book, it was a way to heal my heart. Because he turned out to be a cheater.

"I'm really glad that you have Rhett."

"Now it's your turn to find your person. Maybe you'll find him in Wintervale and then you'll never leave."

I smile at her. "That would be nice. I've missed being able to see you and hang out."

"Me too. And I'm not gonna be happy if you leave again."

I chuckle. "I've missed my bestie."

"I've missed you too. I'm sorry for what Harris did to you. No one deserves that, no matter who they are. You deserve so much better than him and I know you'll find him."

"You're still in your little love bubble and that's why you think I'll find my person. After Harris? I don't know if that's in the cards. No matter how much I want it."

Emiko stares at me. "'Love bubble.' I like that and I don't ever want to leave my love

bubble. But I know for a fact that you'll find him."

I love that she believes that one day it could happen. Until then, I'll try to be content spending time with my bestie and her family.

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CHAPTER TWO

Piper

Wintervale, Montana. My new home, at least for now.

I still don't know how long I'll be staying here, but I know I want to be here to see the new baby.

Or maybe I'll stay here forever. Emiko was telling me about the general store and how they have a bookstore in it.

I plan on going in and asking if I can sell my books there.

Maybe even have a little section for them. Never hurts to ask.

"Your town is really cute. It's bigger than I thought it would be," I say to Emiko.

"Do you mind if we stop at the store first? I want you to meet Rhett. And the twins are still in summer school. You know, since you're going to have a table in the book store...maybe you should do a signing."

"Why would I mind you stopping to see your fiancé? And what the hell are you talking about?" I laugh.

"You can just sit there and people will come to see you. Wintervale should know that we have a famous author living here now."

““Famous.”” I snort.

“Fine. It’s settled. I’m gonna talk to Felicity, she’s really good at social media and getting the word out about things. By next week? You’ll have your own signing.”

Emiko smiles as she parks the car. I look up and see the sign for the Wintervale General Store.

We get out and I follow her inside. I look around as we make a beeline for the pharmacy.

I see a handsome man hop over the counter and grab Emiko.

I can’t help but smile as I watch them. They’re adorable.

“Piper! This is my Rhett. Rhett, this is my Piper.”

I shake Rhett’s hand.

“It’s nice to finally meet you. Emiko’s told me all about you.”

“Thank you for letting me crash with all of you. I promise I won’t stay too long.”

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.” Rhett smiles.

“I appreciate that. I’m going to look around the store.”

“Don’t get lost.” Emiko teases.

I stick my tongue out and turn to walk around.

As I'm walking around, I find the bookstore part of the store.

Emiko was telling me that Rhett had asked his brother if he could make me a table and display.

I walk in and see a guy building a table.

He's gorgeous. Like the guys I write about in my books.

He definitely works out and I can't stop staring at him.

He finally sees me and smiles. I feel like my face is on fire and I'm pretty sure I'm giving him some sort of smile.

"Hi, can I help you find something?" he asks, his voice is smooth and deep.

"I—um. N-no, thank you. Are you Rhett's brother?" I sound like an idiot.

And there's that smile again. "I am. My name is Paxton."

"I'm Piper, Emiko's friend."

"So you're the one I'm making this for." He nods to the table.

"Guilty. And it looks awesome, thank you so much."

I never thought I actually believed in love at first sight. Even if I write about it. I believe in lust at first sight. But love? No way...until Paxton. It sounds ridiculous, even in my head. How do you love someone before you even know them? I don't know. But I feel like I already do.

“I’m sorry,” I say when I realize I’ve been staring at him this whole time. “I’ll let you get back to work.”

I start to walk away and he grabs my hand.

“You’re welcome to stay and keep me company. You could let me know where you want your shelf. I made a stand that will sit on the table. Give me a second, I’ll go and get it.”

I nod as I hold onto his hand.

“You could come with me,” he leans towards me and whispers in my ear. Holy shit he’s sexy.

“Piper!” we hear Emiko calling to me.

I tear my eyes away from Paxton’s face. Emiko and Rhett are smiling as they walk up to us.

“I see you met my brother.” Rhett smiles.

I nod at them. “He was showing me the table he made.”

“That’s not all it looks like he’s showing you.” Emiko snickers.

Again, former best friend.

Paxton

When Rhett asked me to make the table and display, I was annoyed. After meeting Piper? I’ll build her anything she wants.

“Do you think we can use this table for a signing?” Emiko asks.

“Signing?” I ask.

“Yeah, I want Piper to have her own book signing here in Wintervale.”

“You’re crazy.” Piper laughs.

“Don’t listen to her. She needs more signings and I know Felicity will back me on this.”

“What am I backing you on?” Felicity asks as she walks over.

“I was saying I would love for Piper to have her own signing, here in the store,” Emiko says.

“I love that idea! I can start setting it up. We could do it this weekend. In fact we can do once a month if you want. I’M SO EXCITED!” Felicity giggles as she runs back to her register.

“You’re all nuts. No one’s going to come and see me.”

“Of course they will,” I say as I stare at her.

“Let’s get home and get your stuff ready.” Emiko smiles.

I can’t help watching her. She’s perfect and I want her to be mine. Actually, she’s already mine, she just doesn’t know it yet.

“What do you need for your signing? I can make you a bigger table. I only made this to hold the stand and a few books. But I can make you a regular table that you can sit

at. Maybe with removable shelves to display your books. We can bring it out whenever you have signings.”

“You would do that?” she looks at me with wide eyes.

“I’ll make anything you want.”

Rhett clears his voice. “I don’t mean to interrupt you two. But I only have an hour to eat lunch. So are you guys coming back to the house with us or what?”

I squint at my younger brother.

“Are you hungry? I can take you to lunch if you want. Or if you want to see the house, we can do that too,” I say to Piper.

“Sure. Lunch sounds good. How long before you have to be back?”

“I have an hour too. I didn’t put my sign up yet, because I was still working. Give me a sec and I’ll get it.”

I run over to the lumber section that I take care of and write the time on my sign. I make sure to add an extra fifteen minutes to it—if I thought I could do more, I would. I turn and almost run over Piper.

“Oh god, I’m sorry.” I smile.

She laughs. “I just wanted to thank you. I didn’t expect such a big display for my books. And I love the table you made.”

“When we get back, I’ll show you the wood I have in stock. You can choose what you’d like to use for your stands and the new table.”

Before I lose the nerve, I lean down and kiss her on the cheek. I worry that she'll pull away from me. But she doesn't, she looks up at me and smiles.

"Wow," she whispers as I take a step back and look at her.

"Definitely." I smile.

That kiss...a simple kiss on the cheek and I know she's the one for me. I just hope she feels the same way.

CHAPTER THREE

Paxton

We spent this last week designing and building Piper's signing table, with the stand for her books. Today is her signing day. Felicity planned it so that this will be a weekly signing that Piper will do.

"So what do you think?" I ask her.

"I love it. Thank you so much. Are you staying for my signing? I thought I remember you saying that you had a job today?"

"I'll be here. I have to support my girl. And the job is on Monday." I wink at her.

Piper walks over and hugs me. One week. That's all the time I needed to know that she's mine. I haven't told her, but I've even started reading her books.

"BESTIE!" we hear Emiko yell as she's running over to Piper. "Your personal assistant is here. Let's get you set up."

I chuckle as I let Piper go and watch them set up her table.

I love to see that smile on her face. This week we also got her moved into Emiko's old place.

It made me a little sad that she wasn't going to be staying at the house with us.

But it also gave me ideas about finding things I need to fix on the rental. I mean, I am a carpenter.

It takes them about thirty minutes to set the table up.

Felicity keeps running back and forth, throwing things at them to put on the table.

It's actually pretty funny. The last thing she launched at them was some fairy lights.

And they hit Emiko right on the side of her head.

How do I know what fairy lights are? Well I know what they are because when my sister threw it at them, she yelled out 'fairy lights!'.

"I'll be back to check on you two." I laugh.

As I walk away, I can hear them laughing.

I love how happy they are. When Rhett met Emiko, she was dealing with the loss of her fiancé.

He was a state trooper, and he got shot while on a call.

We all make sure that Seth's memory lives on for Emiko and the twins, Rhett wanted it that way.

We plan to celebrate his birthday and even their anniversaries. My brother's a good man.

I go over to my workshop and start working on the dollhouse again.

As much as I'd rather hover over Piper, I'm trying my best to give her a little breathing room.

I can still hear them talking and laughing from where I am.

I've started making the little people that will live in the dollhouse.

So far, I've made my parents and grandparents.

Next I'll be working on myself, my siblings and the families that we're creating.

Piper

Watching Paxton walk away makes me sad. I feel safe when he's around. Surprisingly, there's a line forming at my table. It's an amazing feeling to know that all these people are here to find out about my books.

"I'm so glad to see you again!" I hear a voice say.

A voice that gives me chills. A voice I hoped to never hear again. I take a deep breath and try not to panic, I don't want to scare Emiko. But the man I see in front of me scares the shit out of me. And I don't know how he found me.

"Hi Marc," I say, trying to keep a smile on my face.

"I'm so glad I found you. I was worried when you didn't show up at our coffee shop last week. Everyone I asked said they didn't know where you were. I overheard some customers saying that you were doing a signing last week. I wasn't able to get to it, but I'm here now."

I'm speechless as I listen to Marc talk.

I've had a restraining order on him for the last year.

And for the most part, he's followed it.

Now here he is, talking about how he missed me at 'our' coffee shop?

What the fuck? There's a coffee shop I used to go to daily back home.

But I never saw him there and I was relieved.

I thought my life was finally normal again.

Rhett comes over and tells Marc that he needs to keep moving.

"You're holding up the line that's waiting to meet Piper," Rhett says to him.

"I just want to give Piper a hug. I've missed her and I know she's missed me."

"I don't think that's a good idea," a voice behind me says.

I feel Paxton's hand on my shoulder. Marc gets a dark look on his face that disappears as fast as it appeared.

"I'll come and see you later, Piper," Marc says as he steps to the side.

"Hey everyone, we're going to give Piper a few minutes to grab a bite to eat. Please don't go anywhere. We'll be back in fifteen minutes," Emiko says to the people in the line.

Paxton takes my hand and leads me to the back area. He wraps his arms around me.

“Are you okay?” he asks me.

I shake my head no. “He’s not supposed to be anywhere near me.”

“Who is he?” Emiko asks.

“A couple of years ago, I started going to a coffee shop in my town. It was after I found out about Harris cheating on me. Marc worked at the coffee shop. I thought he was a nice guy and we talked a little when I was there. But I mostly just did my writing there. Then one day I realized he was acting weird. He was talking to me like he was my boyfriend. And he definitely wasn’t.

When I asked him about the way he was acting, he said that he always knew we were meant to be together.

I told him I was sorry if I gave him any indication that I wanted to be in a relationship. But I didn’t want that.”

Paxton holds me tighter.

“He said he was sorry he misunderstood. It was all a little weird, but I think I wanted to believe that he would go back to just being a casual friend. And it felt like that for a few months. But then I started seeing him everywhere I went. Grocery store, gas station, bookstore. Everywhere. I decided to go to the police station and ask them what I could do. The sergeant I spoke to said that I could take a restraining order out on him. And if I did, I needed to find a new coffee shop, because that’s where Marc worked.

So I did. I filed the restraining order, and he’s supposed to stay more than one hundred feet away from me.

I still saw him following me sometimes. But he kept his distance.

And then for the last year, I haven't noticed him anywhere I went. I was so relieved."

"So what he said today was a lie?" Emiko asks.

"Yes. I haven't been to that coffee shop in over a year. And I haven't talked to Marc since the restraining order."

"Well now that we know, he won't be coming near you again. I promise you that," Paxton says to me.

I don't know how he does it, but Paxton makes me feel safe. Somehow in this short time, he's become my safe place. My person that I know I can count on no matter what.

"Thank you," I say. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate all of you."

Emiko hugs me. "Don't you worry. We got you."

I love my new family.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Paxton

I ask my brother Lukas if he can watch over the lumber section so I can stay with Piper.

I know that Marc is still around and I don't like it.

That fucking asshole isn't suppose to be anywhere near my girl.

The shitty part is he knows it, and is acting like it's no big deal.

Well, fuck that. He's going to learn real fast that he can't mess with my girl.

Earlier this year, we met this group of guys and over time, they pulled us into their family. Whenever something happens, they've come in and helped us fix things. So naturally they're the first ones I think of to help us with Marc. I text Sebastiano Mancini.

Paxton: Hey! You got a sec?

Sebastiano: What? You don't start with hey bro! How's the family? LOL

I laugh as I see his text.

Paxton: Hey bro! How's the family? LOL You got a sec?

Sebastiano: LOL. What's up? When are you guys coming to Lake Renegade?

Paxton: Soon. But I need your help. My girl has a stalker

Sebastiano: UM. What did I miss? You got a girl?

Paxton: LOL. You'll meet her soon. She's Emiko's BFF and she's staying in Winterville...hopefully forever. Her name is Piper Daniels

Sebastiano: You know all the mamas and wives are going to be all over you if they don't get to meet her soon. Tell me what you need

Paxton: His name is Marc Porter. He's delusional and I worry that he's going to hurt Piper

Sebastiano: What info do you have on him? Maybe a call will be easier. Give me five minutes to put the baby down and I'll call you

Paxton: Thank you

Sebastiano and his wife Schuyler had their second baby, Sansone is two and baby Kaia is six months old now.

We haven't gotten to meet her yet, but they send us pictures and she's so damn adorable.

I spend a lot of time with my nephew Luke, but I never really thought about having my own kids until now.

I look down and realize I've carved a figure that looks like my Piper. I add her long hair and set her aside so that I can paint her with the others tomorrow.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to properly meet,” I hear someone say.

I look up and see Marc. I just stare at him, I don’t really know what to say to him.

“It seems you’re under the impression that you have a say over my Piper,” he says to me.

I laugh. ““Your Piper’?”

“Yes. We’ve been together for over a year now. So I wanted to come and explain to you that you need to stay away from her.”

Holy fuck. He’s crazier than I originally thought. Just as I’m about to answer, my phone rings. I walk away and answer it.

“Hey Bastian.”

“You sound stressed. Tell me what’s going on and do you need us there in Wintervale?”

“I think we do need help.”

I tell him everything that Piper told us about Marc, finishing with what he just told me.

“How do you guys attract the crazies?” He laughs.

“Hey, you have your share.” I laugh.

“True. But we’re all here in Lake Renegade and we can take care of these things.

We'll come to you. Let me talk to everyone and I'll get back to you in a few.

Don't provoke him. We don't know how psycho he is.

Especially if he's under the impression that he's in a relationship with her. And don't leave her alone."

"She's living at Emiko's old place. I can stay there with her."

"I'll be honest here. I rather you both be at the house with everyone. Let me get on this guy, I'll call Francesco too. He's even better at me at this."

"Thank you. And I'll ask Piper if she'd be willing to move into the house for now. I'll let you know."

"And I'll let you know who's headed to you. You'll have to pick them up because I know they'll fly."

"Okay, just let me know. Again, thank you."

"Family. Remember?" "How do you guys attract the crazies?" He laughs.

Sebastiano hangs up and I head back out into the store. Marc is staring at my dollhouse.

"I'd like to pay you to make me and Piper a house like this. I think she'd love it."

Okay. There's something definitely wrong with him. And I don't want to do anything until the others get here.

"I don't do commission pieces."

“Then I want to buy this one.”

“It’s not for sale.”

“Oh come on. Everything’s for sale. I’ll give you a thousand dollars for it.”

“Again. It’s not for sale.”

“And like I said. Everything’s for sale for the right price. Fine, two grand.”

I shake my head at him. “You could offer me ten grand and I’d still say no.”

I wheel the dollhouse into my office and lock it up in there. Then I do my rounds in my department to make sure no one needs help. What I really want to do is go back to Piper and make sure this asshat stays away from her.

I text my brothers.

Paxton: Lake Renegade family is on their way here

Lukas: To Wintervale?

Paxton: Yeah. Not sure who or when yet

Rhett: Is it because of that douchecanoe that’s stalking Piper?

Lukas: Wait. What the fuck is going on?

Paxton: Yeah. I called Sebastiano to ask if he could find some info on him. He said he’s going to talk to the others and they’ll be coming

Lukas: Who the fuck is the douchecanoe?

Paxton: Come to my section. It'll be easier to explain in person

Lukas: On my way

While I wait for my brother, I keep an eye on Marc.

Piper

I try to block out the fact that Marc is here.

I have no idea how he found me. It has to be a lie when he said he overheard people talking about me.

Because I've never seen him at the new coffee place I went to back in Maine.

And I never really talked to anyone there.

I just spent my time writing and keeping to myself.

"Are you okay?" Emiko whispers to me.

"I don't understand how he found me. It's not like Maine and Montana are close to each other."

"Could he have talked to someone you know back in Maine?"

"I don't know. I mean I had a few friends, but they knew about him and never would've told him where I went."

Emiko frowns. “I don’t like him and the fact that he’s here. Maybe you should come and stay at the house with all of us until he leaves.”

“No. I’ll be fine. He’s never come to my house and I don’t think he’ll do that here.”

“You know you’re being stubborn, right? I bet Paxton would tell you that you need to be at the house.”

“Besides. I won’t put yours and Lukas’ babies in that kind of danger. He was never violent, but in case he is now? No way. Those babies are too important.”

“You wouldn’t be putting us in danger. No matter how crazy he is. You’d be safe. Now I’m worried about you being there alone. I don’t like it.” She frowns at me some more.

“You know if you keep frowning like that, you’re gonna get early wrinkles on your forehead.”

“You’re a pain in my ass, Piper.”

I stick my tongue out at her. From where we’re positioned, every once in a while I can see Paxton.

It usually calms me to be able to see him.

But this time I can see him talking to Marc and the look on Pax’s face isn’t a happy one.

I watch him roll the cart that the dollhouse is on into his office. Marc turns away and walks over here.

“Can we have dinner tonight? I’ve really missed you,” Marc says to me.

“No. Remember the restraining order? You’re not supposed to be near me. I’d really like it if you’d leave. I don’t want to have to call the cops.”

“That’s not a problem. I know you didn’t mean it. Plus we’re in Montana. It’s not like it counts here.”

He’s definitely delusional, I know for a fact that the restraining order is endorsable in any state I go to. But I don’t really know what Marc is like. If he’s willing to come all the way to Montana from Maine and break the restraining order, what else is he capable of?

I breathe a sigh of relief when I see Paxton and his oldest brother Lukas walking towards us. What’s even better is they have a cop with them.

“Sir, you’re going to have to come with me,” the officer says to Marc.

“Why? I’m not breaking any laws and I’m not hurting anyone.”

Officer Jared Taylor shakes his head and pulls out a piece of paper.

“According to this, Miss Piper Daniels has a restraining order out on you. District of Maine,” Officer Taylor says to Marc.

Marc laughs. “That doesn’t apply here. Plus, it wasn’t a real restraining order.”

We’re all staring at Marc and the look on his face is telling us that he’s serious. And suddenly I’m afraid.

CHAPTER FIVE

Paxton

I want to punch Marc. Then I want to throw him out of the store and Wintervale. I've never known anyone like him, I don't know if he's serious or really thinks the restraining order is fake. But he looks like he's serious. It's making me want to wrap Piper in bubblewrap so that he can't hurt her.

Sebastiano: Hey bro, so we're on our way. Zio Enea, me, Giacomo, Lorenzo, Francesco, Celestino, Noah, Eros, Kostas, Artemis, Isabella and Giovanna. You'll need to pick us up at the airport tonight. We're headed to the airport now

Paxton: Are you sure you can all take time off?

Sebastiano: Family. See you soon

We met the Mancini, Bastianini, Nikolaidis and Athanasiou families earlier this year.

Some of them were on a road trip and stopped in Wintervale.

I never thought they would become part of our family, but that's exactly what happened.

It still amazes me. They showed up on the five year anniversary of losing our parents.

And during that time, we gained more family than we could've imagined.

There are secrets about our new family that sometimes makes me feel like we're in a movie.

The Mancinis are the head of the Chicago Mafia.

The Bastianinis are the founders of the Cimaruta MC.

And the Nikolaidises and Athanasious? Well, they're the coolest. They're shifters, real life humans that turn into animals.

I never would've believed it if I hadn't seen them shift with my own eyes.

The families have come to help us twice now.

The first time, Emmanuelle, Lukas' wife, had an ex that decided he wanted to start trouble.

We found out he was part of the Russian mafia.

Then Emiko had trouble with Seth's parents, and again, our new family came in to help us.

And this time they're on their way to help me and my girl.

Every time they come to help, they show us what family really means.

Family means that no matter what, we always have each other's backs.

I hope this time we won't really need them. Even if I told them that, they'd still come. I feel better having more help with this situation. But at the same time, I wish they were just coming to visit and meet my Piper.

“You can’t make me leave. This is a public space and I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Sir, I’ve told you, I have the restraining order in my hand.” Officer Taylor pulls his cuffs out and cuffs Marc.

“I’ll be back soon. This is all a stupid misunderstanding,” Marc says to Piper.

No one is saying anything, mostly because I don’t think any of us knows what to say. After Marc is gone, we all look at each other.

“Holy fuck, he’s nuts.” Rhett frowns. “Maybe we need to call our Lake Renegade family and see what they can find out about him?”

“One step ahead of you. They’re on their way here now,” I say to him.

Rhett nods at me. “That’s good, I have a bad feeling about Marc and this whole situation.”

“Me too. At least they can hold him because of the restraining order.”

“So you haven’t seen him at all in the past year?” Rhett asks Piper.

“Nope. I can’t say for sure that he wasn’t around. But I didn’t see him, and he didn’t contact me. Until now.”

“You need to move into the house with us. I don’t want you in the rental by yourself,” I say to her.

“Okay,” she says, without a fight.

I hate the worried look in her eyes. I take her in my arms.

“Marc won’t touch you. I promise you that.”

“Who’s your Lake Renegade family?” she asks.

“They’re our extended family, they always come to help when we need it. They’re going to love you.”

“I don’t know how they can help. Even with the restraining order, he’s still here. What can they do?”

I wish I could tell Piper who my family is. But I need to talk to them first.

“Trust me, they can help us,” I say as I kiss her head.

Piper

I wish I felt better knowing that Paxton’s family is coming to help us. When I took the restraining order out, it was because I was starting to get scared of Marc. But then he backed off and I thought he had moved on. Now he seems even more unhinged, and I have no idea of what he’s capable of.

“You’ll see, the Lake Renegade family will help you figure out what to do about Marc,” Emiko says.

“Have you met them?”

“I have. I should probably tell you what happened. When I moved here to Wintervale, Seth’s parents decided they wanted to take Kaito and Miyuki away from me.

They went so far as to sue me for custody and said I was a horrible mother.

They even tried to kidnap the kids. Rhett's ex helped them by lying about me too.

She wanted him back and thought that was the way to do it.

Our Lake Renegade family came here and helped us.

Lorenzo went to court with us and we won.

Now they're never going to come near us again. ”

I had no idea that Emiko went through all that. And now I feel like an even crappier best friend.

“I'm so sorry I wasn't here to help you. I should've been here.”

“You didn't know, it's okay. You're here now,” she says as she hugs me.

I hug her back and hold back my tears. She went through so much and I wasn't there. And now she's here for me. I'm a lucky girl.

“I agree with Pax, you need to move into the house with us. I don't want you to be alone either.”

“After we close up, we can get your things,” Paxton says.

“We'll all help.” Rhett nods.

It's almost closing time and we've cleaned up my table. I ended up selling fifteen books. And I'm shocked. I never thought I could sell that many with a signing that

was such short notice.

I've been sitting with Paxton in the lumber section when we see Officer Taylor come in.

"Hey, so today was a little crazy." He laughs. "Was Marc like this when you got the restraining order?"

"No. I was worried because he kept following me. But he was never violent or this delusional. Today was really scary. Like he really thought it was no big deal."

"He did think it was fake. At least that's what he kept saying to us. We told him that he needed to leave Winterville. That if he chose to stay and we catch him anywhere near you, we will arrest him again. And the next time he'll be sent to Great Falls for his trial."

"Do you think he'll listen?" I ask.

"I think so, he did look a little worried when we kept saying he would go to jail. One of the other officers made sure he left town. And we've told all the hotels in the area to let us know if he checks back in."

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate all your help."

"This is what we're here for. If you see him or he contacts you, let us know right away."

"I will," I say as he says good night to all of us.

"Okay, why don't we close up? It's slower tonight anyway, and I want to get your stuff out of the rental," Paxton says.

“Will your brothers mind?” I ask.

“Nope. We were just coming to say we’re ready to close. Emma and Emiko are at home with the kids, so we’ll help you. Plus we need to pick the guys up at the airport in thirty minutes. Then we’ll have even more help,” Lukas says to us.

“Thank you. I really appreciate all of you.” I sniffle.

As Paxton holds me, Rhett and Lukas hug us both.

“One of the biggest lessons our parents taught us is that family is the most important part of our lives. No matter what any of us needs, we’re there. Good and bad. And you’re part of our family now,” Lukas tells me.

I miss my family back in Maine, but being with Paxton and his family helps so much. It takes us fifteen minutes to lock up. They each check a different section of the store before we all meet at the main doors to lock them.

“I think Rhett and I should head to the airport. You and Piper go to the house and get her stuff packed. We’ll meet you there,” Lukas says to us.

“Make sure you check the house and if anyone is there, call us,” Rhett says.

“I will. Maybe we should ask Jared if he could meet us there?” Paxton asks.

“That’s a good idea.” Lukas nods.

Rhett calls Jared and asks if he could meet us at the house. Just in case Marc hasn’t left town.

“He’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Please don’t take any chances,” Rhett says to

Paxton.

They give us a hug and we all get in our cars.

“I’m sorry that I’ve caused these problems,” I say to Paxton.

“Baby, this isn’t your fault. You did everything right, some people are just crazy. You just happened to find one of them.”

He takes my hand as he drives to the rental.

“Yay, me.” I sigh.

When we get to the house, Jared is already there.

“I did a check around the outside, let me go in first and you two wait on the porch.”

It takes him a few minutes to search the house.

“Let me know if anything is missing. You never know if he came in before.”

I nod as we head inside. I work as fast as I can throwing everything back into my suitcases. The good thing is that I had just started to unpack. So a lot of my things are still in boxes.

An hour later we’re almost done and we see two cars pull into the driveway. I watch as they all get out of the cars.

“Holy shit, those guys are huge.”

Paxton laughs. “Yeah, they make us look small. Come one, I’ll introduce you to

everyone.”

We head out onto the porch. I watch them all hug each other.

“Piper, this is Enea Mancini. His kids, Lorenzo and Giovanna. Giacomo Bastianini and his kids, Francesco, Celestino and Isabella. Noah Mancini, Kostas and Artemis Nikolaidis and Eros Athanasiou.”

I smile at each of them as they all grab me and hug me.

“They like hugs. You’ll get used to it.” Rhett laughs.

“Thank you all for coming to help me.”

“We’re family.” Giovanna smiles.

CHAPTER SIX

Piper

It takes us another hour to finish packing up and loading everything into the cars.

“Oh thank god. I’m riding with you. I refuse to be squished between my brothers again,” Isabella says to me.

Celestino comes over and puts her in a headlock.

“Get off me, you dick.” Isabella laughs.

“Sorry. My children are usually more well behaved than this.” Giacomo laughs.

We all laugh as Isabella and Celestino start kicking each other.

“If your mother was here—” Giacomo starts to say.

“Maybe next time we need to bring our wives. They know how to wrangle our spawn.” Enea chuckles.

Giacomo nods. “That’s a good plan.”

“Everyone’s coming here for our wedding right?” Rhett asks as we continue packing.

“Definitely. Everyone’s already packing.” Enea smiles.

“The kids are so excited to see everyone.”

“Okay, I think we have everything. We can head home.”

“Are we going to fit? Some of us can wait here for you to make a trip and come back. Because I don’t think we’re going to fit.” Lorenzo laughs.

“I mean, I suppose I could hang onto the roof.” Eros laughs.

“Dork. How far is your house from here? I don’t mind waiting,” Isabella says as she rolls her eyes at Eros.

“Yeah, it might be easier if we go and come back. Our place is only fifteen minutes away, so it won’t take long.”

Enea tells each of them who stays and who goes. I’m beginning to think he’s the leader of the family. I head to the house in the first run, and Giovanna jumps in with us.

“I’ll leave you at the house with the girls and go back for the others,” Paxton says to me.

“Okay. They all seem really nice, is Enea the head of your family?” I ask Giovanna.

“Kind of. He’s the head of the Mancinis. Giacomo is the head of his family. There are two others, Panagiotis Nikolaidis and Zeus Athanasiou. Those are the four heads of the Lake Renegade family,” she explains.

“You make them sound like the mafia.” I laugh.

They both laugh, but I’m getting a weird feeling from them. What are they hiding?

Paxton

This is going to be so much easier when I can tell Piper about my Lake Renegade family. I'm not sure how she'll react, but at least then she'll know. It sucks keeping things from her. When we get to the house, I drop the girls off and head back to pick up the rest of the guys.

"So Piper seems like a nice girl," Enea says to me.

"She is. Now I get it when my brothers found their person and how they felt around them. I can't do anything when she's around. I just want to follow her everywhere. And now with this situation? I want to wrap her in bubble wrap and take her everywhere with me."

Enea laughs. "We've all been there. I still want to wrap my wife in bubble wrap. I know you want to ask if you can tell Piper. So ask."

I take a deep breath. "I would like to tell her about all of you."

"Are you sure she's your forever?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. Let me talk to Giacomo. As for Panagiotis and Zeus, you'll need to ask them when they come for Rhett's wedding."

"Thank you. I'm excited for her to meet everyone. I just hate that you had to come and help us deal with this psycho."

"Seems to be what we attract in our family." He chuckles. "But we'll get through it."

“Thank you, Enea. I appreciate how fast you all came to help. I wish you could’ve seen him today. He was so damn delusional. I’ve never seen anyone like him.”

“I’m pretty sure Bastian and Franco got some information on him. We’ll figure this out.”

“I’m just afraid that he’s crazy enough to hurt her.”

“That’s always something to worry about. But let’s hope that he’s not that crazy.”

I nod and park at home. We head inside and everyone gathers in the living room. Enea stands up and smiles at Piper.

“Piper—first of all, we are happy to welcome you into our family. And because you’re part of our family, you should know who we are.

There are four main families that live in Lake Renegade.

My parents and my wife’s parents founded Lake Renegade, we are the Chicago Mafia.

Giacomo’s papà and his wife’s father founded the Cimaruta MC.

Almost ten years ago, we decided to come together and change our ways.

We own businesses, help our town, and the city of Chicago.

It hasn’t been an easy change, but it’s been a necessary one.

You’ll meet more of the Nikolaidis and Athanasiou families at Rhett and Emiko’s wedding.

Their story is theirs to tell. But Paxton asked me if he could tell you about us.

So now you know. It's not an easy life, but it's our life. And now it's part of your life."

"Thank you for telling me. I have so many questions. First, what is a MC?" Piper asks.

Everyone chuckles.

"MC is a motorcycle club." Celestino smiles.

"Like the ones in the movies?"

"Some clubs are. We used to run guns and drugs. Never dealt in human trafficking. But now we run legal businesses and no more gun and drug running. Our sister clubs are transitioning too," he explains.

"Sister clubs?" she asks.

"Clubs that we recognize as part of ours. They have different names and patches, but they're part of our family. 'The Cimaruta MC, Chicago' is what we call the mother chapter. We're the original chapter of our club."

"Oh wow. There's so much more to your club than what they show on TV." I chuckle.

"Wait till you meet the whole family." Isabella laughs.

We spend a few minutes talking and I can see that she's loving them already.

“We did want to talk to you about Marc. Do you know anything about him?”
Francesco asks.

Not really. We talked sometimes, but not about anything personal.

He worked at a financial office, the coffee shop job was his ‘for fun’ job.

And he drove an expensive car. But I never went out with him or really anywhere with him.

I only talked to him at the coffee shop.

Which is why when I started seeing him everywhere I went, it started to worry me. ”

“That’s understandable. So you went to the police and asked them to help?”

I nod. “I did and they told me my options. They were limited because he never threatened me. But because he was everywhere I was. The the police officer said they could help me. And when we went to court, they were able to show pictures of Marc following me.”

Listening to Piper tell her story makes me angry that she had to go through that alone.

“Did you tell your family about it?” Giacomo asks.

“After I took the restraining order out, I told my parents. I had to, in case something happened to me,” she says softly.

I hold her in my arms and I can feel her shaking.

“We’re going to do everything we can to help you. The main thing right now is, you

need to remember not to go anywhere alone. And to never be alone,” Enea says to her.

Piper nods.

“We plan on staying for a while. So make sure if you need to go somewhere, you take one of us.”

“You can also stay with me at the store,” I say to her.

We spend another hour discussing what we can do to make sure Piper is safe. When it’s time for bed, Piper chooses to stay with me. I love that I get to hold her all night.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Piper

It's been a week and I haven't seen or heard from Marc. I spend most of my time at the general store with Paxton. I feel so bad that everyone is still here. Especially the ones with families back in Lake Renegade. I keep expecting to see Marc somewhere, but I don't.

This weekend is Rhett and Emiko's wedding.

We were planning to do a girl's night out since Giovanna, Isabella and Artemis are here. But Enea and Giacomo said no to that. So now we're going to stay in and have a girl's night here.

We're also waiting until Friday, since all the women will be here from Lake Renegade.

It feels like our little town is going to be overrun with family.

Some of them will be staying at Emiko's rental and the rest will be here.

I have a feeling it's going to be pretty loud.

"How are you doing?" Giovanna asks as she sits next to me.

"I'm okay. I hate that I keep looking over my shoulder."

“Yeah, I understand that. It’ll fade away in time.”

“And I feel so bad that all of you are here, away from your spouses and kids.”

“It’s really okay. My mam is taking care of my babies. And my husband is on a week of away games. So I wouldn’t be seeing him anyway.”

I always forget that Giovanna’s married to Declan O’Reilly. He’s the assistant captain of the Chicago Redhawks hockey team. And her brother is their starting goalie. I can’t wait to meet them both.

“I need to apologize in advance if I fangirl over your husband and brother. They’re two of my favorite players and I can’t believe they’ll be here tomorrow.” I chuckle.

“Oh it’s okay, I totally get it. They’ll both love that you love the team, and the game. We finally got our son ice skates and Declan is in heaven taking him on the ice.”

“Your babies are so stinking cute. Is Rowan liking the ice?”

“He giggles and crawls on the ice more than he stands on it.” She laughs.

“How old is he? And you have two babies, right?”

“I do. Rowan is two and Lorcán is six months old.”

“I can’t wait to meet them. I love kids.”

“They’ll be here tomorrow with my mam. I told her I’d come back and help her on the plane. But she insisted she’d be okay.” She laughs. “And now Declan will be helping her, so I don’t feel as bad.”

“See, I was already excited to be Emiko’s maid of honor. But now I’m even more excited because of everyone that’s coming.”

“Our family is a riot, wait till you see everyone together.”

“I love that you all embrace each other as family. I’ve always wanted a big family. I’m an only child, but my parents are really great.”

“I love that. Having great parents makes life so much better. Some of the family didn’t have the best childhoods. But I think we help them make up for it now.”

“That’s awesome. Before I moved here, I was pretty content. But being here now, with Emiko and all of you...I’m so much happier. And I really missed Emi, I regret not being around when she was with Seth. And knowing what she went through makes me so sad.”

“I’m sure she understands, you didn’t have a choice when you left.”

“No. But I could’ve come back after we turned eighteen. Except I was so wrapped up in my own bullshit.”

All the other women come over and join us. I’ve never had so many women that lifted each other up. And not one of them act like they don’t want to be here.

“Has Gia shown you her babies? It’s really not fair how cute they are.” Isabella smiles.

“She did, and I have to agree. I can’t wait to meet them. Your sister has babies too?” I ask.

“Yeah, Luciana has Grayson. He’s almost two and she’s having her second baby in

four months.”

“So many babies in the family. Do you have kids too?” I ask Artemis.

“Kostas and I had our first last year. Orion is nine months old.”

I love listening to them talk about their families and the new families they’re starting. I look over at Paxton and he’s smiling at me. Can you fall in love with someone this fast?

Paxton

I can’t help but watch Piper, the smile on her face is making me smile. She seems to be enjoying spending time with the women in our family. Wait till all the mamas come tomorrow, things are going to get really busy.

“I’m having the club make sure that security is up for the wedding. I’m a little worried because of the amount of people we’ll have here. But luckily we’re used to this, so it should be okay.”

“I’m worried that Marc will slip in and we won’t notice,” I say.

“Well, since they’re getting married in a church, we can monitor who goes in and out. But the reception is a little trickier. We’ll be posting guys at the doors. But be on alert,” Giacomo says to us.

I hate that my brother’s big day is going to have some issues. That asshole Marc better be gone.

Unknown: You should keep a closer watch on Piper if you don’t want anything bad to happen to her

What the fuck. I show the text to the guys.

“This asshole reminds me of when we helped Ciarán’s wife, Emilia. She started getting texts from an unknown number and it turned out to be the shitbags twin. Not that the shitbag wasn’t a shitbag. But it wasn’t him that was stalking her,” Celestino says.

The guys nod.

“Tell me it all turned out okay, that Ciarán and Emilia are happy and safe,” I say to them.

“They are and you’ll meet them tomorrow. I told you before, there’s been a lot of turmoil in our family. But we’ve all come through it just fine. And stronger as a family,” Enea tells me.

“I just want Rhett and Emiko’s day to be perfect.”

“It’s going to be as perfect as we can make it. And if Marc shows up? We’ll deal with him too.”

If there’s one thing I know for sure is that our new family isn’t just talk. They’ll back us up as much as they can. All I know is that I need Piper to be safe. And I’ll do anything to make that happen.

“Should I answer whoever this is that’s texting me?” I ask.

“No. Let me see if I can trace the number,” Sebastiano says. “If this is Marc, let’s hope he’s stupid enough to leave a trail for us to follow.”

“We can hope, and after today, I think he’s either really good at faking it or he really

is crazy.”

My brothers and I fill everyone in on what happened last week with Marc.

“It sounds like maybe the officer that was helping you convinced him to leave?” Giacomo asks.

“I hope so, but Marc was pretty adamant that the restraining order was fake. Jared said he made sure to fully explain what could happen to him if he comes near Piper again. Which is why I keep saying I hope he’s gone.”

“I suppose he could be hiding somewhere. We’ll take a look around town tomorrow while everyone is arriving. Will it be okay to use some of your cars while you’re at the store?” Enea asks.

“Definitely. And we’re closing the store on Saturday for the wedding. We’ve already made sure that the town knows about it,” Lukas says.

“Sounds good. Let’s get some rest, I have a feeling the next few days are going to be non-stop fun.” Lorenzo chuckles.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Paxton

By lunch time, the rest of our family from Lake Renegade is here.

Things are busy, but I know that Piper is safe when she's not with me.

She's spending the day with all the women, helping Emiko get ready for tomorrow.

They're also planning a girl's night for her.

As for the guys, we're just going to hover around and watch our women.

"So I started a paper trail for Marc. And it looks like he's left Winterville. I can see his spending and the trail has him in southern Montana."

"That's a relief. But I have a feeling he's going to come back. The way he looked at my Piper..." I say to him.

"We're going to keep monitoring him. But we need to figure out who the text is from," Sebastiano says.

"The number was from a burner phone. So I'm looking for who bought it and where," Francesco Bastianini says.

"Do you think Marc is working with someone?" I ask.

“I don’t know. I mean he must be if he’s in southern Montana. Unless that’s him doing it from there.”

“Whoever it is, I want to know how they got my number.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Tonight is for celebrating Rhett and Emiko, though.”

“Definitely. Are we still doing dinner and drinks?”

“I don’t want anything fancy.” Rhett laughs. “Emiko said they’re just doing dinner and a girl’s night in.”

We spend the night celebrating my brother. I’m excited that he’s found his person. And tomorrow we all get to watch them add to our family.

Piper

“So you’re the woman that’s stolen our Paxton’s heart.” Rosaura Mancini smiles at me.

I smile back at her. “He’s definitely stolen mine.”

“We were worried he wouldn’t find his love.”

“I never thought I would find someone like him. But sometimes I wonder if it’s too fast.”

“When it comes to finding your true love, there is no fast or slow. You just know when it’s right.”

“Is that how you felt about your husband?”

“Yes. When I met Leo, we were fourteen. I knew even then that he and I would be together forever. We’ve been together for thirty-one years. And we will celebrate our twenty-seventh wedding anniversary in a few months.”

“Wow. That’s amazing. Paxton is everything I’ve ever wanted in a man. And the way he looks at me? I’ve never had anyone look at me that way.”

“That’s how you know they’re the one. When you look at your person, you just feel at peace.”

I love listening to Rosaura talk about how love feels to her. I feel that way when I look at Paxton.

“So are you ready to be Mrs. Vandenberg?” Emmanuelle asks.

“Now there’s going to be two of us.” Emiko laughs.

“Soon to be three, I’ll bet.” Felicity says softly.

I laugh. “I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon.”

They all look at me and laugh.

“I think the Vandenberg men are like our family men. They move as fast as they need to when they find their loves.” Gráinne Mancini smiles.

Paxton

After we all get back to the house, I see my girl and she looks so happy.

Rhett and Emiko decided that they didn't need to spend the night apart so they've already gone to bed.

The rest of us are spending time catching up, I realize now how much I miss our Lake Renegade family.

When we lost our parents, it was just Lukas, Rhett, Felicity and me.

Then Lukas and Emma got back together and now Rhett found Emiko.

The only thing that will make all this perfect is Piper staying with me forever.

I walk over and kiss her.

"Are you having fun?" I ask softly.

"I am. I love seeing Emi so happy. And the kids. Look at how much fun they're having with everyone."

"Do you want to have babies?" I ask her.

Piper turns in my arms to face me.

"I do want kids. What about you?"

"With you? Yes."

"You want babies with me?"

"Piper, if I haven't made it clear to you, you're my future. I know you think this is fast and when Rhett met Emiko, I thought they were fucking crazy. But I get it now. I

get why they moved fast. Because it doesn't feel fast, I know because I feel like I've known you my whole life."

"I thought it was just me," she whispers to me.

I kiss her and hold her tight.

"Stay with me tonight," I whisper to her.

The last few nights, Piper has been sleeping in one of our guest rooms. I didn't want to push her so I didn't ask her to stay with me. But tonight? I want to hold her in my arms.

I feel her nod as she lays her head on my chest. All I want is to hold her and wake up with her. Everyone is starting to head off to bed.

"We'll start getting ready at eleven tomorrow," Lukas says to everyone.

I take Piper's hand and lead her to my room.

"Do you need to get anything from your room?" I ask her.

"I do. I'll be right back."

I take a quick peek into my bathroom to make sure it's clean. Or clean-ish. I clear off an area for her to put her things on the counter.

Suddenly I'm so damn nervous. I see Piper come back into my room. I'm brushing my teeth as she joins me in the bathroom.

"I cleared off part of the bathroom counter for you," I say after I rinse my mouth out.

“Thank you.” She smiles as she puts her things out and brushes her teeth too.

“So...should I leave and let you change?”

“Um. Maybe?” she says softly.

“I’ll be in the room. You’re beautiful,” I say as I kiss her neck.

While I’m waiting, I get my shorts on and leave my shirt off. I can’t decide if that’s a good idea or if I should keep it on.

Piper comes back in wearing a tank top and shorts and holy fuck I’m hard. I try not to be obvious about it, but she’s so fucking sexy. I watch her walk over to my bed, then stand up and pull her to me.

“I promise I’ll never force you to do anything you don’t want to. But you’re so damn sexy. I’ll keep my hands to myself if that’s what you want,” I say as I nibble on her neck, her moans are driving me crazy.

“I don’t want you to keep your hands to yourself.” She gasps as I run my hands down her side, taking her shorts with me.

I slide my hands under her tank top and she lifts her arms so I can get it off.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

I kiss her as I pinch her nipples, I love the noises she’s making. I help her lay back onto the bed and kiss my way down her body. I make sure to lick and suck on each of her breasts.

“Fuck, you are perfect,” I say to her as I continue down her body.

I nibble the inside of her thigh as I rub her clit lightly.

“Teasing isn’t nice,” she growls at me.

I chuckle and continue teasing her. I finally slide a finger into her and she gasps.

“Paxton. Please,” she moans.

I smile as I make my way back up her body, keeping the rhythm going with my finger, adding a second one.

“Please what? Tell me what you want,” I whisper to her.

“I want to feel you in me. Please.”

I kiss her and line my cock up, slowly pushing into her.

“Holy shit. You make me feel like a teenager.” I moan as I take my time. I don’t want to finish before she does.

Piper grabs my ass and holds me still.

“I need a minute, it’s been a while for me,” she says softly.

I chuckle. “For me too.”

She runs her hands down my back as I move slowly. I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed sex as much as I am right now. I get up and pull her to the edge of the bed, lifting her right leg up. I watch her as I rub my cock along her slit. Her moans are making me harder. I push back in her.

“Fuck yes,” she gasps.

I move faster as I slowly start to rub her clit.

“I need you to come for me, baby.”

I can feel her pussy starting to clamp down on my cock and holy fuck.

“I’m going to come,” she gasps.

“Fuck.” I grit my teeth as she comes, I can’t hold back and I come with her.

I collapse on top of her, kissing her face as we both catch our breath.

“You’re incredible,” I say to her. Just then, it dawns on me that I didn’t ask her about using protection.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.”

Piper looks at me and frowns.

“I didn’t use a condom, I didn’t even think about it. I’m clean, I swear.”

“It’s okay, I trust you.”

“Are you on birth control?”

Piper’s eyes start to fill with tears. And I hold her tighter.

“Why are you crying? Please don’t cry.”

“I wasn’t thinking of getting pregnant. And I’m not on birth control.”

I smile at her and kiss her face.

“Well then, we might be having a baby. And I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

Her eyes get wider.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m fucking serious, Piper. Is it fast? Of course. Does it scare me? Nope.”

She kisses me. “Thank you.”

“You’re my future. Period.”

We fall asleep in each other’s arms, and I dream about the family I’ll have with her.

CHAPTER NINE

Piper

When Paxton asked about birth control, I panicked.

When I was with Harris, I got pregnant once.

We were using protection and it failed. His reaction was to tell me that we couldn't afford to have a kid.

I ended up having a miscarriage. Harris seemed relieved and when I told him how much it hurt me, he said we'd have a family 'one day.' A week later I found out about him cheating.

So as hard as that time was for me, I'm glad I didn't have a baby with him.

I stopped taking my birth control after finding out about Harris cheating. I didn't see a need for it, I wasn't a one-night-stand kind of girl. So why take it?

Paxton's reaction to this situation wasn't what I would've expected. But the look he gave me last night is telling me that he's not lying. I'm still trying not to freak out about this.

I open my eyes and look at Paxton. He's a gorgeous man even when he's sleeping.

"Your thoughts are loud." He yawns.

I laugh and sit up to go to the bathroom.

“So are we still in the 'bathrooms are solitary time' stage?” Paxton smiles.

“We’ll never be out of that stage. Brushing teeth, bathing...okay. But peeing and pooping? That’s not sharing time,” I say to him.

He laughs more and watches me go to the bathroom.

“Did you want to join me for a shower?” I ask him as I open the door.

Paxton jumps up and is in the bathroom before I can get the shower on. We make love again and it’s as explosive as last night. He even spends time gently washing me up after. I’ve never had anyone treat me like this.

“Thank you,” I say to him.

“For what?”

“For showing me what it’s like to be cared for. For not getting angry that I’m not on birth control.”

“Baby, I’ll always take care of you. As for the birth control? Protection isn’t only on you, it’s on me too. I want to have a family with you. But if it’s something you’re not ready for, I’ll get some condoms and use them. Did someone hurt you? I feel like someone did something to you.”

I look up at Paxton.

“Harris. I was with him for three years. One day I wasn’t feeling good and I realized that my period was late. So I took a test...”

Paxton holds me as I talk.

“When I told Harris, he said we couldn’t afford a baby. And that one day we would discuss it. A few weeks later I miscarried. When I told him, he sounded relieved. And then a week after that, I found out he’d been cheating on me for the last six months. The worst part? She was pregnant.”

“Fucking asshole,” Paxton says quietly.

“There’s a part of me that’s still sad about the baby. But there’s the other part that’s relieved I’m not tied to him in any way. So when you said that you want to have a family with me? It made me feel cared for, you weren’t even mad about it.”

“Why would I be mad? There’s nothing you could do that would make me mad.”

“You’re like my fairytale prince. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but thank you.”

“I’ll always be here for you. That much you can count on.”

After Harris, I told myself screw it, I’m fine alone. Now that I have Paxton? I don’t want to be alone ever again.

Paxton

I made the archway that Rhett and Emiko are standing under.

Standing beside my brother as he says his vows makes me think of my own vows.

I can’t wait to be standing here with Piper.

I know that we'll get there, I don't know when, but I know it'll happen.

My girl looks beautiful standing next to Emiko.

After the ceremony, we head back to the house for the reception.

Everything here was made by someone in our family.

Rosaura made their wedding cake and it's gorgeous, with cherry blossoms cascading down the side like a river.

There's also a lot of finger foods like mini corndogs, mini pizzas and sliders.

Emiko wanted mini foods because of the kids.

"You know it's your turn next," Rhett says as he comes and stands next to me.

"I hope so. I don't want to push Piper. But I know that she's the one."

"You'll get there, I thought that Emiko would need more time. But she surprised me, and look where we are now. Even after all she's been through."

"Piper was hurt before and I think she's a little hesitant because of that."

"She'll work through it and you'll be there when she's ready."

"I will." I nod. "So how's it feel to be a husband?"

"I love it. My wife—I've said it in my head a lot, but now I get to say it out loud. Are you sure you're okay watching the twins for us? We can postpone our trip if you can't."

“Of course we’re sure. You and Emiko need some time to yourselves. It’s only a week.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Plus, everyone’s staying until you get back. So the kids will have a blast while you’re gone.”

“I wish Mom and Dad were here today.”

I hug my brother. “Me too.”

We spend the rest of the night celebrating Rhett and Emiko.

Unknown: I gave you some time with Piper. Now it’s my turn. Do you think you can stop me?

Fuck. I head over to Sebastiano and show him the text.

“We have guys watching everyone coming in and out of the party tonight. And we have them in shifts so that no one can come onto the property. But as far as we can tell, Marc is still in southern Montana of us. He hasn’t come back up here yet.”

“I don’t know who this could be. Some crazed book fan?”

“I wish I knew. We will know something soon, I called Salvatore to ask if he could run the number, maybe see where it was bought and who bought it.”

Salvatore Mancini is the Sheriff of Lake Renegade.

He is also part of the Chicago Mafia. Between him, Sebastiano and Francesco, I’m

hoping they can help us figure out who this is.

I'm starting to wonder if it's Marc, especially since they're tracking him in southern Montana.

He's at least three hours away from us and it looks like he's leaving Montana now. So if it isn't Marc, then who is it?

"Is there anyone else we should be looking at?" Sebastiano asks.

"No one that I know of, Marc is the only one we've had issues with."

"I've been meaning to ask, since we're all here, did you want Piper to know about us?" Ares Athanasiou asks.

The Athanasiou and Nikolaidis families are shifters. Not the kind you read about in fantasy books. Real-life shifters. The Athanasious are polar bears and the Nikolaidises are white tigers. When we found out about them earlier this year, it felt like I was dreaming. Real-life shifters.

"I would like her to know. I meant to ask your dad and Panagiotis about it."

"Let me talk to them about how we'll tell her and I'll let you know. Also, does she know about these weird texts you're getting?"

"No, she doesn't know. I didn't want to worry or scare her. But now that I got this second one, I think I need to tell her."

"I agree, she needs to know in case whoever this is comes after her," Lorenzo says.

"I'll talk to her tonight. I don't want to take away from her enjoying today with

Emiko.”

We spend the rest of the night celebrating my brother and new sister. Tomorrow they leave for their honeymoon in Ireland. Then I’ll talk to Piper and hopefully we can figure out who it is that’s threatening us.

CHAPTER TEN

Piper

I feel like something is wrong with Paxton. I want to ask him, but I'll wait until we go to bed. I saw him talking to some of the guys earlier and they looked concerned. Rhett and Emiko get up in front of everyone.

"Hey everyone. We want to thank all of you for being here with us today. And for being with our twins so that I can spend a week with my beautiful bride. I promise we'll be back."

Everyone laughs.

"I've been lucky enough to find love a second time in my life. And a whole new family to celebrate it with. Thank you for taking me, my kids and my family into yours. We love all of you." Emiko sniffles.

Everyone takes their turn giving them hugs. The kids stay up with us while their parents head to bed. Their flight is at five am. I can't wait till my own babies are out here playing with the family.

We let the kids play for another hour and then somehow get them all into the living room and laying down. I help make sure all the doors are locked and then head to bed.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him as soon as he comes into the room.

“Why do you ask?” he says as he gets undressed.

“It just feels like something is wrong. Like you’re keeping something from me.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t want you to feel like that. There’s been a few things that have happened. I didn’t want to ruin today for you so I planned on telling you tonight.”

Now I’m worried. My insecurities are creeping up on me and I don’t like it.

“A-are you leaving me?” I whisper.

“Whoa. What? No. Baby,” he says as he pulls me to him. “You’re never getting rid of me. This isn’t about you and me.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you felt this was moving too fast.”

“Piper. Listen to me, you’re stuck with me. I’ll never leave you or cheat on you. And all I need is for you to promise me the same.”

“I promise,” I say as I get on my tiptoes and kiss him.

Paxton looks at me.

“I love you, Piper. Fast? Sure. But I know how I feel about you. I want to wake up with you everyday for the rest of my life.”

“What if you change your mind?”

“Baby, I’m never going to change my mind. And I’ll tell you that every day of our lives together.”

I lay my head on his chest as he holds me.

Paxton

It kills me to think that Piper's worried I'll leave her. And I know it's because of what Harris did to her. Cheating is the one thing I could never do or forgive.

"What I needed to talk to you about is I've gotten two weird texts. One was yesterday and another today."

I show her the texts.

"Is it Marc?" she asks.

"I don't know. The guys are looking into it. But we do know that Marc is in southern Montana. And he's getting farther from Winterville, not closer."

"Who else could it be? I've never had any trouble except from Marc."

"Has Harris ever given you problems after you broke up?"

"Nope. After I moved out, I never really heard from him. Wait, I did see him before I left Maine. But he didn't do anything weird. He was with a girl and it was a hey, good to see you, bye type of meeting."

I nod at her, I was hoping that she was going to say that Harris was a stalker and that it could be him. But nope. it doesn't sound like it. I'm so frustrated at this situation.

"You look disappointed." Piper looks at me.

"I was kind of hoping you would say that Harris was a stalker like Marc and then

we'd have someone else to point the finger at. I don't like that whoever this is, has my number and knows we're together. Because I need to keep you safe and not knowing who it is makes that really hard."

"Those texts have me really worried. I mean who could be doing this?"

"We're going to figure it out. But for now, please don't go anywhere alone. Especially when we're out or at the store. You need to have someone with you even when you're going to the bathroom."

"I'll be careful. Especially now knowing that there's someone out there coming after me. Marc never seemed like he would do more than just scaring me. But this one? This one scares me."

We get ready for bed together, it feels like we've been doing our routine for years.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Piper

Today, all the kids are at the house with the family. But I decided to go to the store with Paxton. Because I'm not supposed to be alone, Georgíos Nikolaidis has offered to be with me when Paxton can't. And because Rhett is gone, we have a pharmacist from the next town over filling in.

I've been helping Felicity set up my table for my signing today. It feels a little weird without Emiko here. But Artemis, Giovanna, Isabella, Fiorella and Luciana are going to be with me. They're all here helping us set up and my table has even more stuff on it. It's so much fun to watch them.

"I can't believe we know an author." Giovanna smiles.

"I can't believe I know the wives of my favorite hockey players." I chuckle.

"You realize that they're not as much fun at home. I mean they burp and fart...A LOT. And they try to do it while walking past you. I thought my brothers were bad. But Cillian? Holy shit." Fiorella wrinkles her nose.

Fiorella has been with Cillian McGregor, captain of the Chicago Redhawks for four years. Meeting the three Redhawks players has been a dream come true.

"No way. They're angels, I saw them. There's no way they do things like that." I laugh.

“Well, they’re your family now. So they might crop-dust you too.” Fiorella laughs.

I laugh more as we finish setting up my table.

“Thank you so much. I was so worried that I would have to cancel today because Emiko isn’t here. But having all of you here—thank you so much.”

“We’re family. This is what we do, no matter what. If you need any of us? You call and we’ll come,” Luciana says.

“The same goes for us, if we need you, we hope that you’ll come too,” Artemis adds.

“Definitely,” I say as we all hug each other.

“So now what do we do?” Giovanna asks.

“Now we wait for people to come and see me.”

“Okay, while we wait, why don’t you tell us about your books. That way if you have to leave the table, we can tell people about them.” Artemis smiles.

I spend the next five minutes telling them about my books. They all take one of each book and Giovanna grabs my credit card reader and starts to scan my books.

“What are you doing?” I laugh.

“What does it look like? We’re buying your books.” Giovanna raises an eyebrow at me.

“Duh,” Luciana says.

“Hey! That’s mine,” Isabella says to her.

“They’re the same book.” Luciana rolls her eyes at her twin sister.

“Well I want that one,” she says, and sticks her tongue out.

I can’t help but laugh as I listen to them. Makes me wish I had grown up with sisters.

“We also need you to sign each one,” Fiorella says as she stacks them in front of me.

“But don’t mix them up. That’s my set,” Isabella says.

“Omg. They’re the same books.” Luciana rolls her eyes again.

I chuckle as I start to sign each book. It takes me a while because I’m trying to personalize each one.

And I have to stop every so often to talk to people that are stopping by my table.

A few even buy some books. I’m still amazed when people buy one of my books.

It makes me feel like crying. That someone who doesn’t know me is willing to take a chance on something I wrote. It’s humbling.

“I need to run back to the house and get more books. I never thought I would run out.”

“Well I would’ve told you to bring all your inventory if you asked.” Fiorella winks at me.

“So should we just sit and tell people you’ll be back? Or I can go and get them.”

Luciana says to me.

“It’ll be faster if I grab them. But you guys don’t have to sit here, we can put a sign up.”

“We don’t mind sitting here, makes us feel like we’re famous too.” Luciana smiles.

That makes me laugh even more.

“I wish I was famous, maybe one day.”

I walk over to Georgíos.

“Would you be okay taking me back to the house? I need to grab more books.”

“Of course. You want to go now?”

“Yes, let me just tell Paxton and then we can go. Thank you.”

“No problem. I’ll wait here.”

I head over to Paxton to let him know what I need to do.

“It won’t take me long to grab my books.”

“Is Georgíos going with you?” he asks.

“He is. I just wanted to let you know in case you didn’t see me at my table.”

“Thank you.” He smiles and kisses me.

“I love you. Let me know when you’re back.”

“I love you too. And I’ll come see you when we get back.”

It doesn’t take me too long to grab a bunch of my books. And we head back to the store.

“Thank you again for driving me today—” I say just as we hear a pop and then a flapping sound.

“Shit. That sounds like a flat,” Georgíos says as he pulls over to the side of the road.

“Do you need help?”

“Nope. I got it. You relax, I’ll have it done fast.”

I can feel him jacking the car up to change the tire. It’s an odd feeling and it makes me giggle. I pull out my phone to text the girls and let them know about the flat.

Piper: Got a flat. We’ll be back ASAP

Luciana: Wow. Your books are that heavy that you popped a tire?

Giovanna: *snicker*

Fiorella: HAHAAH

Piper: Goofball

Isabella: Be safe and hurry back. There’s been some customers and they said they’d come back

Piper: Thank you all so much. See you soon

I look up and see a car parked behind us. But I don't hear Georgíos fixing the tire. He was making a lot of noise and then nothing. I get out of the car and walk around to the rear driver tire and see Georgíos on the ground.

“Georgíos!” I yell as I crouch down and feel for a pulse.

He has a pulse and I start to pull out my phone to call Paxton.

“It's nice to see you again, baby.”

Holy shit. I stand up and see Harris.

“What are you doing in Wintervale?” I ask him.

“I came to see you. I realized something these last few months. I was stupid to let you go. We were meant to be together. So I started looking for you.”

“What are you talking about? We broke up over a year ago.”

I start to back away from him and see Georgíos starting to wake up. Harris notices too and leans down and pulls a needle out.

“What are you doing? Leave him alone.” I yell at him.

I start to grab my phone again and I feel someone grab it from behind. I turn to see Marc.

“You know my brother. He's been keeping an eye on you for me.”

What in the fuck is going on? I never knew that Harris had a brother.

“We need to leave before that monster wakes up again.” Marc says to Harris.

Harris nods and grabs me, throwing me into their car. Harris gets in the back with me and Marc gets in to drive.

“Why are you doing this? You can’t force me to be with you.”

“I’m not forcing you. I’m just giving you time to remember how much you love me. And how much I love you.”

I feel like I’m in a twilight zone. When Paxton asked me about Harris, I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t think he’d do anything. But here he is kidnapping me and talking like a lunatic. I’ll never love him again.

“Aren’t you with Morgan? You told me you were having a baby with her. Your baby should be over a year now.”

“That bitch. She told me that the kid wasn’t mine. And we did a DNA test and he wasn’t mine.”

Karma. I love when I see it work.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t worry, you’re gonna love the place I found for us.”

I don’t understand what the fuck is going on. But I hope someone notices Georgíos and I aren’t back. And I hope that he’s okay. I don’t think I can handle it if he’s not.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Paxton

I look at my watch and realize that it's been over an hour since Piper and Georgíos left. I try calling her but her phone goes straight to voicemail. I take a walk to where her table is set up and see Artemis, Giovanna, Isabella, Fiorella and Luciana sitting where my Piper should be.

"Have you seen Piper?" I ask them.

"She texted and said they got a flat tire."

"Do you know how long ago that was? Georgíos can change a tire in a flash."

Giovanna sits up and looks at her phone.

"She texted thirty minutes ago. And you're right, it shouldn't take him this long. Have you tried calling her?"

"I did and it's going straight to voicemail. Can one of you take care of the lumber area for me? Just ring people up if they need anything. If anyone needs lumber cuts, tell them I'll be back."

"No problem. I'll go with you." Luciana says.

"And I'll take care of the lumber store." Fiorella tells me.

“Thank you so much.”

“I’ll drive. You shouldn’t be driving.” Luciana says.

We take the route Georgíos would’ve taken from the house to the store. Half way there we see the car, it looks like it’s still on the jack. But I don’t see Georgíos or Piper. I jump out of the car before Luciana comes to a complete stop.

“Paxton!” she yells at me.

I run around the car and find Georgíos on the ground. I kneel down and feel for a pulse. It’s strong.

“Georgíos, wake up. Where’s Piper?” I say as I try to wake him.

I see a needle lying next to him. What the fuck happened? Georgíos starts to wake up, he jumps up and shakes his head. Like he’s trying to clear it.

“Whoa you’re okay.” I say to him as I step back in case he shifts. He’s a huge guy and his tiger is even bigger.

“I saw Marc and another guy. I was fixing the tire and a car pulled up. A guy asked if I needed help. I said no, but the next thing I knew I was on the ground. I heard him talking to Piper. And then they put her in the car and took off.”

“What kind of car?” I ask.

“Grey SUV. License plate was 77-91254.”

I get on my phone and call Salvatore.

“Hey, Paxton. What’s up?”

“Piper’s missing. Someone took her, Georgíos said he saw Marc and another guy. He got a license plate, it’s 77-91254.”

“I’m on it. I’ll get the others helping. Is Georgíos okay?”

“He seems okay, I’m going to try and see if he’ll let me take him to the hospital ? —”

“I’m fine. Let’s find Piper.” Georgíos says.

“I figured he wouldn’t let me take him. We’ll head back to the house now. I asked the women to keep an eye on the store with Lukas and Felicity. I’ll call them when we get back.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they all know what’s going on. Drive safe.”

“Luciana’s with me and she’ll drive one car. I’ll fix the flat and drive this one back. Please find her.”

“Try not to panic, having the car’s license plate will help us. Get home safe.”

I hang up the phone and change out the tire.

“Let me help. I’m fine, these are times when being a shifter helps.” Georgíos says to me.

He does look like he’s one hundred times better than when we found him.

“I’m so sorry. This is my fault.” Georgíos says.

“This isn’t your fault. Whoever took Piper, they’re at fault. And we’re going to find them.”

We work together and finish getting the tire changed. Then head back to the house, I’m trying to keep my cool and not panic. When we get back to the house, I find out that my brother closed the store for the day so that we could all be here.

Sebastiano comes running into the living room.

“Having that license plate has made finding Piper a lot easier. It’s a rental car, it was rented by Harris Porter.”

“You mean Piper’s ex?” I ask.

“That’s the one. I don’t know what he’s doing, but I also found out that he and Marc are half brothers. They have the same mother.”

“So they’re in this together?” I frown.

“It looks like it. But I do have some good news, I found out where they’re staying. We’re getting some of us together to go and get your girl.”

“That’s the best news. I’m ready.”

Piper

It looks like we’re only a few miles outside of Wintervale.

And I’m hoping that Paxton knows I’m missing by now.

Marc and Harris have been talking like we’re just on a road trip.

We finally stop at a motel I try to jump out before Marc stops the car.

But Harris grabs me before I can get my hand on the door handle.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” Harris snaps at me.

I stay quiet as I follow him into the room. I’m hoping at some point Marc and Harris will pass out and that will give me a chance to escape. There’s only the two of them so unless they’re taking shifts? They both will pass out. Please make them both pass out.

I lie on one of the beds and try to ignore them both.

“You’ll come around in time, I know you will.” Harris says to me.

I continue to ignore him, I’m hoping that he’ll come to his senses and figure out that he’s being stupid.

How could he think that I could forgive him for what he did?

I told him when we were together that one of the biggest things for me was cheating.

And that I’d never forgive him or anyone if they cheated on me.

I guess he thought I was joking? I don’t even know. I just want Paxton.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Paxton

It takes us an hour to get everyone together and get to the motel. Harris was dumb enough to register the room under his real name. Salvatore used his clout to get the manager at the motel to give us the information we needed and to keep his mouth shut.

We're all waiting across the street, coordinating what we're going to do.

"The manager said that there's a window in the bathroom. So besides the big window and the front door, there's no other way for them to get out of the room." Giacomo says to everyone.

"I still want a few of you near the back window in case one of them tries to get out that way." Enea says.

"What are we doing with them when we get in there?" I ask.

"I called the sheriffs department and told them to meet us here in an hour. Gives us enough time to get in there and get Piper before they get here." Salvatore says to everyone.

"We don't know if they have any weapons. We do know that they have syringes with tranquilizers in them. But Georgíos said he didn't know if either of them had a gun." Celestino says.

“So we go in like they have guns. Always assume people who kidnap have weapons.”
Francesco tells us.

“Okay, are we all ready? I want Celestino, Sebastiano and Eros at the back window.
Paxton, Francesco, Apollo you’re here waiting?—”

“Wait. You can’t make me wait here.” I frown.

“You’re the very one that needs to wait here. Your emotions are higher than the rest
of us. I can’t be worrying about keeping you safe. I need to make sure we get Piper
out.”

I start to argue again, but I realize that Giacomo is right. I will just barge in there and
fuck it all up. I finally nod.

“Please keep her safe.”

“We’re going to do our best. The rest of us are in the front door and watching that big
front window. Let’s go”

I watch the rest of them cross the street. Even though I know Giacomo is right, it’s
the hardest thing I’ve had to do. Waiting here and watching the others go in to save
my Piper.

Piper

I’m still lying here ignoring Harris and Marc.

All of a sudden, there’s a huge noise and there’s a huge commotion.

The next thing I see is members of my new family taking down Marc and Harris.

I jump off the bed and run into the bathroom to hide.

As I'm cowering in the bathroom, I hear Harris yelling for me. I cover my ears.

I feel a hand on my arm and I start swinging at it.

"Piper, it's Enea. You're safe."

I look up and see his face looking down on me.

"H-Harris. Is he gone?" I ask.

"He won't be touching you again. Did he hurt you?"

I shake my head no.

"Where's Paxton? Is Georgíos okay?" I ask as Enea helps me stand up.

"Paxton is outside waiting for you. Georgíos is back at the house, he wanted to be here. But we made him stay there to rest."

"I'm so relieved that he's okay. When they took me, Georgíos was on the ground. I felt for a pulse and he had one. He was starting to wake up and Harris injected him with something."

"It was a tranquilizer. He's okay. He's pissed. But he's okay."

It's a huge relief to know that Georgíos is okay. I follow Enea outside.

"You're going to come back to me. You know we're meant to be together." Harris yells to me.

I stare at him.

“I’ll never be with you again. I told you before that cheating was the ultimate no. And you did it anyway.”

“It was a mistake. We can get past this.”

Holy fuck he’s as delusional as Marc is. I keep walking with Enea, he leads me across the street and into Paxton’s arms.

“Thank God you’re safe.” Paxton says as he holds me tight. “Did he hurt you?”

“No. He didn’t have time. You found me before they could even figure out where they were going to take me.”

“We have our family to thank for that. The way they all come together to get things done is amazing to watch. And that’s how we got to you so soon. And Georgíos was able to remember the car and license plate.”

My tears start to fall, the gravity of what could’ve happened is hitting me. If Georgíos hadn’t remembered what he did, my family would’ve had a harder time finding me. And then I wouldn’t be in Paxton’s arms right now.

We hear sirens and five sheriff and police cars are turning into the parking lot. We watch them take Harris and Marc into custody. We walk across the street to talk to them.

“Do you need an ambulance?” Officer Taylor asks.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? It’s better if you get checked out, there’s going to be a court date. So having those record will help us put them away for a longer period.”

“We don’t need an ambulance, I’ll drive her to the hospital now.” Paxton says to Officer Taylor.

After I give my statement, we head to the hospital so I can get checked out. Paxton doesn’t leave my side though all of it. And at this point, I just want to go home and be in his arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:16 am

Paxton

It's been a month since Harris and Marc kidnapped Piper.

They had their court date this week and both were found guilty of aggravated kidnapping.

Which is the most severe charge that they could be found guilty of.

They were both sentenced to twenty-five years.

No parole. They were also found guilty of aggravated assault on Georgíos.

They both got an extra ten years which they'll serve consecutively.

So they'll be in a federal prison for thirty years.

Lorenzo Mancini was Piper's attorney. He stated that if the brothers were allowed to be in the same prison, they could spend their time plotting against me.

The judge agreed with Lorenzo and they'll be in separate prisons.

And they're not allowed to have any contact.

Our Lake Renegade family came back for the court date. That night we had a party to celebrate that this ordeal was over. It was the night I asked Piper to marry me, she said yes and we're planning a winter wedding.

“Are you coming with me to my appointment?” Piper asks me as we’re getting ready for our day.

“Of course. Are you okay? You won’t tell me what the appointment is for.”

Piper smiles at me. “It’s because I don’t know yet either. But when I know, you’ll know.”

I chuckle. “Let’s get some breakfast and head to your appointment.”

I make eggs and pancakes for everyone and we all sit down to eat together. Then Piper and I head to the Doctor’s office.

I wait in the waiting area while she goes back for her appointment. Twenty minutes later, the nurse comes out.

“Paxton Vandenberg?” she says.

I stand up. “That’s me. Is everything okay?”

“I need you to come with me.”

I frown as I follow the nurse. She opens the door and motions for me to go inside. Piper is laying on the bed as she smiles. The Doctor is in the room too.

“Are you okay?” I ask Piper.

“I’m fine.” She says as she holds her hand out to me.

I take her hand and stand next to the bed. The Doctor squeezes some gel on Piper’s belly. And all of a sudden there’s a whooshing noise and then a thumping noise. I look at Piper and she has tears falling down her face.

“Is that what I think it is?” I say softly.

“That’s your baby’s heartbeat. Or I should say babies. Here’s baby A and here’s baby B. Congratulations.” The Doctor smiles at us.

I look at Piper and kiss her.

“We’re having babies.” I say to her as I kiss her.