



Summer Nights (The Kingston Brothers #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: One hot summer night will either lead to ruin, or forever. Could go either way, really ...

No one is impossible to charm. Except her.

Ivy is our small town's best realtor. Smart. Fiercely independent. Stunning.

Completely unimpressed by my status as one of the island's most eligible bachelors.

Working together was a necessity. Falling for her—and falling into bed with her—was not.

But I did it anyway. All of it.

A few crazy twists of fate and a lot of wild chemistry later, Ivy and I find ourselves sharing a life-altering secret. And also sharing my house.

But that's another story entirely.

Now, I need to find a way to convince Ivy that trusting me with her heart wouldn't be an epic mistake. Unfortunately, there's only one outcome that's certain.

Ivy will not make it easy on me.

It's fine, though. There's no way I'm backing down.

Not when we're this close to happily ever after...

Summer Nights, book 3 in The Kingston Brothers series is a spicy, surprise pregnancy, roommates contemporary romance of angsty emotion and all the feels.

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Chapter One

Ivy

My heart beat in time to the sounds of heavy footsteps on the wood floor as Cooper made his way down the hallway and into the kitchen of the house. "You need me to take a look around?"

I always felt a little breathless when I was with him. "That's right."

He wore the traditional navy-blue Kingston Construction T-shirt with the white stenciled logo, worn jeans, and work boots. There was nothing special about the outfit; it was how he filled them out that was distracting.

With a curt nod, he moved around the kitchen, checking the faucet, then crawled under the sink. I'd gotten into the bad habit of following him around the house. I wanted to learn from him, but I enjoyed being in his presence.

I was leaning against the counter when Cooper emerged from under the sink. He stood up, and he was close. Too close.

Cooper raised a brow. "You always hover around your clients?"

"I'm trying to figure out your secret. How do you find problems when no one else does?" I attempted to infuse confidence into my shaky voice.

Cooper stared at me for a second as if he couldn't quite figure me out. "You can

follow me around all you want, but you'll never figure out my secret."

"And why's that?" I asked in a flirty tone to match his energy.

He cocked his head slightly as if he was considering my question. "I have a sense for these things. You'd probably call it intuition. But I can't teach it to you. You either have it or you don't."

"If I hang around long enough, maybe it will rub off on me.

"I prided myself on always knowing as much as I could about everything that would help my business.

I hated depending on anyone, and right now I needed Cooper to do these checks before the sale went through.

His advice had saved me in more situations than I cared to admit.

Cooper's eyes flashed with heat, and I wondered if it was my unfortunate choice of the word rub. Then he said, "Good luck with that," before heading down the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

In heels, I followed him at a slower pace. I always dressed professionally when I was working. I wanted to be taken seriously, and I'd found that the right clothes helped. I'd grown up poor, and I never wanted to be mistaken for that person again.

Cooper spent a lot of time inspecting the walls of the guest bathroom, moving items that the previous owners had left behind to get a better look. Finally, he stepped back, and sighed. "There's a water leak."

I moved closer, a little surprised. "No one mentioned anything about a water leak."

"The owners tried to cover it with paint and caulk, but if you remove it, you'd see that there have been multiple leaks." He nodded toward the front of the house. "I suspect it's the pipes leading from the house to the street."

I sucked in a breath. "That wouldn't be covered by homeowners insurance, and it's expensive to fix."

He nodded grimly. "That's why they covered it up. They want to leave this little surprise for the new owners."

Once again, I was impressed. "Can you write up the report for the buyers?"

Cooper nodded. "Of course."

He continued his inspection while I messaged my buyers to give them a heads-up.

It would be up to them whether they wanted to force the sellers to fix it, ask for a reduction in price, or walk away from the house altogether.

From my experience, the cover-up was a sign that more things could be wrong with this house.

"I'm going to check out the bedrooms." Cooper's voice was closer than I expected, and I teetered on my heels.

He reached out to steady me, his hand on my elbow. The heat of his palm seared my skin.

"You startled me."

"I thought you were supposed to be observing me." His voice had a nice low rumble

that settled deep in my chest.

I shrugged. "I wanted to let the buyers know what's going on."

He let go of my elbow, and I immediately missed his touch. "Let's go."

He had a tendency to be abrupt, as if he didn't want to waste time on saying too many words. It only made me more intrigued by him.

He waited for me to precede him, and I wondered if I affected him the way he did me.

I prided myself on being in control of any interaction with a man, especially one I was interested in, but I didn't feel that way when I was with Cooper.

He had this way of throwing me off center.

It was exciting and scary at the same time.

I followed him through the bedrooms, studying him to see if I could glean anything from his method. But he worked silently, not telling me what he was thinking or doing. It was frustrating. I didn't want to rely on a Kingston.

The brothers were the subject of a recent magazine article which ranked which brother was the most eligible. The attention had only inflated their egos as far as I could tell. But Cooper was quieter than the others, so I couldn't get a read on how it had affected him.

Our friend group hung out together often, but I hadn't seen him flirt with anyone. If he had a personal life, he kept it quiet.

As he worked, the room grew darker. Thunder cracked, and I jumped.

"You okay?" Cooper asked.

I wrapped my arms around myself. "Yeah, I didn't realize we were going to get storms."

Cooper's hand landed on my lower back as he steered me out of the room. "You always work this late at night, alone with contractors?"

I scoffed. "You're a friend. I don't have to worry about you."

His forehead wrinkled as if my words hadn't alleviated his concern.

"I always let my assistant know where I am, and I never put myself in dangerous situations." I'd grown up navigating my mother's numerous boyfriends. I knew how to take care of myself.

He raised a brow.

"If you think I'd let someone take advantage of me, then you don't know me very well." We'd grown up together, but I wasn't sure how much he knew about me. As soon as I was old enough, I got a job. I saved so I could go to college. I moved out of my mom's trailer and never went back.

"That's probably the case."

I walked past him. "That you don't know me very well?"

"You don't exactly let people get close to you."

I paused in the hallway. "I could say the same to you. Shepard tends to get the attention."

He winced.

I immediately regretted my words. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"People assume we're the same, and I don't have the energy to change their mind."

I smiled softly, stepped closer, and touched his stomach. His rock-hard stomach. "Maybe you should let people get to know the real Cooper Kingston."

I turned away from him, not wanting him to see the desire swirling in my eyes. He was quiet as we made our way down the hall and to the foyer.

At the door, he said, "I'll get you that report."

"I appreciate that." I glanced out the front window where the rain was coming down hard. Puddles were already forming on the driveway. "You might want to wait to leave. Unless you're okay with getting soaked."

He hesitated, clearly unsure what he should do. Then he glanced back at me, a look of concern crossing his face. "I can wait until it passes."

Storms never lasted long in Florida. But the thought of being stuck in this house with Cooper had my throat tightening. I pretended my interest in him was purely professional, but I couldn't deny the physical attraction.

Thunder cracked, and the lights in the house went out. I sucked in a breath, my heart hammering.

Cooper placed a hand on my back and steered me deeper into the house, away from the windows.

Thunderstorms always reminded me of living at my mom's, huddling under my blankets, scared of the storm but reluctant to go in my mom's room. She usually shared it with a man I didn't know well.

I felt shaky with the memory of hiding under my blanket and trying to stifle the sound of thunder with the pillow. It never worked.

Cooper turned so that he was facing me. "Are you scared of storms?"

I laughed as if the idea was ludicrous. I made it a habit never to admit weakness to anyone. I was more than aware that it could and would be exploited by the wrong people. "Of course not."

He raised a brow. "It's okay to admit that there's a chink in your armor."

"I don't know what you're talking about." It was dark, but his face was laminated by the light coming through the window over the sink.

"I've always thought of you as wearing armor. Like you had to protect yourself from the world."

I sucked in a sharp breath. "That's ridiculous. I'm perfectly safe."

"Is that how you feel?" His voice was soft and gentle and threatened to unravel something deep inside of me.

I didn't want to admit it, but I'd been protecting myself for as long as I could remember no one had ever called me out on it before. My friends said I was strong, and I preferred to think of myself like that. "I don't know why we're talking about this."

Cooper glanced out the window. "Because we're stuck in this house without power while it storms, and there's nothing else to do."

It felt like he was probing, testing how far he could go. Instead, I did the one thing I knew would get his attention. I curled a hand around his neck and pulled his face down to my level. "I can think of a few things we can do to distract us."

He raised a brow. "And what's that?"

He was going to make me spell it out for him, but this is where I excelled. I didn't need anyone psychoanalyzing me. I preferred to keep things surface level, so I went up on tiptoe to press my lips against his.

For a long second, he didn't respond, and then his arm banded around my back, and he pulled me against his hard body. I almost groaned; the sensation was so incredible.

It was a mistake to think I had control of this situation.

My lips parted, and his tongue swept inside, claiming me. This was the kiss I'd always dreamed a man would give me. But I didn't usually pick men like him.

Cooper Kingston was different than any other man I'd ever been with. He had the power to blow through my walls and leave me vulnerable. I couldn't let that happen.

I pressed myself against his body and fought with him over control of the kiss. He lifted one of my legs so that my core was pressed against him. All thoughts of control fell away until I was soft and aching with need.

He kissed my chin. "Do you want this?"

"Yes," I gasped as he sucked on the sensitive skin of my neck.

"This doesn't mean anything."

I shivered at the promise. "Of course not."

"I won't call you for a second round."

I pulled back so I could look at his face. "You'd better not."

He grinned and lifted me with impressive strength, pressing me against the nearest wall. "I've wanted this for a long time."

I swallowed down my agreement. He already had too much of me; I wouldn't give him any more. This was a one-time thing, never to be repeated.

I'd allow myself one indulgence. One taste of Cooper Kingston. It would be foolish to ask for more. He was the perfect distraction from the storm.

He eased back slightly, allowing my feet to touch the ground.

I slowly slid down the zipper of my skirt while his gaze tracked the movement.

Once the skirt was pooled at my feet, I hooked my fingers on the sides of my panties and moved them over my hips and down my legs, letting them fall to the floor.

Before I could unbutton my blouse, he'd shoved his pants down and lifted me into position.

With one motion, his cock filled me. My mouth fell open on a gasp. I'd never experienced anything like this. He was so big. I felt like he was consuming me.

Then I remembered how he'd shoved his pants down and how impressive his cock

had looked. He wasn't wearing a condom. "Protection."

He growled as he lowered me once again, digging in his pocket for one. I didn't want to think about why he had one ready. Was he generally prepared for sex on the go?

I'd never done anything like this. It was so unprofessional. If anyone walked in on us, my reputation would be in tatters, and he'd be hailed the hottest bachelor on the island once again.

The only thing that saved me was that this house was under contract, and the sellers lived in Canada.

With the rain falling on the roof overhead and the lights out, I could pretend that we were alone and that there were no consequences.

This time, I unbuttoned my blouse, shrugging it off my shoulders, before he lifted me in his arms, easily entering me. He set a steady pace, thrusting in and out of me as if he was claiming his spot deep inside me, and I wasn't about to argue with that. I'd never felt this taken before.

I'd never let him in emotionally. I only had this to give. No man was worth the cost of leaving yourself open. I had to protect myself at all costs.

No matter how good this felt, I wouldn't give in to the desire to do this again or to see what he'd be like in a bed. We only had this one moment.

There was a part of me that reveled in letting go, in letting someone else support me even if it was only for a few seconds. I gave in to the feel of his strong arms supporting me, his cock driving into me.

The sensations cleared my mind of thoughts, leaving me in the moment with him.

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Chapter Two

Cooper

Sweat trickled down my temple as I fought for any semblance of control. I couldn't believe that Ivy had made a move. I hadn't thought she'd ever give into the growing attraction between us. I wasn't sure she'd acknowledge it to herself, much less to me.

Ivy Buckley was so carefully controlled; I thought of her as a queen in my head. She was regal and professional and never gave in to any man.

It was the storm that seemed to rattle her, and I couldn't leave her alone in this house. Especially when the power went out.

There was something about seeing Ivy so vulnerable that struck a chord deep inside me. She wasn't a damsel in distress, but damn if I didn't want to sweep in and save her, even if it was from herself.

She'd never admit to anyone that she needed me to protect or satisfy her.

The orgasm built in the base of my spine, so I slowed my pace, kissing her, as my hand snaked between us, finding her swollen nub. I rubbed her, and she jerked in my arms, her mouth ripping from mine.

"Oh, my God."

I ground my teeth together. "It's Cooper."

She held on tight as her body spasmed around me. I was positive she'd hate this act of vulnerability when she realized what transpired between us.

She'd never let me this close again, but I'd always remember it. She'd let down her guard and let me in. I was positive she thought she was in control of every situation, especially this one. But she wasn't.

For a few seconds, I was in control. I was the one holding her against the wall, supporting her weight. It took my touch for her to let go.

Her fingers tangled with the hair at the base of my neck, and that one act of tenderness set me off. I thrust one more time deep and emptied myself into the condom. I wished I was bare inside her, but she would never allow that to happen.

It was too risky. Neither of us wanted the risk that came with something like that. I hadn't even asked if she was on birth control. I should do it now, but she was already pushing me away, wanting to get down.

I complied, setting her on her feet.

She pulled on her bra, hooking it with efficiency, then her shirt, which she left gaping open while she reached for her skirt.

It only took a second for me to tuck myself into my briefs and zip up my jeans. This was a quickie against the wall of an empty house. It shouldn't have meant anything, but I felt this overwhelming swelling of emotion in my chest cavity.

I wanted to ask her to slow down, to wait, but there was no stopping Ivy when she got something in her head, and right now, she wanted to escape this situation. She wanted to get away from me. I stepped back to give her the space she needed.

My presence was a reminder that she'd let down her guard for a few seconds, and she wouldn't forget it.

Her movements were jerky, so I shoved her hand aside to pull up the zipper of her tight skirt. "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Her tone had a bite to it, belying what we'd just shared.

"We had sex. That tends to be an intimate act." One that requires emotion, whether she believed that or not.

She snorted. "I thought we agreed that this meant nothing."

"We did."

She lifted her chin. "Then why are you trying to make it something it's not?"

I didn't respond because she already knew where this was going, and it wasn't back to her place or mine.

She straightened her skirt, then worked the tiny buttons on her silky shirt.

It was white over a pale pink lace bra, the color of her skin.

I couldn't believe I was only just now noticing what she wore.

My biggest regret was that I hadn't even gotten to see much of her breasts much less taste her nipples.

I wasn't ready to let her go, but then again, I never really had her. I just hoped I hadn't made a huge miscalculation.

Ivy glanced out the window. "The rain stopped. I have to get going."

"I'll walk you out."

"That's not necessary." I didn't point out the obvious that I was on my way out when the rain started.

She walked ahead of me, grabbing her purse from the kitchen island and doing her best to comb her tangled hair with her fingers.

When she reached for the doorknob, I stopped her with a hand to the door. She turned slowly, facing me. "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." I cupped her chin, wishing I had more time to get under her skin. Even though I'd promised her it was a one-time thing, unraveling the mystery of Ivy was becoming a top priority in my head.

Her lips pursed. "I'm fine."

"Of course you are." She'd never admit that she wasn't. "I don't regret what we did."

She barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes. "I don't either. Now can I go?"

I dropped my hands, stepping back.

She was free to walk out the door at any time. But she was the one who'd chosen to kiss me. The one who'd gotten undressed and said she wanted me. I wouldn't forget that anytime soon.

She opened the door and walked outside. The rain was still dripping from the porch and a nearby tree.

She hurried to her SUV. I suspected she drove a nice vehicle and wore expensive clothes to hide where she came from. A lot of people might have forgotten, but I remembered her coming to school in too-small clothes and getting the free lunches.

I remembered her being embarrassed if anyone pointed out her circumstances. And I remembered clearly when she came back to town after college and set up her business. I was impressed with her.

I'd only gotten the opportunity to be alone with her during the inspections. She gave into the attraction as the storm raged around us. I didn't delude myself into thinking that this wasn't a rare occurrence for her.

I wanted to know more about her, but I wouldn't get answers by forcing her to stay with me. I needed to let her go. That was her first instinct when anyone got close. I had to comfort myself with the knowledge that I'd been the only one who'd gotten this far with her emotionally.

She talked about dating tourists, men with a timeline to leave. She needed to keep her distance from everyone. Our friends might not have noticed it, but I had.

I'd always been intrigued by her but never thought anything would happen. But now that it had, I wasn't going to let the idea of her go. She was under my skin, and I couldn't shake her.

Many times, I'd dreamed of the way she felt and ached to taste her. She might try to forget that anything happened between us, but I didn't think she'd be successful.

Or at least, I hoped she wouldn't be. I didn't want to be one more easily forgettable man who entered her life and left just as quickly.

I didn't know what I wanted beyond possessing her. But there was that moment when

I realized the storm had shaken her, that I wanted something more. I wanted to protect her. I'd never felt that way about anyone outside of my family.

It was a new feeling. One I wanted to explore.

She opened her door, and when she was behind the wheel, she looked up at me. I shoved my hands in my pockets but kept my gaze locked on hers.

She turned away to back out of the driveway.

I wanted to see her again and not just for business.

I'd promised her what she wanted to hear the first time, suspecting it would be hard to walk away from her.

The next time we were alone, I wanted to taste her.

To make her come with my mouth. Would she let me, or was that too intimate an act for her?

I wanted to break down every wall, every hang-up, and see the woman underneath. The one riddled with hidden insecurities she never let anyone see.

As much as I admired the woman she'd become, I wanted to get to know the one she hid from everyone.

I waited until her taillights disappeared before heading to the bar where I was supposed to meet Shep. I didn't enjoy the bar scene anymore, but it was a habit to keep Shep out of trouble.

It was a bad habit I couldn't shake.

I found Shep at the beachside bar, his stool swiveled so he could talk to a woman. They were never far when he was around. I'd long ago gotten over any jealousy surrounding his appeal.

As I'd grown and matured, I realized I didn't want the type of women Shep attracted. I wanted something deeper and more meaningful. I just hadn't found it yet.

I leaned on the bar, raising a finger to get the bartender's attention. I ordered a beer, and when he handed it to me, Shep asked, "Where've you been?"

"I had to do an inspection for Ivy." I hoped he didn't take this opportunity to mention that we'd been doing a lot of those lately. I didn't want him to put anything together.

The woman who'd been next to Shep disappeared. He might have been a lady's man, but we were close. Or at least I'd always thought we were. Lately, I'd been getting the itch to create some distance. To figure out what I would do with my life if I wasn't so wrapped up in his.

"You coming over this weekend to rip out the bathrooms?" Shep asked.

"I thought you were doing the kitchen first?"

"I got rid of some cabinets."

"Shouldn't you finish renovating one room before you do any more demolition?" I asked him.

"I want to do the demo first."

"I can't believe you're finally getting around to making changes." Shep lived in our grandmother's house on Captiva. It was too big for him, but I'd made the decision

early on not to live with him. Besides, Grandma left him the house.

Shep nodded. "It's time to make that place my own. I don't know anything about picking designs though."

I think it had something to do with the fact that he was color-blind.

We'd discovered that interesting information when we were kids.

I'd always covered for him. The only reason anyone suspected he had attention deficit disorder were the teachers.

He'd always refused any sort of help and pushed away any plans they created for him.

He wanted to be treated like everyone else.

Unfortunately, it made him look like he was disorganized and lazy. When in reality, he suffered from an executive functioning disorder and got easily overwhelmed with details. He reacted by shutting down.

"Have you thought about asking Luna for help?" Our sister had recently started her own interior design company.

Shep swiveled on the bar stool so that he could take in the crowd. "She's in Colorado working on a project. She doesn't have time for this."

"I think she'd enjoy working on our grandmother's house."

"I don't want her to feel bad that Grandma gave me the place and not anyone else."

I think it was because she'd had a soft spot for Shepard. She'd seen through the

bullshit to the man underneath.

"You're going to need help with this project," I said, knowing that he had difficulty deciding what to do first and finishing a project before he moved onto something else. Without supervision, he'd have the house ripped apart and unlivable without a clear plan to fix it.

"I'll figure it out." Shep shrugged. "What about you? You haven't been out with us as much."

"Eh. The bar scene is getting old." I leaned a hip against the countertop. The thing that interested me more was fucking Ivy against the wall. I wanted to find a way to make it happen again. Would Ivy take me up on a no-strings-attached fling? Or would it be better to use action instead of talking?

"You seeing someone?" Shep asked.

For how oblivious he was at times, he had an uncanny ability to figure me out. "Why would you think that?"

He leaned an elbow on the bar, facing the room so he could eye the women milling around. His gaze settled on Kinsley, who was out with the rest of the girls tonight. "Because you're not coming out with me as much."

I shrugged, trying not to focus on Ivy. "It's not a big deal."

He glanced over at me. "I'm starting to think you've been avoiding me."

My brow furrowed. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. You tell me." He kept his gaze on me.

His scrutiny was uncomfortable. "I've been picking up more inspection jobs than ever. It's time consuming, and I've been too tired to go out."

He shifted his gaze from me to the crowd. "Why does Dad want us doing that anyway?"

"He thinks it's good to work with local realtors."

"That makes sense, but it's a lot of work for not getting paid."

"I don't mind helping Ivy. She's a friend."

"Yeah, I guess. I always thought we'd hook up at some point, but she was never interested. I can't figure her out."

I let out a surprised laugh. "You came onto Ivy, and she didn't want anything to do with you?"

Shep shifted his stance, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "It's rare that I strike out with anyone."

I bumped his shoulder, pleased that he'd struck out with her. "Did she bruise your ego?"

"Of course not. It's not like every woman on the island is interested in me." His gaze settled on Kinsley once again.

I dipped my head toward her. "She's a single mother and doesn't want anything to do with you."

He tipped his beer to his lips. "That's because I let her think I'm a player."

"Aren't you?"

Shep grimaced. "I enjoy their attention. That doesn't mean I sleep with every woman I flirt with."

I lifted my beer to my mouth. "Are you sure about that?"

"I'm not a complete asshole."

Kinsley looked over at us, and I wondered if she sensed our attention.

Shep winked at her, and she shook her head.

I leaned in close. "You shouldn't mess with a single mom. She has enough going on."

His jaw tight, he said, "I'm not messing with Kinsley. I don't intend for anything to happen with her. I just like riling her up."

"She hates you."

"You think so?" Shep asked, a hint of vulnerability in his tone.

"Hates is a strong word. But she's usually irritated with you."

Shep chuckled. "Yeah, no kidding. There's no getting around my reputation with the women, I guess."

I snorted. "You like it that way."

"Of course I do," Shep said with a grin, and when a blonde sidled up next to him with a friend, I moved away.

I didn't feel right talking to women after I'd been intimate with Ivy. When I saw her heading toward the bathroom, I followed her.

I waited in the hallway for her to come out.

A few minutes later, she opened the door. When she saw me leaning against the wall, she asked, "Can I help you?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew they were the wrong ones.

She was taller than other women I'd dated, so I only had to drop my head slightly for her to talk into my ear. "I'm always okay," and then she was gone.

I wanted to touch her skin to remember what she felt like under my palm. I wanted to find out what she tasted like. Our encounter was too short. I wanted more time with her, getting to know her. I wanted her to scream out my name. Too bad she was never going to let anything happen again.

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Chapter Three

Ivy

I couldn't believe I'd fucked a business partner in one of my houses. It sounded really bad when I put it like that. But there was something about the storm that had made me want to do something.

It was like time had been suspended, and there was no need to worry about anyone walking into the house.

It was just me and Cooper and our undeniable desire for each other. As much as I wished I could experience it again, it wasn't smart.

I felt vulnerable with Cooper in a way I didn't with anyone else. Maybe it was the storm or the memory of my childhood, but I suspected it had something to do with him. I needed to stay away from anyone who had the ability to see the real me.

I put on a facade, one that served me well. I wasn't the poor girl with a dad who left before I was born or a mom who was too busy with her current boyfriend to ensure I had field-trip money or clothes that fit.

I took care of myself, and I did a great job of it. No one who met me now would suspect my less-than-ideal upbringing. I drove an expensive SUV, I wore designer clothes, and I never went out without being dressed nicely.

I'd worked too hard for anyone to see me as the girl I was before. Cooper

remembered her, and I didn't want to answer the questions I saw in his eyes. What was different about me? Was there anything of that other girl left?

I shuddered at the thought of talking to someone about those days growing up, an afterthought in my mother's too-small trailer.

I tried to stop in and check on my mom and my half-siblings once a week. They still lived in the same trailer I grew up in, and it wasn't the cute RV park when you first came on the island. It was the one that the local politicians hoped the tourists never saw.

I drove to the trailer park and parked on the road in front of my childhood home. The house itself was worn and run-down. The same broken swing set I played on was still in the backyard.

I knocked on the door and opened it carefully. I was never sure of what I'd see when I came home.

One time, I'd opened the door to one of her boyfriends snorting drugs on the kitchen table and to another fucking another woman on it.

This time, Mom stood at the stove, waving me in. "It's so good to see you."

I kissed her offered cheek and sat at the table. It was the same one that had seen so much abuse from her long line of boyfriends. I had two younger siblings from different fathers. None of them had stuck around.

There was one man who took care of us for a while, but when Mom cheated on him, he left. I always suspected she couldn't deal with a nice man and pushed him away before he could break up with her.

I shook off the realization that I had the same radar. I only dated guys who were looking for a one-night stand. I didn't want anything to do with a nice guy, which was what Cooper Kingston was.

"You don't have to check in on me every week, ya know?"

I shook my head. "I'm here to see my family and spend time with my brother and sister. Where are they?"

"In their room."

Before I could leave, she said, "There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"What's that?" I asked, my stomach dropping. I didn't want to give my mom money, but I couldn't resist helping my siblings out when they needed it. And I'd never tell my mom, but I had college savings plans set up for each of them. I wanted them to have a way out should they want it.

"The car broke down again."

I winced. "I hate to have to tell you but you're going to have to get something newer."

Mom rolled her eyes. "You know I can't afford a car right now."

"You want me to check the used lots for a good deal?"

Mom's shoulders dropped. "Can you see if they'll take the old one on a trade? I'd love to save some money."

I didn't have the heart to tell her no one would want the junker in the driveway that

rarely ran. "I'll see what I can find."

Mom knew I wouldn't buy her a car or even give her money. I'd set that boundary early on. But I was good at working with people and negotiating, so I could finagle a deal for her. "You have any money for a down payment?"

Mom's lips pursed. "You know things have been tight."

"You're not seeing anyone?" I asked, knowing the drill. Sometimes she could get financial help from whomever she was seeing.

"Carl left last week. Said he couldn't live here anymore."

"You should be careful who you're bringing here to live with Duncan and Rae. They're getting older now."

Mom shrugged. "We're going to be fine. It's just tight between boyfriends. You know how it is."

It was a cycle I hoped would stop for my siblings, because I hated the roller coaster.

Every once in a while, Mom had dated a guy who put food on the table and bought me new clothes.

But more likely than not, he was an extra mouth to feed, and we were worse off.

She was forever chasing a man who'd take care of her. But I didn't think those men existed.

My mind flashed to the moment when Cooper had asked if I was okay. It was a simple throwaway question, but I knew he meant it. I felt that concern deep in my

soul. I couldn't let one man trick me into thinking I could have something more.

I took care of myself. I didn't need a man to do that for me. Especially not a Kingston.

"I'll see what I can find."

Mom reached over and squeezed my hand. "You're a good daughter."

"Thanks, Mom." I didn't feel like one when I refused to give her money. But she hadn't given me everything I needed growing up: love or support. She'd made her decisions, and I'd made mine. But I always ensured that Duncan and Rae were taken care of.

I walked into their shared room. They were getting older now and needed to have separate bedrooms. But I figured it was better for them to be together just in case Mom moved a bad guy in. I hated to think like that, but it was a reality when you dated around like she did.

"Ivy!" Rae cried when she saw me, jumping up from her bed.

I hugged her tight. "I missed you."

She smiled up at me. "It's only been a week."

Duncan hugged me, slightly more reluctant. I worried he wouldn't welcome hugs soon.

I sat on the end of Duncan's bed that was still rumpled from sleep. "How are things at school?"

"I'm in the play," Rae cried as she jumped on her bed.

"That's amazing, but no jumping on the bed," I said to her.

She landed with a flop on her butt.

"I'm graduating from elementary school," Duncan added.

I couldn't believe he was getting that old already. "Do you need money for the class trip or the end-of-year party?"

Duncan handed me the paperwork from his school folder.

"I can take care of this." Thankfully, they used the same account for field trips as their school lunches. I always ensured they had money in their account for lunches so they wouldn't need free lunches.

"My shoes are getting tight," Rae whined.

I smiled at her. "Of course they are. You're a growing girl. You want the same style. Next size up?"

She nodded.

I tucked Duncan's school paperwork in my purse. "You want to head to the park today? It's a beautiful day out."

"Duh," Duncan said, teetering so close to the teenage attitude that I dreaded.

"You're not supposed to say duh. It's not nice."

He sighed. "Can we go now?"

"Let's say goodbye to Mom, and then we'll go." I followed them to the kitchen where they hugged Mom, and then we headed out. It was important for me to maintain this relationship with my siblings. I grew up as an only child, and I was glad they had each other.

As long as I was here to keep an eye on them, their childhood would be different than mine.

They wouldn't worry about having food in the fridge or shoes that fit.

If Mom couldn't pay for the rent on the trailer or the kids were scared of one of her boyfriends, I'd petition the court for custody.

I just hoped it wouldn't get to that point.

I drove them to the park in town next to the recreation center. There was a playground, a basketball court, and even a walking path through the woods. As an added bonus, it was across the street from Sanibel Bean, the coffee and ice-cream shop.

"Can I shoot hoops?" Duncan asked after he'd been on the playground for a while.

There was a group of men playing a game, but they'd taken a water break. "Just don't get in the way of the game."

He ran over to the court and asked one of the men if he could use their ball. When the man nodded, Duncan squared up to the hoop and shot. The man caught the rebound and passed it back to him.

When Rae ran up to me, I asked, "I'm going to check on Duncan, okay?"

"Sure," she said as she ran off again.

My pulse picked up when I realized the man he was talking to was Cooper, and he was shirtless.

He wore basketball shorts low on his hips, and sweat clung to his shoulders. His tan skin glowed in the afternoon sunlight.

He demonstrated the proper positioning of his hands on the ball and showed Duncan how to shoot. The ball whooshed through the net. "Now you do it."

Duncan mimicked his hand position and attempted to shoot it with the same form, but it bounced off the rim.

Cooper snagged the rebound and threw it at Duncan. "That was better. Try it again."

I stopped at the edge of the court, watching them together. The other men were gathering their things and heading out.

"You coming out with us?" Shep asked Cooper.

Cooper scanned the area, his gaze snagging on me, and paused. "I have some things to take care of."

My cheeks heated.

"What are you doing here?" Shep asked me.

I nodded toward Duncan. "Spending some time with my brother and sister."

Shep glanced at Duncan. "I forgot you have younger siblings."

I smiled. "Much younger."

He squeezed my shoulder. "You're a good sister."

"Thanks."

"I'm going to head out," Shep said, falling into step with the Kingston men. They were an impressive bunch with their hard muscles and tan skin.

I waited while Cooper helped Duncan with his shot and then asked him, "You want to do some one-on-one?"

Duncan nodded shyly. "Sure."

Duncan didn't have a father figure around. Not one that stayed for longer than a few months and none that I'd consider good for him.

I sat on the bench so that I could keep one eye on Rae on the playground, where she'd found a group of girls to play with, and Duncan. Although Cooper in his shirtless state was drawing more of my attention.

His muscles rippled as he played defense on Duncan, and when he jumped in the air to block his shot, his muscles pulled taut.

Cooper fist bumped him when the shot went in.

Duncan drifted over to me. "I'm thirsty."

I handed him his water bottle.

"You come to the park often?" Cooper asked me.

"We come here once a week, and then we get ice cream." I hated leaving them in that trailer, so this eased some of my guilt. I couldn't take them from my mom without a clear reason, but I wanted them to have a reprieve from that place.

"Can we get ice cream now?" Duncan asked.

"Sure. Let me grab Rae."

"Let me know if you want to play basketball again," Cooper said to Duncan.

"I don't know if that's possible," I said, not wanting Cooper to infiltrate my life any more than he already had.

"Please?" Duncan asked, and I sighed.

Why did Cooper want to get involved?

I hoped he didn't disappoint my brother. "I'll let you know the next time we're here."

Cooper nodded. "I'll see you next time, buddy."

Duncan hugged me quickly and ran off, calling over his shoulder. "I'll get Rae."

"You didn't have to do that," I said to Cooper who wiped the sweat from his forehead, then his chest. His pecs flexed, and I sighed.

"Duncan seemed to want me to play with him."

"He doesn't have a father who's around," I reluctantly admitted.

"Sounds like he could use someone then."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "And exactly who is that?"

"A good man who wants to teach him how to play basketball." Cooper grabbed his bag and walked the path around the playground.

I rushed to keep up. "You couldn't possibly want to be the guy to do that."

He raised a brow. "And why is that?"

I searched for the answer but settled on the only one I knew. "You're busy, and we're not your responsibility."

Cooper paused and faced me. "I think you have this all wrong. Duncan asked for help, and I'm willing to give it. There's no ulterior motive."

This time I raised a brow. "Are you sure about that?"

Cooper's face softened. "Not everyone wants something from you, and maybe I just want to help a kid who needs it." He boosted the bag onto his shoulder. "Besides, I like him."

"If you think you're going to get into my pants by going through my brother, you're wrong." I was a little embarrassed that I went that far, but I wanted to be clear.

Cooper drew up and looked at me. "Who said anything about that? You were clear it was a one-time thing."

I wanted to ask if he was going to push that boundary, but I didn't want to sound like I was eager for that to happen. He had me stuck. I needed to let this go, or it would seem like I wanted him.

"I bring him here ever Saturday afternoon, but if you don't show up?—"

Cooper's face softened. "I have your number. I'll let you know if I can't make it."

Relief flooded my system. I could handle rejection, but I didn't want Duncan to experience it. He didn't deserve to be cast aside by another man. "Okay."

Duncan and Rae ran up to us.

"I'll see you next week," Cooper said to Duncan.

"Yeah, okay."

"Be good until then," Coop said, and I wondered if he'd be a good role model for Duncan. God knows he needed one.

"I will."

"Thanks for helping Duncan with his shot," I said to him, grateful despite my reluctance to need anyone for anything.

"Anytime," Cooper said before heading to his truck.

We used the crosswalk to cross the street, filing into the coffee shop slash ice-cream store. I'd somehow managed to avoid interacting with Cooper outside of our friends' get-togethers or the inspections.

Cooper Kingston was a good man. He was nice to my brother, taking the time to show him a few basketball skills. To anyone else, that might not be much, but to me, it was huge.

I didn't want to set up a schedule where he could work with Duncan. It might be nice for now, but I anticipated for the inevitable fallout. People always let you down. Cooper would get busy or focused on something or someone else, and Duncan would be left behind.

I wouldn't let that happen. I looked out for my siblings because I could see the pitfalls before they could. I'd been through this before. I'd experienced the worst humanity had to offer, and I'd protect my brother and sister from it at all costs.

Cooper Kingston would move on from our little family. It was only a matter of time.

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Chapter Four

Cooper

My pulse picked up in anticipation of seeing Ivy. She usually scheduled the inspections for after work hours so that I didn't have to take time away from my other projects. That meant she was usually alone in the house.

There was no possibility of anyone walking in on us. I didn't expect her to want to hook up again, or even entertain the idea, but I still hoped that something would happen.

So far, my impression of Ivy was that she didn't trust people to be there for her. She hated asking for help, and she didn't like relying on anyone. She probably hated that she needed me to take one last look at her buyers' homes.

But she was even more protective of her siblings. She wouldn't let me hurt Duncan or Rae. If she had an inkling that I'd let them down, she'd shut me out.

I'd gotten all of that from the few meager interactions with her. She might allow herself to have fun with men here and there, but she hadn't let anyone in. I was positive of that without any solid evidence.

When I pulled up the truck, I had the sudden urge to test her, to see if she wanted more from me. But I had to avoid her logical side. I needed to appeal to the side of her that acted on instinct.

I knocked on the door, and as soon as it opened, I took her in. She wore her usual outfit of a blouse, slim-fitting skirt, and heels. I wondered what color bra she wore today. I stepped inside, and she locked the door behind us.

"Thanks for coming—" Before she could finish her sentence, I was on her. I backed her against the wall, kissing her like I'd imagined all week.

I should have completed the inspection first, but I didn't want to give her any time to think. I needed to separate the logical side of her brain from the reactionary one. The one that wanted to be careful and maintain distance.

I angled her face so that I could ease inside her mouth.

Her leg hitched over my hip, and I held it there as I ground against her center. She moaned into my mouth, and I knew I made the right decision. She wanted me. She wanted this. She was just too cautious to let herself have it.

In this position, there was nothing separating us except for her panties and my jeans. I eased a hand between her legs, teasing the edge of the lace.

She arched her hips against my hand, urging me to go farther. When I slipped underneath the scrap of material, she moaned again.

I kept the onslaught on her mouth and senses. She held onto my bicep, powerless to conjure up any desire to stop this.

I felt like a freight train barreling out of control. It was too late for the brakes.

My fingers eased between her folds, collecting the wetness, then slid inside her tight channel. I pumped my fingers inside her, my thumb circling her clit.

She bit my lower lip. "I want you inside me."

She didn't want to play around. She wanted the real deal. She wanted me.

"Yes," I said as I fumbled with the button of my jeans.

She reached between us to grip my cock.

I lifted her so that she was once again pressed against the door. I hadn't even checked to see if the house had any furniture. But this wasn't our place; we couldn't use the bed anyway. As much as I wanted to take my time with Ivy, she wouldn't allow that.

No time to think. No time to consider that she might be making a mistake. I wanted her to feel me. To be surrounded by sensations. My touch. My scent. My desire.

My cock teased her entrance, and I lost all sense of reason. I thrust hard, bottoming out in one motion. Her head fell back against the door with a thunk. "Condom."

"Shit." I never forgot about protection, but I'd made it a habit with Ivy. Hopefully, she wouldn't decide that I was too careless for her. I wanted to protect her, but I was doing a poor job of that.

I eased her down to the floor, grabbing the condom I'd placed in my wallet this morning, hoping something would happen between us. I wanted to get my mouth between her legs, but that kind of foreplay was impossible with a woman like Ivy.

It was a race to the finish line, not a slow seduction. As much as I wanted to try different things with her, this would have to be enough for now.

While I was fumbling with my wallet, she'd managed to open her blouse and unhook her bra.

I ripped the wrapper with my teeth, and she held her hand out for it. I waited for her to smooth the rubber over my length before I sucked a nipple into my mouth.

She was perfect. I wanted more than a quick fuck against the wall, but this was the only way past Ivy's defenses, and I was almost positive she'd never done this with anyone else.

She needed to maintain control, so she could walk away at a moment's notice.

So far, she hadn't wrestled it from me, and I hoped she wouldn't.

She guided my cock between her pussy lips. It was hot as fuck. I'd never encountered a woman who was as confident during sex as she was. If I didn't think she did it as a way to control our interaction, I'd be more impressed.

Instead, the act, as attractive as it was, set off a wave a tenderness inside me.

What was it about this woman that had all my protective instincts roaring to life?

She needed less protection than anyone else I'd ever met.

At least on the surface. But underneath, she was vulnerable, begging for real intimacy.

I wanted to be the one who cracked her hard outer shell. I expected I'd receive pushback. I'd have to be patient to get under this woman's skin.

She'd somehow managed to get under mine already.

I didn't know that she was close with her much-younger siblings. I had no idea that she took them out every weekend for big-sister time. It was impressive. But maybe

not if I knew more about her background.

I suspected she couldn't count on her mother, and her father wasn't around. She was a lone wolf who was protective of her siblings. She wouldn't want them to grow up the same way she had.

When I was inside her to the hilt, I dropped my forehead to hers, letting her adjust to the fullness.

Her fingers, which were tangled in my hair, pulled lightly, as if she wanted to remind me that she needed me to move.

I leaned back slightly so I could see her face, withdrawing my cock and then thrusting deep. "You need this?"

Her lips parted on a gasp, and she nodded.

I did it again, watching the flush on her cheeks, the hard points of her nipples. One day, I'd have her naked on a bed, her hair spread over my pillow and her legs parted for me. But for now, this would have to be enough.

She gripped me tight, her legs wrapped around my hips, as I drove into her. My movements grew more frantic as I chased the inevitable release. I wanted her to orgasm first, so I reached between us, circling the swollen nub. She was slick with desire.

I enjoyed the sight of her pussy stretched by my cock, the glistening evidence of her arousal, and the tightening of her body.

"Cooper," she gasped in frustration.

"You need to come."

She nodded, her eyes bright with desire.

I slowed my movements, removing my hand so that I could grind against her clit with my pelvis on every thrust. I circled my hips, and her head fell back again, her eyes falling closed. Her lips parted, and she said, "Yes."

Sweat beaded on my forehead with the effort to hold back. My muscles were locked. I needed her to come.

I wondered if she was holding back. If she was afraid to let go. To let someone else master control of her body.

Just when I thought I'd have to change tactics, her body bowed off the door, and she cried out. It was the most satisfying feeling in the world.

She spasmed around my cock, squeezing my orgasm from me. I thrust one more time and let go, spilling into the condom and resting my head against hers. Our breath was ragged as we came down from the high.

I slowly let her slide to the floor, ensuring she was steady before handing over her panties.

She eased them under her skirt before righting it and then fastening her bra and buttoning her blouse. Her cheeks were flush, her hair tangled.

I adjusted my jeans, refusing to apologize for my behavior. I couldn't give her an opening to set rules and boundaries. The more time I spent with her, the better I was able to anticipate her possible reactions. I wondered if my sixth sense about houses worked on Ivy.

When she was dressed, she attempted to fix her hair, and I immediately switched to professional mode. "I'll get started while you clean up."

I figured she'd want to visit the bathroom, and I needed to discard of the condom. I went outside and threw it into the garbage I always kept in the back of my truck. By the time I returned, she was looking slightly less freshly fucked.

I wanted her all over again. I'd never get enough of this woman.

She held up her phone. "I have some calls to make."

I raised a brow, surprised. "You don't want to follow me around?"

"I'm in the middle of contract negotiations on another house that's in a bidding war."

"Right." I believed her, but she could have done that while shadowing me. She wanted time to regroup, and I'd give her that for now. As long as she wasn't telling me this couldn't happen again.

If she started talking about rules, I was in trouble. To head it off, I went straight to work.

I took my time checking every nook in the kitchen and bathrooms before heading upstairs. Ivy was in the kitchen talking on her phone. Her voice was confident as she ran through the comps, the likely outcome, and what she knew about the other bidders.

I enjoyed the sound of her voice as I moved from one room to the next. She finally joined me when I was in the master.

"This bathroom is gorgeous."

I hadn't paid much attention to my surroundings except to look for possible issues. But I could appreciate that the recent renovation was top-notch. "You looking to renovate your master?"

Ivy shook her head. "I own a condo, but I don't intend to put any money into it."

I never thought about it, but I had no idea where she lived. "You own a condo?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's surprising." I would have expected her to have a house on the beach. She should have amassed enough to buy one by now.

She tipped her head to the side. "Why is that?"

"I took you for a beach-house girl."

"Maybe one day," Ivy said quietly.

"Why not now?"

She shifted on her feet. "I have big saving and investing goals."

"A girl who likes to talk money. I love it," I said before I could censor my words. She wasn't supposed to know that I admired her, that I was curious about who she was as a person.

"Well, when you come from nothing, you become obsessive about having money." Then she sucked in a breath as if she hadn't meant to reveal that much.

"You deserve to treat yourself too." I wondered if she was scared to spend money,

worried she'd end up back where she started.

She chewed her lip. "I have to be smart about money."

"I'm sure you are," I said without any reservations. She'd always struck me as a responsible woman who took care of those around her, and seeing her with her siblings only reinforced that impression. "You get to enjoy your money too, you know."

She raised a brow. "Who says I'm not? I have a nice car and expensive clothes."

"You seem like the kind of woman who'd enjoy coming home to the view of the ocean."

She tilted her head to the side. "Speaking of which, are you enjoying yours?"

Ivy had helped me purchase my home a few years ago, shortly after Shepard moved into our grandmother's house. The only problem with the house was that it was empty when I came home. I hadn't bothered to get a dog since I was gone for so many hours a day. "It's great."

"Good. I'm glad."

I wanted to ask more questions about her living situation, but she'd effectively diverted the conversation to me. I'd have to pay attention and see how often she did that. Was she an expert at diversion tactics? Did she not want anyone to know the real Ivy?

She looked around the bathroom. "Did you notice anything?"

"Not this time." It was a newer build, so I wasn't expecting to find anything too

concerning.

"I appreciate you helping me out."

I raised a brow. "You worked a sweet deal with my father, apparently."

Ivy grinned. "My clients are grateful when you find something, and it saves them money."

"My dad's always looking to boost the company's reputation and continuing to build our client base."

"I'm happy to help in any way I can. When a buyer asks for a contractor, I always refer them to you."

Ivy was in full professional mode now, as if we hadn't just fucked against the front door.

"If that's all, I'll head out." I pulled open the door, not wanting to give her an opening to bring up the state of our relationship. I'd rather leave it as it was.

She held the door open for me, and I wanted more than anything to push her back inside and go again. "Thanks again, Cooper."

I let out a breath as I headed toward my truck. I wasn't sure how long I'd get away with fucking Ivy in the houses we were tasked with inspecting, but I intended to enjoy every minute of it. I just had to remember that Ivy wasn't wired for more, and she could shut it down at any minute.

I almost expected to get a text or a phone call to that effect all week. Maybe she was happy to enjoy the physical relationship and ignore the rest.

But if I was right about Ivy, she wouldn't let herself feel anything more than desire for me. If she did, she'd break things off. Was it too much to hope for, that we could continue as is?

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Chapter Five

Ivy

As much as I wanted to enjoy the sexy interludes with Cooper, I couldn't help but feel like I was being incredibly reckless. I never got involved with someone as intense as him. I stuck with guys that were looking for a good time, more like his twin, Shepard.

Cooper had taken control of our interactions, and I was powerless to stop it.

I couldn't resist the way he handled me, easily lifting me and pressing me against the door.

With him, I was able to block out everything: my worries, concerns, and the niggling self-doubt that were never far from my consciousness.

It was like he was wrestling the demons from my soul while simultaneously giving me the most intense orgasms I'd ever experienced.

Even though fucking against a door wasn't intimate, I still felt oddly vulnerable when I was in his presence. It felt like my walls were flimsier than usual. Like he had X-ray vision and could see through my fortifications.

I intended to confront him when I opened the door, but he'd immediately pressed me against the nearest solid surface and had his way with me. I'd forgotten my good intentions and all my objections. I was sure that was his goal. Instead of using words, he used his body.

Not that I was complaining, but I needed to put a stop to whatever we were doing and soon. The only problem was, my body was constantly humming with desire now, and I needed my next Cooper fix. He'd primed me to crave what only he could give me.

It was completely unprofessional, and if anyone had walked in on us, that would be the end of my career. But so far, the houses were vacant and under contract, so no one was booking showings.

The riskier proposition was my heart. I had never let anyone in outside of family. My father didn't stick around long enough to meet me. Why would anyone else care about me?

That was the cruel reality of life. My friends might have had softer upbringings, but I couldn't ignore where I came from. It shaped who I was today.

I prided myself on being smart and making good decisions. But somehow, Cooper erased all of that. I needed to take back control of the situation somehow. But I still wanted him. It was so infuriating.

On Friday night, I went out with the girls, dancing to the music and enjoying the flirting of the men at the bar. But I hadn't felt a flutter of desire because Cooper wasn't there.

Now it was Saturday, and there was a possibility I'd see Cooper. He'd texted to say he was planning to play basketball with his brothers, and he was looking forward to seeing Duncan again. I didn't pass that message along to Duncan.

I knew what it was like to wish and hope for something and never have it happen. I dreamed of my father coming home and apologizing for not being there sooner. That he loved me and never wanted to leave.

But it was a dream, not reality. I'd never even met my father. But if he showed up now, I'd have a few choice words for him. None of them would be welcoming. I didn't need him then, and I certainly didn't need him now.

"Will Cooper be there?" Duncan asked from the back seat as we drove toward the park.

"I don't know. He works as a contractor, so he might have had to go in to work. Or something could have come up."

He looked out the window. "He's busy."

"It will be a nice surprise if he is here." As we pulled into the lot, Duncan pointed and said, "It looks like Cooper's here."

Sure enough, the lot contained a few Kingston Construction trucks.

"Hold up," I said, but he'd opened the door and jumped out before I could caution him. I waited for Rae to get out and took her water bottle from her. "Are you going to the playground?"

She nodded. "Yup."

"I'm going to check on your brother."

"Okay," she said as she ran into the fenced area that surrounded the playground. A few years ago, they'd added sunshades, so I didn't have to worry about her getting too hot.

I followed Duncan at a slower pace. He came to a halt at the edge of the court, watching the men play. Half weren't wearing shirts, and of course, that was always

Cooper's team. It was ridiculous that men this hot would play shirtless to drive all the ladies in the vicinity crazy.

But only one man had my attention, Cooper Kingston. He ran up and down the court, his muscles straining as he jumped to block a shot and bunched as he recovered the rebound and tucked it into his side until the rest of the players ran down the court.

"I think they're still playing. You want to play on the playground until they're done?" I gestured toward the structure behind us.

"I want to watch."

I glanced over at the court where the teams were thundering toward us, the team wearing shirts passing the ball around, looking for an opening to shoot. "Okay."

I didn't want him to be disappointed if Cooper was too tired to help him after his game or had other plans. When the team scored, Cooper called for a time-out. The men moved off the court to the bench, grabbing water bottles to drink and squeeze water onto their heads.

I didn't think I'd survive it if Cooper drained his bottle over his head. I didn't need to be thinking about licking the droplets off his skin.

Cooper grinned as he headed in our direction, but his attention was on Duncan. "Hey, buddy. You here to play?"

Duncan nodded eagerly.

"We'll be done here in a few minutes if you want to stick around."

"Okay."

"Are you sure you have time?" I asked him, and Cooper's gaze lifted to meet mine.

"I've been looking forward to hanging out with Duncan all week," Cooper said to me evenly.

Shep approached. "What's going on?"

"This is my brother, Duncan. Duncan, this is Cooper's twin brother, Shepard."

Duncan's forehead wrinkled. "You don't look like twins."

"That's because we're fraternal. We were born at the same time, but we don't look alike," Cooper said.

Shep smacked Cooper's chest. "I'd hate to look like this guy."

Shep meant his comment to be flippant, but something crossed over Cooper's face. Did it bother him when he said things like that?

Cooper shook his head. "Let's finish up so I can hang out with Duncan."

Shep raised a brow. "You're not letting this guy teach you how to play basketball, are you? Everyone knows I'm the best in the family."

Cooper's jaw tightened. "Don't go anywhere. We're almost done here."

I was fairly sure Shepard couldn't say anything to convince Duncan to not spend time with Cooper. He'd gotten a taste of his attention and was hooked. I couldn't blame him because I was in danger of being hooked myself.

Shep was the more outgoing twin, demanding attention wherever he went, but Cooper

was the one who intrigued me.

"I'm going to check on Rae. I'll be back," I said to Duncan, but he didn't take his eyes off the court. "Yeah, okay."

Duncan was starved for male attention. How had I not noticed that before?

I didn't have any such affliction growing up at my mother's.

I wanted to deflect men's attention. One or two of mom's boyfriends were interested in me, so much so that I took to locking my bedroom at night.

Nothing happened, but I hadn't felt safe in my space.

I shivered at the memory, even in the heat. After watching Rae play hide-and-seek with a few girls, I headed back to the court where the guys had left, and it was just Cooper and Duncan.

They were playing a one-on-one game. I sat on the bench, snapping a few pictures for Mom. I wasn't sure she'd be interested but figured, if I was Duncan's mother, I'd want the moment documented.

I hoped Duncan and Rae were having a better childhood than I was. I worked hard to make that a reality. But I wasn't always sure I succeeded.

I watched them play for a while, and when they took a break, Cooper came to stand in front of me.

I blocked the sun with a hand on my forehead.

"There's a summer basketball league. Duncan should join."

"How much is it?" I was always conscious of price. I could only pay for so many things behind Mom's back before I risked insulting her.

Cooper tilted his head as if he was thinking about it. "I think it's free. It's just two pick-up games a week on Wednesdays."

I chewed my lip. I'd need to figure out the times and whether I could pick him up around my work.

"I'll forward you the link."

"Can I play?" Duncan asked.

"We'll have to see when the games are and whether I can fit it in."

"If you need help, I can pick him up too."

I shook my head. "I couldn't ask you to do that," and I never would. Duncan and Rae were my responsibility.

"Please, Ivy," Duncan asked, and for a second, it felt like he could have replaced Ivy with the word Mom, and it would have held the same meaning.

"I'll see what we can figure out," I promised him. I wanted him to have all the opportunities the other kids had, and I knew firsthand how important sports could be. I'd played volleyball despite not having the money for camps and summer leagues.

Duncan grinned before taking the ball back onto the court and shooting.

"He loves playing basketball."

"I think he likes the attention more than anything."

Cooper's forehead creased. "What do you mean?"

"He doesn't have any male figures in his life. You're becoming important to him." My heart rate picked up. Duncan would be upset if Cooper lost interest in him. I knew it was only a matter of time before that happened.

"Are you worried about that?" Cooper asked, his voice low.

"I'm always worried about my brother and sister. I don't want them to get hurt."

Cooper shook his head. "I don't want to hurt him."

"I'd say then don't, but you're not his father. You don't owe him anything."

Cooper was quiet for so long I wasn't sure he was going to answer. "I know you don't expect much from people, and I think I know why. But not everyone is going to disappoint you."

"I'm talking about Duncan." I needed to deflect him because he was getting too close to the truth.

"Just because you experienced life a certain way doesn't mean that they will too."

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"I'm ensuring that they don't. As much as I can anyway. I can't change my mother's living circumstances. But I'll do anything else I can to make their life better. No free school lunches or thrift store clothes."

Cooper's gaze narrowed on me. "You pay for their lunches and clothes, don't you?"

I shifted on the hard bench. "I want them to have a better life."

Cooper's brows pinched. "You realize that's already the case because they have you looking after them. It's not about how much money you spend on them. It's your presence. Your concern. You didn't have an older sibling looking out for you."

I let out a breath that felt as if I'd been holding it my entire life.

I always worried I wasn't doing enough. I'd researched whether I could get custody of my siblings, but it wasn't possible.

My mother might not have been the best mother in the world, but she wasn't legally unfit. "I hope that's true."

"I've been watching you for a short while with him, and I know that to be true."

I wasn't sure what his end game was. Did he think flattery would work on me? I'd already had sex with him. "You're not spending time with Duncan?—"

"Don't even finish that sentence," Cooper said sternly. "One has nothing to do with the other."

I worried I'd offended Cooper with my distrust again. I couldn't help it. It was natural for me to question people's motives. No one had been there for me growing up, so I couldn't understand why he'd go out of his way to help Duncan.

"I know your upbringing was different than mine, and you don't trust easily, but please don't insult me." Then Cooper turned and stalked toward the court where Duncan was squaring up for another shot.

My eyes stung with unshed tears. What he'd said had hit hard. I wasn't fair to Cooper. I should give him a chance. But I couldn't help but listen to the voice in my head reminding me that everyone always left.

Cooper was different than Shepard. He felt things deeply, and he was insulted that I continually questioned his motives.

I should be grateful for what he was doing and not distrustful.

It was so hard. I'd been going to therapy on and off since I graduated from college.

There was a lot to unpack from my childhood and my lifelong beliefs about the world.

I wasn't sure I'd ever be fully healed. Maybe I was further from that goal than I thought.

I treated Cooper like he was one of my mother's boyfriends. In fact, I was starting to wonder if I painted every guy I'd ever dated with the same brush. If you went into a relationship with the belief that the man would leave, then that was exactly what happened.

What if I let go of those thoughts and let this thing with Cooper play out? The

thought was scary. He could leave. He could hurt me. He could disappoint Duncan.

I could handle the pain, but I wasn't so sure about Duncan. He still believed that people were good. Or at least I hoped he did. I didn't want my negative beliefs rubbing off on him.

I watched them play for a bit and then headed over to the playground to spend time with Rae on the swings. When the boys walked away from the court, I rushed to talk to them in the parking lot.

"Duncan invited me to get ice cream with you." Cooper's face was pinched. He was prepared for me to say no.

Could I say yes? What would it hurt to spend a little time with Cooper? "Okay."

"Cool. I'll get Rae." Duncan ran into the playground to tell his sister we were ready to go.

Cooper shifted his ball from one arm to the other. "Are you sure? I don't have to go. I know how you feel about me getting too involved."

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

He chuckled. "So your first inclination wasn't to say no?"

I sighed. "It's hard to forget how life treated me. That someone might not be the same as everyone else."

"I'm bound to disappoint you or Duncan at some point. That's human nature. But I don't want to hurt you."

"That's not a great promise."

"All I'm asking is for you to give me a chance."

I blew out a breath. "Okay."

He raised a brow.

"It's just ice cream. Don't get too excited." I started walking toward the path that would take us across the street.

Cooper rushed to keep up with me, and I could see Duncan and Rae following us. Beside me, Cooper was grinning widely.

"Why are you acting like you won a prize when we're just getting ice cream?" I asked crankily.

Cooper grinned wider. "You know it's huge."

I scowled. "I'm fairly sure you invited yourself along."

"Tell yourself whatever you want. But I'm going on an ice-cream date with Ivy Buckley."

I opened my mouth to protest, and he wrapped his arm around my shoulder. Thankfully, he'd thrown on a shirt.

He gazed down at me, and something fluttered in my stomach. "Enjoy the moment, Ivy. No worries or what-ifs. Not everyone is here to let you down."

I lowered my shoulders. "It's hard to remember that."

"Lucky for you, I'm a patient man."

Duncan ran ahead of us, and Rae chased him. It was the perfect Saturday. I was spending time with my siblings and Cooper. For once, I didn't feel so alone.

In the shop, we perused the menu and the display case, carefully choosing our ice cream flavors before going outside to eat.

This moment felt bigger than getting ice cream or learning to play basketball. Cooper wanted to know me, and it was scarier than anything I'd ever faced before.

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Chapter Six

Cooper

After getting ice cream with Ivy, I hadn't heard from her about any new inspections for a few weeks. When I met Duncan for basketball, she'd stayed with Rae, and he hadn't invited me for ice cream.

I figured she needed some space. I'd gotten to Ivy on a level that probably sent her into a bit of a panic. It would be good for her to see that life was different from what she feared.

Not everyone would disappoint her, and I'd never want to hurt her or her siblings. I wanted to be there for them.

I thought this thing with Ivy would be purely physical, but I couldn't help but feel connected to her more each time we were together, whether it was getting ice cream, playing basketball with her brother, or fucking her in an empty house.

Ivy had so many layers and walls I'd yet to discover. The more I thought about why she acted the way she did—so distrustful and fearful—the more I felt for her. Her mother, and I'm assuming her rotating boyfriends, had done a number on her.

She might appear to be strong on the outside, but it was because she had to be. Underneath, she was vulnerable. I wanted to protect her, but at the same time, I wanted to show her life could be different.

It was a combination I'd never experienced before. I'd never felt this tenderness for anyone I'd dated. I wondered if Hudson or Brady felt like this when they decided Elena and Hazel were the women for them.

Now I was getting ahead of myself. There was no way Ivy would ever let me into boyfriend territory. I'd never known her to be close to anyone.

I wondered if I was the only one who saw the Ivy underneath.

I couldn't imagine living that way or having to adapt my life to those false beliefs. How many people had let her down?

That's when it hit me; her father had never been in the picture. Had she hoped he would come back and be part of her life, and he never did? That would be devastating for a little girl.

I wasn't put-off by her distrust. It only made me want to reach her more.

I didn't want to hurt her or let her down. I was a little worried I was going to do it anyway. It was just human nature. Ivy would take it that much harder. She was literally waiting for me to mess up. But I wanted to prove her wrong.

She avoided me at Hazel and Brady's engagement party, and I'd been preoccupied with Dalton's baby-momma drama. He'd gotten his girlfriend pregnant, and she was jerking him around a bit. I didn't like it, but Brady had somehow convinced him to get his own place.

It sounded like the best solution for everyone. This morning, we were going with Ivy to see some possible places for him to rent or buy.

I waited on the porch of the place Dalton had texted me about earlier. When Brady

arrived with Dalton, I said, "I did some research on this place. The owners were only here for six years. Doesn't look like they did many upgrades."

"I'm not afraid of a little work," Dalton said "It will help me fill the time when I can't see the baby."

I exchanged a look with Brady. I wasn't sure what I would do in Dalton's situation. I hadn't even thought about having kids yet. But I was impressed that he was trying to find the best way to handle it.

Ivy pulled up in her SUV, and we waited for her to get out. I was becoming addicted to her prim outfits. I distinctly remembered how it felt to feel the bite of her heels in my ass when I was fucking her against the door.

Ivy met my gaze as she headed in our direction, and I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was. We couldn't keep our hands off each other when we were alone in a house.

I took the paperwork she offered me, not bothering to look at it. I'd already seen everything there was on record about this place.

"Are you ready to see this place?" Ivy asked Dalton, and when he nodded, she unlocked the lockbox. "I think you're going to like this one. It has everything you asked for."

"Looks like it needs some work," I said, ripping my gaze from her ass in that skirt. She probably thought the outfit was professional, but I found it sexy.

Ivy flashed me a smile as she pushed open the door. "I would think you boys wouldn't be afraid of a little hard work."

"Of course not," I said, feeling my heart rate kick up now that I was finally in her proximity.

"It has a study." Ivy gestured to our right.

We walked through the formal living room, which was sparsely furnished with a couch and a piano, then into the family room with a stone fireplace and large windows showcasing the view of the backyard.

We stood by the slider, and Ivy said, "There's a small pool and hot tub on the ground floor with an outdoor shower."

She walked through the house at a pace I appreciated. I'd go through the house on my own once she was done.

I braced my hands on the stained white Formica countertops, noting the dated linoleum and cabinets.

"You'll need to do some work in here," Ivy said.

"It needs to be gutted." My niece or nephew wouldn't be crawling around on peeling linoleum.

"I'm confident you can tackle this project. Maybe it would be a nice housewarming present," Ivy said to Dalton with a wink, and I felt a twinge of jealousy.

Why was I jealous of my baby brother? "I don't think he deserves a kitchen renovation for his first house."

"What about for my first baby?" Dalton shot back.

I exchanged a look with Brady, knowing we would do anything for him and his baby.

Brady nodded. "We'll talk about it."

Dalton shook his head. "I was just messing with you. You guys don't have to do that for me."

"We'll want it to be completed before the baby comes," I said.

"Let me show you the second floor," Ivy said, and I tuned her words out. I was more interested in the sway of her hips as she made her way up the stairs ahead of us.

She opened each door, showing us the three small bedrooms, the laundry room, guest bath, and the master at the end of the hall. "You might want some new carpet, and the bathrooms are meh."

I squatted down to inspect the tile. "I don't think these would meet code. It's the same as the tile on the wall. They'll be slippery. You won't want a toddler on this when it's wet. They'll fall and hit their head."

"We'll need to gut the bathrooms then too. I don't want anything that is unsafe," Dalton said.

"You have a bit of time though because the baby won't be walking for a bit," Ivy said.

I straightened. "What if you're walking around with the baby, and you slip?"

Dalton nodded. "That's a good point."

"I like how you boys are taking Dalton and his baby's safety so seriously," Ivy said with a smile, and I was momentarily distracted by the thought of us having a baby.

Would she appreciate my concern for safety when it came to our child?

I mentally shook my head as we followed her downstairs. I shouldn't be thinking about babies. Not with Ivy. She didn't want a relationship, much less a family.

Ivy mentioned the proximity of the neighbors' home, explaining that it was a vacation home for them.

"That's ideal," I said.

"You get the advantage of a lower price tag, and a neighbor that isn't present. What do you think of the pool?"

Dalton walked the deck. "I've always wanted a pool, but I'll need to get a fence to put around it."

"You're already thinking like a dad. I'm going to wait out front for you while you take a closer look. Let me know if you have any questions."

"I'm going to take another look," I said, following her inside.

Ivy moved toward the front door. "Of course."

"I thought you liked to watch me work?" I said, hoping to challenge her to stay inside with me.

She gave me a look over her shoulder. "I have calls to make."

"Are you sure you're not avoiding me?"

She rolled her shoulders back. "Why would I do that?"

"You tell me," I murmured as I moved past her toward the primary bedroom. "Are you coming?"

She sighed. "Fine."

When I was fairly sure Dalton and Brady wouldn't come inside, I said, "I was hoping to get a dance with you at the party." Then I turned my attention to studying the ceiling and walls for signs of leaks.

"That's not a good idea, and you know it."

"Why is that?" I was breaking all my rules in even asking her about it, but her ignoring me in social situations didn't sit right with me.

"We hooked up twice. That's all it was. It can't be anything more."

"Is that all it was for you? A hookup?"

She laughed. "What else would you call it? Good sex?"

"So you admit it was good?" I asked, pausing to look at her.

She glanced away from me, clearly uncomfortable talking about it. "You know it was."

"You don't have chemistry like that with everyone."

"I'd never experienced that kind of passion with anyone else."

I bet she hadn't either. It might have something to do with knowing each other, being friends, but we weren't that close.

I suspected we had one-of-a-kind chemistry, and I wasn't ready to walk away from it.

She pursed her lips. "That's true."

"What we have is good. I want to do it again. Maybe on a softer surface this time. I want to take my time with you. I want to taste you."

She flushed. "Cooper, you can't talk to me like that. Not when I'm working."

"You didn't mind when I fucked you against the wall while we were working."

Her eyes widened, and I knew I was pushing her hard. But I didn't want to risk missing out on whatever this was. "I want that too."

Fuck. Yes. I hadn't expected her to capitulate so easily.

"But it doesn't mean anything. This isn't the start of a relationship."

I shook my head, letting out a chuckle. "I knew that without you telling me."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm glad you think I'm so easy to figure out."

"Oh, I didn't say that." I moved closer to her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her breath hitched, her gaze lifting to meet mine.

"I'm enjoying getting to know you, to learn what makes your breath hitch, what makes your heart race?—"

"That's not necessary?—"

"If I want to please you, it is."

Her cheeks flushed. "You can't?—"

"I can, and I will. You can't control this, Ivy." I gestured between us. It was more like I wouldn't let her take over.

Her mouth opened as if she wanted to say something, but I turned away. "Dalton and Brady are waiting for us."

"Of course," she said, but I heard the irritation in her voice.

If I'd asked for a date or quality time together, she would have said no. But because I mentioned our physical chemistry, she was open to hearing me out.

I took my time, looking through the house and then went outside to tell the guys that there weren't any issues we couldn't handle. This was the perfect house for Dalton. He could grow into it, and we'd ensure it was safe for his baby.

I wanted him settled before the baby came. Oakley was creating drama, and I was hoping if Dalton took a stand on his living situation, she'd have to back off.

I went inside with Brady while Dalton talked money with Ivy. I fiddled with the kitchen faucet, unable to stop checking out Ivy through the window. "Everything okay between you and Hazel?" I asked Brady.

"I need to talk to her and clear the air after what happened at our parents'."

I looked over my shoulder at him. I'd heard Dad confronted him about the buzz that he'd contributed money to the library to support Hazel's after-school project. "You haven't done that yet?"

"I never said I was an expert at relationships."

"Ivy said there's an article online about the library and how a local construction company is funding money there because of a certain fiancée."

"That's a mischaracterization of the situation. One of the reporters who came to the library didn't want to talk about how good the program was, they wanted to find some dirt."

"Dad's going to be even more mad. But what I don't understand is why anyone would care."

"I think it has something to do with the article that was in Elena's magazine and the poll that went viral about us being the most eligible bachelors on the island. Our names were in the news before."

Brady groaned. "Dad hates negative publicity."

I turned off the water, satisfied the faucet was working properly.

I took the opportunity to sneak one more look at Ivy, who was seated at a small table with Dalton looking over something on her phone, probably comps.

I turned to face Brady. I needed to focus on something besides Ivy. "Do you know if Hazel's seen it?"

Brady ran a hand through his hair. "I haven't really seen or talked to her since the dinner at Mom and Dad's."

I frowned. "Didn't she walk out? Mom said something about that."

"Yeah, and then Dalton showed up, and we were preoccupied with him."

"You should probably talk to her about the article and see if it's going to be a problem for the library. I'd hate to see her program cancelled over something like this." The entire situation seemed petty. Who cared who donated the money as long as the program was helpful to the community?

"Is it wrong to support causes you believe in when your fiancée or best friend is the leader of the program?" Brady's voice was laced with irritation.

I leaned against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest. "I don't know. But it seems like the news likes to tear people down, not lift them up."

Brady's face screwed up. "I hate this."

"You can go if you need to. Ivy's got this part."

"You don't think Dalton needs me here?"

"He's going to have to start standing on his own two feet here soon. We can't be with him every step of the way, and I think he's getting that. He'll rise to the occasion."

"If you're sure—" Brady began.

I waved a hand at him. "I've got this. Go."

Brady didn't need any more encouragement. Once he was gone, I looked out the window again where Ivy and Dalton had their heads close together, probably figuring out the perfect offer for this house.

I felt a pang of something. It felt a little like jealousy. Dalton was having a baby and

buying a house. He was making steps to settle down.

I owned a house, but I wasn't settled. I was engaged in a fling of sorts with Ivy. It felt amazing, but if there was no endgame, then what was the point? Should I be looking for someone who could be a long-term girlfriend, and maybe even a wife one day? Is that what I wanted?

Dalton hadn't been looking for anything when Oakley got pregnant. In fact, he was going to break up with her when she relayed the news. It had changed everything.

How would I react in the same situation? Would I step up and do the right thing? I'd like to think I would. I was older than Dalton after all. I even enjoyed hanging out with Duncan. But that didn't mean I was ready to be a father.

I wasn't sure what I wanted. But with my siblings starting to settle down one by one, I was starting to question my bachelor ways.

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Chapter Seven

Ivy

By the time I ironed out the details of the offer with Dalton, the sun had started to set. I was surprised to discover that Cooper was in the kitchen.

"You're still here?"

Cooper lifted his gaze from his phone. "Brady had somewhere to be. I can take you home."

Dalton nodded. "Ivy's going to put in the offer, and then we have to wait for the response."

"You anticipate multiple bids?" I asked Ivy.

"This one isn't on the market yet, and the owner is motivated to sell quickly. I think there's a chance she'll take this one without soliciting more offers."

"Even if this doesn't work out, we'll find you something," Cooper said to Dalton, and my heart contracted.

I admired how Dalton's brothers rallied around him, helping him find a house, and offering to do the work so that he could have a fully renovated house before the baby came. It would be amazing to lean on siblings. At least my brother and sister would have that.

I could take care of myself. Isn't that what I'd been telling myself forever? The Kingston brothers were the exception to the rule. I'd never have what they did, and I shouldn't want it.

I'd worked too hard to let it all go for the promise of an extended family or a relationship with Cooper. Those kinds of things never worked out anyway. People broke up and moved away.

"I'll be in touch as soon as I hear anything," I said to them.

"Thank you. I wouldn't even have a shot at this house if it wasn't for you."

I was known for knowing everything that was going on around the island when it came to real estate. I'd networked extensively so that when sellers were even thinking about putting something on the market, I was one of the first to hear about it. "I'm just doing my job."

"Thank you, Ivy," Cooper said, and I nodded, my throat feeling a little tight.

He thought I was doing his family a favor, and I was. But I wasn't part of his family, and no matter how attractive it was, I wouldn't give into the fantasy of something more happening between us.

Happy endings didn't happen for girls like me.

"I'm going to call the listing agent," I said, disappearing into the living room to make the call.

Cooper walked Dalton outside, and I fully expected they'd leave. I was used to being in houses alone.

I told the realtor that the offer was in her inbox and to call me as soon as she knew anything. "The buyer is having a baby and wants to get settled as soon as possible."

"I'll let my clients know."

"He's related to Kingston Construction. They want to update everything." That was my hint that they wouldn't back out of the deal if something came up at the official inspection. I wasn't worried about that anyway because Cooper had already taken a look at the house.

"Good to know. You know my clients are eager to sell. I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

When I turned, Cooper stood in the doorway watching me. I was a little surprised that he was still here. "I appreciate that." I hung up and asked, "What are you still doing here? I thought you left with Dalton."

"I didn't want to leave you alone in the house."

I shook my head. "I'm used to it."

He stepped closer to me. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I thought we already talked." Cooper unsettled me, and I wasn't sure what to make of him yet. I should be pushing him away because he got to me like no one else ever had. But my body had other ideas.

Now that we were alone in a house, my skin was humming with anticipation. Would he want to continue our pattern?

"We're alone in a house." His voice was low.

I raised a brow. "You want to christen every house we're alone in?"

"That's a tempting idea. But this will be Dalton's house."

"You're awfully confident about that. You don't even know what the offer is."

"I know that you will do everything in your power to ensure Dalton gets this house."

There was something about his tone and his words. He believed I'd take care of his brother. "Why are you so confident about that?"

He brushed the back of his knuckles over my cheek, and a tingle ran down my spine. "Because I know you, and you're good at your job. And you'd do anything for your friends and family, but you're not sure if they'd return the favor."

I sucked in a breath, not quite believing he'd been so honest. And I couldn't formulate a response because he was spot on. He understood me, and that was the scariest thing of all.

"I want to fuck you against this wall. But I'm not going to do that here." He raised a brow. "Unless you want to come back to my place. I can show you the kind of house you should be living in."

I gave him an exasperated look. "I know what real estate is available on the island."

"Come home with me, Ivy." His voice was gentle, pleading. "We don't have to do anything. I just want to show you the house."

"I sold you that house. I know what it looks like."

He sighed. "You haven't seen what I've done with the place."

My eyes widened. "Did you renovate the bathrooms and the kitchen?"

He nodded. "I did."

"I would like to see that." I spoke too soon, forgetting my rule about never going to a man's house. It was too intimate.

He placed a finger on my lips. "No take backs."

Then he turned away and headed toward the door. "You coming?"

"It doesn't sound like I have a choice."

"You always have a choice," Cooper countered, and the tender way he said it did something to my heart.

My throat tightened to the point that I couldn't respond.

He held the door open for me, and I moved past him, breathing in his familiar scent. The one I'd come to associate with hot sex. Would we have sex at his place? The idea unnerved me.

I waited for him to back his truck out, and then I followed him, wondering what the hell I was doing. I was breaking all my rules with Cooper. I should have run the first time he made a move.

I shouldn't have had sex with him a second time, and I never should have agreed to follow him to his house.

He turned on his signal at the red light to go to his house.

If I went straight, I'd be in my condo and kicking off my heels in a few minutes. But I wanted to see what he'd done with the house since he bought it.

I saw the work he did on other people's homes. But this renovation would tell me about his style. What he thought was important.

When the light changed from red to green, I turned on my signal, and I wondered if Cooper knew I was thinking of leaving.

He turned into his lane and parked by the garage. I pulled in next to him. His driveway was lined with foliage and palm trees. It gave it a private and serene feel.

His house was on stilts to counteract storm surges from hurricanes.

He waited for me on the porch and unlocked the door. "You thought about going home, didn't you?"

I sighed as I stepped into the house. "I'm not going to lie to you."

"I'd prefer you didn't."

My heart beat hard. "It would be easier if I went home."

"I'm sure it would be. But rewards come from doing the hard things."

I tipped my head to the side. "Is there a sexual innuendo in there somewhere?"

He chuckled. "I guess there is, but I didn't mean it as one."

"I wanted to see your house." It was partly true. A stronger part of me wanted to spend more time with him, and it had nothing to do with his house.

He nodded.

I was grateful he'd let me have the out for now. I had a feeling if we continued whatever this was, he'd want more. He'd want things I couldn't give him. I wasn't a forever kind of girl. I didn't have anything to offer him.

I'd been let down so many times, I couldn't trust that anyone would be there for me. Not even Cooper Kingston.

He'd let me down too. It was only a matter of time.

It didn't matter how much I lowered my expectations; people never failed to disappoint me. He wouldn't be different. And if he was, I was in big trouble. Because I didn't know what to do with someone like that. I'd never encountered anyone who stuck around.

Sure, my mom was physically present. But not in a way that mattered.

There was an office to the right as we walked into the space. A formal living room on the left. The kitchen was open to the family room with large windows facing the backyard with the pool and tall palms.

"What do you think?" Cooper asked, and I knew he was talking about the kitchen. The one room in the house that I judged all homes by.

The lower cabinets were blue with brass hardware. The upper cabinets were white. The appliances were top-of-the-line. "You like to cook?"

"I'm not a chef, but I like to eat."

I ran a hand over the cool white marble countertop on the gourmet island. "You know

this is gorgeous."

"You like it?"

"It's what I would have picked. Then there's this view." I sighed as I turned to face the windows. From here, we could see the ocean.

"Why do you live in a condo again?"

I laughed. "I'm not sure. There were reasons. Reasons I can't think of right now."

"You're a successful realtor. You sell multimillion-dollar homes. Don't you want oceanfront?"

"Doesn't everyone want that?" I was desperate to show him that I wasn't weak. That there wasn't some deep reason why I hadn't bought a beach house yet. "I'm too busy buying everyone else their dream home. I don't have time."

Cooper snorted. "That's bullshit, and you know it. You get advance notice of every house on the market. There's no reason why you couldn't have put in an offer on one."

I had wanted this one. I never told Cooper that, and I never would. I figured if I couldn't have it, then he should.

When I didn't answer, he sighed. "Come see the deck."

"You know I've seen all of this, right?"

"Humor me." He held out his hand, and I hesitated for a second before placing mine in his. I never held hands or let a man put his arm around me in public. I kept my distance both physically and emotionally. It was necessary, especially with him. But I

was powerless to deny him.

He'd placed comfortable wicker furniture on the deck with blue cushions. But he guided me to the railing where we could hear the waves and smell the salt air.

"This is the dream." This was my dream.

We were quiet for a few seconds, both of us enjoying the view. Gray clouds were moving past, a misting of water hitting the ocean but not us. Not yet. Soon there would be a deluge. A typical summer storm in Florida.

"Why do you feel like you don't deserve this?" Cooper asked softly.

He stood with one hip leaning against the railing, then turned to face me. His hand still held mine, and it was decidedly intimate.

I drew in a breath, not accomplishing anything but breathing him in. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"There has to be a reason why you haven't allowed yourself to have this yet. What is it?"

"The condo's enough for me." I pressed my lips together.

"Is it because you grew up in a trailer? You don't feel like you deserve something better? Are you worried your mom would be upset?"

"Why would she care?" I was fairly positive she didn't know where I lived now. She'd mentioned something about one less mouth to feed when I'd moved out.

"If it's not your mother, then it's you."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't psychoanalyze me."

"I didn't mean to. I just want to understand you. I want to know you."

I shook my head. "Trust me. You don't."

I never thought about why I hadn't bought a home yet. Every time a house came on the market, I knew someone who'd love it. "I liked this one."

Cooper had been looking over the water. His head whipped back. "You liked this house. Mine?"

"And you bought it." I shrugged.

"Why didn't you buy it for yourself?" His voice was careful, measured.

"It was perfect for you," I said simply.

"But what about what you want?"

"My business is about my clients, and this had everything you wanted. What kind of a realtor would I be if I bought your perfect house for me?"

"I can't believe that you didn't say anything. I wouldn't have been upset. I would have been happy for you."

"Maybe I wasn't ready. Maybe you're looking for something that isn't there. There's no big reason. I just haven't felt like doing what I need to do to buy a place." I'd saved more than enough for the down payment. But I was scared to spend it.

"You want to see my bathroom? I haven't done the guest bathroom yet."

"Yeah, I'd love to." Cooper had incredible taste. I was excited to see what he did with the space.

He opened the slider, and I stepped past him. "I remember it had a lot of white tile."

Cooper grimaced. "That bathroom was stuck in the late nineties. The first thing I did was rip it out."

I followed him up the stairs to the second floor and down the hall to the master.

"I knocked down the wall to the guest bedroom and expanded the space."

I stepped into the room which now had a sitting area in front of wall-to-wall windows opening onto a deck. "You added this deck."

"It runs the length of the second floor."

My heart rate picked up. He had a futon chair out there to sit and enjoy the sunset. "It's gorgeous."

"The bathroom's through here."

The room was massive with a tub in front of a large window with a view of palm-tree leaves. It felt like a tropical paradise. The shower had three shower heads, and I couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to share those with Cooper.

"What do you think?" Cooper asked me.

"It's gorgeous." It would feel luxurious to live here.

Cooper grinned. "Would you change anything?"

He respected my design choices and wanted to know if he'd made the right decisions.
"Not at all."

"I was worried it would feel like a bachelor pad."

"I don't think so. Unless you put a pool table in the dining room."

Cooper chuckled. "Have you seen that?"

"I've seen one in the foyer."

He raised a brow. "As soon as you walked into the house?"

"It was like they couldn't carry it any farther and dropped it as soon as they got it through the door."

"That's ridiculous." He smiled at me, and I felt something pass between us. A connection.

This space was a mature adult's space, complete with every amenity you'd want.
"You did good."

Cooper grinned. "After listening to everyone else's design choices, it was nice to make my own decisions. I just hoped I hadn't screwed up and inadvertently lowered the value of the house with my style."

"Not at all. I can run the numbers for you if you want, but I'm positive you significantly increased the value."

He couldn't have just brought me here to see his renovations. He had to have an ulterior motive. I wasn't sure what I should do. Hooking up with a man in his home

was relationship territory. Especially with this man.

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Chapter Eight

Cooper

Now that I had her in my space, I wasn't sure what I should do with her. I'd like for her to see my renovations but beyond that, what was the plan? I didn't want her to feel pressured into having sex. I didn't even want that to be the expectation.

I had a feeling Ivy didn't know how to react if sex wasn't on the table. She used physical intimacy to block out everything else.

"You want to sit on the deck? I can get us a drink."

I half expected her to make an excuse and leave. She'd seen what she wanted to. I didn't have anything else to keep her here. And as much as I wanted to test out the new shower heads, I wouldn't do that tonight. I wanted to keep her guessing.

"Sure."

My heart leaped at her easy agreement. We headed downstairs to the kitchen where I grabbed a bottle of wine and poured two glasses. Then we went outside to the deck where you could hear the crash of the waves.

She sat on the cushioned couch, and I sat next to her, placing the glasses on the coffee table.

"This is perfection."

"Can you imagine coming home to this every night?"

Something flashed in her eyes, and I wondered what she was thinking. She had to make great commissions with her record and have a nice stockpile of cash from her successes.

"I can."

I handed her a glass and took one for myself. Lifting it, I said, "To your beach house."

She clinked her glass with mine. "To my beach house."

I smiled before sipping the wine. I preferred beer, but she was my guest, and I wanted her to be comfortable. "Is it weird to be alone without our friends here?"

"I don't get much time for socializing. I hang out with the group occasionally and do other networking events."

"Do you spend a lot of time on Captiva?" I asked her.

"I wish. The properties there are massive."

I leaned back in the chair, pleased to see that she seemed relaxed. "You can't break into the market?"

"Those realtors have been around forever. The families come from old money, and they use the same realtors their parents did."

"You'll get there."

Ivy sighed. "Just one commission from one of those properties would let me start my dream of generational wealth."

That was impressive. "I didn't know that was your aspiration."

"I want to ensure that my family never has to worry about money again. Mom's doomed to repeat her patterns. If I gave her money, it would be gone, or she'd run off with one of her boyfriends, leaving behind my siblings. Then again, maybe that would be a good thing."

"You want custody of your brother and sister?"

Ivy sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything."

I waited for her to continue. I had a feeling this was something she wanted to get off her chest but didn't talk to many people about it.

"I've spoken to a lawyer, and I have all the documents written up for guardianship or custody, depending on the circumstances. I'm ready to move quickly if I must. But I don't anticipate anything changing. I'm trying to help as much as I can from my position as the big sister."

Ivy was a good person. She cared about her family. She wanted a better life, not only for herself but for her siblings. "Is that why you haven't bought a beach house? You want to be prepared in case you become their guardian?"

"Well, under that assumption I should have a bigger place for them to move into."

"Yeah." I hadn't even thought about that aspect.

"I should start looking more seriously. This place is divine."

It wasn't the same when I came home alone and crashed in the bed by myself. There was something infinitely more attractive about having Ivy here on my deck.

"You only wanted me to see your house and share a glass of wine?" Ivy asked.

I glanced over at her. "No expectations, remember?"

She raised a brow. "What if I have a few?"

"I'm a man of my word. I told you I wouldn't make a move on you tonight." I wouldn't make any promises about the future though.

She shifted on the cushion as if she was uncomfortable with the idea. "You're different from other guys."

"Maybe I'm just different than the guys you've allowed yourself to be involved with."

Her brow furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You date safe guys. Ones that couldn't possibly get too close."

Ivy scoffed. "That's ridiculous. I date men who know I don't want a commitment."

"How do you know that I'm the same?"

She pointed at me with an amused smile. "If you remember, you promised me one time."

"Does it make you uncomfortable that I changed my mind?" I waited with bated breath to see what her answer might be.

"If it becomes something I don't want, then I have no problems ending it." Her tone was stiff.

I wasn't sure that she believed what she was saying. Was it possible to get her to a point that she felt differently? It was a challenge I wanted to take. "You don't want to get married one day?"

Ivy frowned. "I haven't had the best example when it comes to relationships and parenting. I assumed it would be healthier for me to stay away from all that."

That was sad. She'd deny herself a life with someone and a family because of her mother's mistakes. "You don't think that you could be different from your mother?"

She frowned. "I am different."

"Then why don't you think you could have a better success rate?"

Ivy chuckled. "I don't know the first thing about relationships."

I frowned. "You never had the inclination to find out?"

Ivy shook her head. "I never met anyone that I'd take that chance for."

I was fairly sure she was already different with me. I had the advantage. I just needed to play my cards right.

"We both have successful businesses to run. You have your family to think about." Ivy set her glass on the table, and I knew my window was closed. At least for the night. "I don't mind enjoying ourselves physically. But there isn't room for anything else."

I forced myself to act nonchalant. "Let me walk you out."

Her brow raised in surprise, but she followed my lead, heading toward the door and inside.

"Thanks for stopping by." It was good to have her in my space.

"It's absolutely gorgeous. You should be proud."

"Thank you." I was, but this place was empty most of the time. There wasn't anyone to fill the space with love and laughter. It was just me after a long day at work. I showered, maybe drank a beer on the deck, and then fell into bed exhausted.

What would it be like to share the space with Ivy? I could imagine evenings on the deck, talking about our day, and fucking in the hot tub, the pool, and on every surface.

I walked her outside to her SUV. I waited for her to get into the driver's side seat, and then I leaned in. "Drive safely."

"Thanks, Cooper."

I liked hearing my name on her lips. I wished it was in the throes of passion. But I could bide my time with her. I wanted her to be a little off-center with me. I wanted this to be different for her.

"Night, Ivy." Then I forced myself to step away.

She closed her door and reversed down the driveway. I waited until her taillights disappeared and then went back inside. Our glasses were still on the table, and I didn't have the heart to clean them up.

I couldn't believe I'd gotten her to come here. To break a few of her rules and spend time with me in my space. It was a win. I just wasn't sure how much further I'd get with her. She'd keep me at arms' length.

At what point would I want more?

The senior center was holding an anniversary party. There would be dancing and food, and our family was expected to be there. Phyllis said it was because we'd worked on their flower beds.

I hoped Ivy would be there too.

There had been a few news articles about Kingston Construction giving money to the library, with some negativity surrounding the fact that Brady was engaged to the children's librarian and head of the afterschool program.

Dad wasn't happy about the negative press, especially so soon after the local magazine had run an article and online poll about the Kingston brothers being the most eligible bachelors on the island.

It had caused a rift between Brady and Hazel too, and Brady was desperate to heal it. I wasn't sure what Brady had planned for the evening, but I hoped he worked it out with her.

When I walked inside, the party was set up in the social room where bingo was usually held. The tables had been cleared away and a dance floor set up near the front of the room.

There was a little stage with a lecturn and an overhead projector with pictures of the work and events that had taken place over the years.

Hazel stepped up to the microphone. "I wanted to welcome you to the senior center. We're so happy to have you here tonight to celebrate—" She broke off because Brady walked in, and Ivy rushed to the projector. She held up a finger for Hazel to wait.

"There must be some difficulty with the projector," Hazel said.

Ivy stepped back, and the pictures disappeared. In its place was a video of Brady and a man I'd never seen before. He introduced himself as Colin Waters, a reporter from an independent Florida newspaper.

The room was quiet as the video played of the man interviewing Brady. Brady explained how he'd met Hazel, the engagement, and the fake relationship.

Brady's words continued to play over the speakers, how he loved Hazel and wanted a future together. He didn't want to let the love of his life go.

Brady crossed the room, holding Hazel's hand. I couldn't hear whatever they were saying to each other. But his words spurred me to talk to Ivy.

When I saw Elena standing with Hudson at the back of the room, I approached them. "Do you know where Ivy went?"

Concern flashed over Elena's face. "She wasn't feeling well. She went home."

"Was it something she ate or a virus?" Should I be showing this level of concern? We weren't supposed to be public about our relationship. But then again, it was just a fling according to her.

"Probably something she ate. I'm sure she'll be fine."

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I made a noncommittal noise. I wanted to check on her, but I couldn't be obvious about it. I scanned the room again, noting my brothers were in attendance. Then I made my way through the crowd and outside.

When I got in my car, my fingers curled around the wheel. I didn't like that Ivy was sick. I should stop and pick up soup and crackers, but I didn't want to take the time. I needed to be sure she was okay.

I knew where she lived but not the exact condo number.

So I parked in the lot and searched for her address.

It was easy enough to find. Then I headed up the stairs to her place on the third floor.

There was no beach view here; it was so far away from the water.

And it had a modern feel, so it wouldn't have the cottage feel I knew she'd appreciate.

I knocked on the door, but that's when I noticed the door was slightly ajar. I pushed it up, worried about what I'd find.

The living room and kitchen were empty. The TV was playing a home renovation show, but the sound was off.

I made my way down the hall. "Ivy? Are you okay?"

I hoped she wasn't here with another man. That made my blood run cold. We hadn't

talked about being exclusive. I just assumed, and maybe that made me an idiot.

The only light came from the slightly ajar door to the master bath. "Ivy?"

"In here." Her voice was small.

I hurried to the doorway, not knowing what to expect. Ivy was seated on the floor, her back against the wall.

"Are you okay?"

Her eyes were filled with tears. "I will be."

"What's going on?" The counter was lined with sticks. When I moved closer, I saw the matching blue lines on a few, and the word Pregnant on the digital screen on another. "Are these yours?"

Who else's would they be? Hadn't we been careful?

I was almost positive we always wore a condom.

Except for the first time. But I'd pulled out and put one on.

Surely, we couldn't be pregnant from that slip.

But then again, we hadn't discussed whether she was on another form of birth control and condoms could fail.

"Are you?—"

"Pregnant." Her voice was flat, but she managed to pull herself to standing.

"Is it mine?"

Her face paled. "Of course it's yours." Then she pushed past me. "You can leave now."

I followed her out of the room, slightly panicked. "I don't understand. Shouldn't we talk about this?"

"I can't. Not now." She dropped onto the edge of her bed.

Was she upset that I questioned whether the baby was mine? Was it rude to ask? I hadn't planned on being a dad.

I was worried it was too much, too soon for Ivy. Would she want to end the pregnancy? It was her choice, and I'd support her, but I had to know where her head was at.

"When did you find out?" I finally asked her.

"Elena brought the tests to the senior center when we were setting up for the party."

"You should have come to me. I would have helped you."

Ivy just gave me a look. "I don't need anyone here for this. That's why I left. I can handle this on my own."

"You don't have to though. You have me, your friends. We all want to be here for you." I didn't need to ask our friends what they'd do in this situation. I saw how we all came together to help Dalton.

She pursed her lips. "I'd prefer to be alone."

"You left your door open. I was worried about you." And I wondered if she left her door open because, on some level, she did want me here. Or maybe the need was buried so deep inside her, she couldn't even acknowledge it yet.

"Now you know I'm fine." She swiped at her face and drew in a steadying breath.

"Are you?" I couldn't imagine getting this news by myself. This was her body. Her life was going to change in ways she probably couldn't even contemplate yet.

"I will be." She stood and moved down the hallway toward the living room. "When I'm ready to talk, I'll reach out."

I didn't want her to shut me out. "What are you planning on doing?"

She sighed. "Eating a carton of ice cream."

"Do you have any?" I looked around the kitchen to see if she'd already put it out to melt.

"In the freezer."

I opened the door, pulled out peanut ripple, and set it on the counter. Then I grabbed two bowls and spoons.

Ivy scooped up the spoons and the carton and went into the living room where the TV played silently.

"No bowls?"

Ivy sat on the couch, her legs crisscrossed with the carton on her lap. She opened the lid and tested the hardness.

I sat gingerly next to her, worried she'd remember I was here and kick me out.

Instead, she handed me a spoon. "We have to wait for it to melt."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "You want the show on?"

"Sure."

I reached for the remote, raising the volume so that we could hear what the hosts were saying but not so loud that she couldn't talk if she needed to.

"I never planned on this."

I shifted slightly so I could face her. "Getting pregnant?"

She nodded miserably. "I thought I'd be smart about it. I'd always use protection, and if the worst happened, I'd deal with it.

"Do you know what you want to do?" I asked gently, not wanting to sway her one way or the other. She was different from her mother. I was positive she'd be amazing, and I had more than enough to support both of them, if she didn't.

She rested a hand on her belly. "There's a baby. It might be a bean at this point, but it's mine."

I wanted to add that it was mine too, but I didn't want to ruin the moment. This was extremely personal to her since she carried the baby. This would disrupt her life in ways it wouldn't mine. "You don't have to make a decision now."

Her shoulders tightened, and she kept her gaze on the ice cream. "I'm keeping this baby."

I closed my eyes, the air whooshing out of my lungs. "I'll support you, whatever you decide to do."

She looked at me. "But I can do this on my own."

"You don't have to. I'm here, and I want to support you."

She shook her head. "You can't mean that. And even if you do, you won't stick around."

"Are you talking to me or your father?" I asked tightly.

She sucked in a harsh breath. "What do you know about him?"

"Nothing. Other than he's never been around. He's not someone that's worthy of the title," I said bitterly.

"He couldn't be bothered to stick around and meet me. I always hoped he'd change his mind and come back, but he never did."

"Did he know about you?" It was hard to believe anyone could do that.

Ivy chuckled without any humor. "Mom told me a million times over the course of my childhood that he didn't want me."

I bit off a curse. I didn't want her to know that I was angry on her behalf. Her mother shouldn't have done that, even if it was the truth.

I took her free hand in mine. "That's not our situation. I'm going to be by your side whether you want me there or not."

Her nostrils flared.

I held up a hand. "You're wrong about me. I want to be the dad our child deserves."

I was going to prove her wrong. I'd be with her through everything, and I was fully prepared for her to push me away. To expect me to leave at any moment. It wouldn't be easy, but I was up for the challenge.

Chapter Nine

Ivy

"You can't possibly want to be a father." The words were bitter on my tongue.

"I'm not saying I had plans for it right now, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't on my mind with Dalton and Marshall having children and everyone pairing off with their significant others."

I shook my head, dipping my spoon in the ice cream. "Once you realize what's required, you'll think differently."

"You forget I have younger siblings. I know exactly how much work they were when they were little. I've kept Shep in line my entire life."

That was the first time I'd ever heard him complain about his twin. "They why would you want to deal with this too?"

"Ivy, I know this is a shock, and neither of us expected a baby but I'm happy about how things turned out."

I raised a brow, not sure what to believe. It was easier to repeat my childhood story. Fathers don't stick around. The sooner I got in line with that truth, the better I'd feel. "You are?"

He was quiet for a few seconds and then said, "I can't help but think this baby was

meant to be."

I ate another scoop of ice cream, letting the cool flavor melt on my tongue. I knew the truth. Babies were expensive, they required a lot of things, and they needed a lot of support from their parents. Was I cut out for this? "I wanted to be there for my siblings. How can I do both?"

Cooper shook his head. "You don't see yourself very well. You'll excel as a mother and a big sister. You could stay home, but I bet you'll want to work and be a mom. You'll want to have everything, and you'll do it with ease."

I let the spoon dangle from my finger, the ice cream forgotten. How did he see that? I didn't even know that about myself. "How do you know?"

"You're incredible."

I scoffed, even as his words worked their way through my body, leaving tingles in their wake.

My mom never wanted to understand me, and I only let my friends see what I wanted them to.

Cooper saw below the surface. Was he right?

Would I be a good mother? "You don't think I'm making a huge mistake by going through with this? "

"This baby will be loved by so many people."

I blew out a breath.

"You'll give this a chance?"

I narrowed my gaze on him. "I'm having this baby, if that's what you mean. I'm not signing on for a relationship with his or her father."

The skin around Cooper's eyes crinkled as a slow smile spread over his face. "Fair enough."

"Elena said I need to make an appointment with my doctor to verify the pregnancy. But from what I researched, five at home pregnancy tests probably aren't wrong."

"Do you mind if I came with you to your appointment? I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I'd like to be there for you."

I nodded, my throat tight. How could I argue with that sweet sentiment?

I wasn't convinced that he wouldn't change his mind, maybe request a paternity test or decide that he wanted nothing to do with me and the baby.

It would be awkward, considering how close we were with our friends.

But I didn't trust that anyone would be there for me.

"How did you know you were pregnant?" Cooper asked.

"I keep track of my period on my phone. It was late." I managed everything in my life with spreadsheet-like precision, so when it didn't come, I freaked out. Thankfully, Elena offered to help me.

"You aren't having any symptoms?"

I shook my head. "Not that I've noticed. But it's early."

"You want to share that ice cream?" Cooper waved a hand at the carton, which was quickly melting now.

She handed me the container. "Have at it."

We focused on the home renovation show. The familiar cadence of the host's voice was comforting even as my life was imploding. I had plans for my life. Work hard, be successful, and save as much money as I could to support myself and my siblings. Getting pregnant wasn't on the list.

I'd never been confronted with something like this. I felt out of control. As if my entire life plan had just been set on fire. How could I support my siblings if I was raising a baby on my own?

Cooper was here now. But there was no guarantee he'd stick around. And I wouldn't beg him to stay. I'd promised myself a long time ago that if my father showed up, I wouldn't give him anything. He didn't deserve a second of my time. And I wouldn't beg Cooper to be a father to this baby either.

When we got sick of the ice cream, I put the carton in the freezer. I had an urge to open a bottle of wine, but I was pregnant. My go-to stress reliever wasn't available to me anymore.

When I returned to the living room, Cooper was watching me. "Everything okay?"

I shrugged. "Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because you just got big news."

My phone started buzzing with a string of texts. I picked it up. "The girls are on one long message chain. It can get out of control at times."

"I'm on one with my family, but we don't use it often. Just when we need to get together for a family event."

"Lucky you," I said as I skimmed through the string. "They're talking about how Brady declared his love for Hazel at the end of the interview."

"I'm glad they figured things out."

"Yeah, me too." I set the phone aside, feeling a pang of jealousy. I wasn't used to that feeling. I'd long ago decided that my life was different from other people's and comparing myself to my friends only caused heartache. I made the best of my circumstances and persevered.

But for a few seconds, I'd let myself wallow. Our friends were in love. They were going to get married at some point and have a family. I was doing everything backward. "I never thought I'd be in this position. I was always so careful."

Cooper's brow furrowed. "I put it on late both times."

Ivy sighed.

"It doesn't matter how it happened," I finally said.

"No, it doesn't."

"But for now, I think we should keep it quiet. Most people don't tell their friends and family they're pregnant until after the first trimester."

"If that's what you want to do."

"That will give me time to process everything and to make a plan."

Cooper touched my thigh. "You don't have to have everything figured out."

My stomach flip-flopped at his touch. "I won't be able to relax until I do."

"You don't think this will be more of a day-to-day situation? We don't know what we even need to worry about yet."

I nodded. "I'll do some research."

"It's okay to just sit with the news and process what it means for you, physically and emotionally. You don't have to have everything figured out."

"Then you don't know me very well. I need to get on top of this." I'd research what I needed to do and all the things I'd need to buy.

"I don't want you to be stressed out. It can't be good for the baby."

His hand on my thigh was comforting, grounding me in this moment. "I won't be able to relax until I know the next steps."

"I can understand that," Cooper finally said, but I could tell he was concerned.

All of a sudden, it was too much having him in my space. I needed to be able to breathe, to think. "I'm exhausted."

He removed his hand and stood. "I'll leave you alone. But call me if you need me."

"I will," I said as I followed him to the door. I could already see myself pulling back from whatever this was. We wouldn't be fucking against random walls anymore. I was going to be a mother. He'd move on, and I'd be a single mom.

I squared my shoulders. I'd supported myself since I was a kid. I could do this too. I wouldn't let my child live the same way I did. I would raise them in a loving and secure home.

He turned to face me. "I feel weird leaving you like this."

"I'm going to take a bath and go to bed." In reality, I was going to do some research on my laptop. I needed to know what I was in for.

He nodded. "That's a good idea. Let me know when you schedule your appointment."

"I will."

Finally, he turned to go, and I shut the door behind him. I let out the pent-up breath from my lungs and grabbed my laptop from my bag. I sat at the table and searched what to expect when you're pregnant. There was so much information; I was quickly overwhelmed.

There were so many things to think about, to plan for, and to buy. Babies were expensive. How was I going to continue to live in this condo on the third floor of a building without an elevator? With the amount of gear I'd be lugging around, it would be difficult.

It was only a one-bedroom, and the walls were thin. I couldn't imagine my neighbors would appreciate a baby crying all hours of the night.

I closed my eyes. How was I going to work with a baby? I couldn't exactly bring him

or her with me in a baby carrier when I showed houses.

Sure, some people would be okay with that. But most wouldn't. Especially any of the out-of-towners and business owners. Especially if I eventually wanted to break into the Captiva market. I needed to be professional. But I didn't have a family member who could watch the baby for me.

Deep into my search, my phone buzzed. It was Elena. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said absentmindedly as I continued to stare at my spreadsheet.

"Did you tell the father?" Elena asked.

I hadn't told her who it was yet. "Yes."

"How did he take it?" I could hear the concern in her tone.

"He asked if he was the father, or if there was a possibility it could be someone else's baby."

She let out a breath. "That's a fair question if you weren't in a relationship."

I sighed. "I suppose."

"Was he okay when you said it was?" Elena asked tentatively.

I pursed my lips, remembering how Cooper had seemed so concerned. "He seemed to be."

"Does he want to be involved?"

"For now." My voice was flat.

"You were worried about how he'd react." Elena seemed encouraged by the news.

"We'll see how things go. I'm pregnant for nine months, and then babies are a lot of work." It was best to be prepared to go it alone. That way, I wouldn't be disappointed when Cooper decided he didn't have time for me and the baby.

"Are you really okay?" Elena asked, and her concern sparked tears in my eyes.

"I will be." I just needed to do more research.

"Take your time to process everything, and let me know if you need anything."

"I'm not planning on telling anyone else." I wasn't ready for the girls to bombard me with their positive wishes. They'd have expectations of Cooper that I didn't.

"I'll keep your news to myself. You don't have to worry about me saying anything."

"I appreciate that." I needed more time to research. "I'm tired. I think I'll head to bed."

"I've heard that you can be very tired when you're pregnant," Elena said, her tone lighter than when she initially called.

"Thanks for being there for me today." I wouldn't forget that she'd come through for me in a way I didn't expect.

"That's what friends are for," Elena said, her voice more upbeat.

She didn't realize that I didn't expect friends to be there for me either. "Good night."

Elena hung up, and I refocused on the screen. There were so many things to consider. I'd already created several spreadsheets for every aspect of this pregnancy.

I searched for a place to live. I needed something practical. Maybe a two bedroom on one level. Most houses on the island were on stilts, and I didn't want to lug a stroller up and down steep stairs, and I couldn't afford a place with an elevator.

Frustrated with the options, I looked off the island. Maybe it would be better to leave and raise the baby somewhere where no one knew me. I didn't want to go far from my sister and brother though. Maybe Ft. Myers would be far enough. Somewhere I could be anonymous.

At the end of the day, I was alone. I'd raise this baby as a single mom. Even if Cooper wanted to be involved, he'd be here for the baby, not me. That was to be expected. We weren't in a relationship, and this baby wasn't planned for.

I felt sad and lonely. But it was the only way I'd ever known. I'd figure this out like I always did.

I had no one to count on but myself. Elena and Cooper were here now, but they wouldn't be here in the middle of the night when the baby wouldn't sleep.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the tears threatening to break through.

I didn't want this for myself. I thought I'd be smarter than my mom, to not get pregnant when I didn't have a partner.

I might have waited a while longer than her to get knocked up, but I was still my mother's daughter. Was I doomed to repeat her mistakes?

Chapter Ten

Cooper

I was still trying to wrap my mind around the idea of being a father. Ivy had mentioned not telling our friends and family, but I needed to talk to someone.

Instead, I buried myself in work, hoping the physical exertion would make me so exhausted at night, I'd sleep. Instead, I lay awake, stressed about how my life would play out.

Would Ivy stay in her condo and raise the baby there alone? Would she let me visit or help with the baby at nighttime?

I had a feeling she was going to push me away. Unlike Oakley, she didn't want anything from me. She hadn't asked for anything the other night. And I had the distinct feeling that she expected me to leave. She'd steeled herself for the possibility.

It was hard not to take that personally. I wasn't her father. But she seemed to judge everyone the same.

Oakley made a million demands of Dalton, but Ivy hadn't even called since I found out she was pregnant. I thought she'd reach out to tell me about the doctor's appointment, but she hadn't.

I wanted to give her space, but my patience was wearing thin. And I didn't want her to think I was just like her father. That I was going to ignore her and what she needed.

I was going to be there for her whether she liked it or not.

"You coming out with us tonight?" Shep ducked his head into the room I'd been working on.

"No." That wasn't even a question. I didn't think Ivy would be there either.

"What's gotten into you? You never want to hang out anymore."

"I've been out a few times." Mainly because I knew Ivy would be there. But now I suspected she'd withdraw from our friend group. She wouldn't want anyone worrying about her.

"It's not like before."

I used to feel like I needed to watch out for Shep, but I was tired of being his babysitter. I was going to be a father. Shep was going to have to figure things out on his own. "I'm not interested in the bar scene or picking up women."

Shep just stared at me. "Are you dating someone?"

My mind flashed to fucking Ivy against the wall. "No."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe it, because it's true." I had a feeling the baby news had stopped whatever might have naturally progressed between us. Ivy had shifted gears and wasn't interested in anything physical anymore.

"You'll get bored hanging out at home."

I might, because so far Ivy hadn't reached out to me. She wasn't talking to me about how she was feeling. Maybe I should show up and see for myself. Satisfied with that plan, I turned away from Shepard.

"Can you help with my house this weekend? I want to tear more stuff out."

"Sure." As long as Ivy didn't need me. But I had a feeling she would continue to push me away. I wasn't sure if it was a self-fulfilling-prophecy kind of thing or she really didn't expect anything from me. A lesser man would have been relieved, but I was irritated.

"Kinsley said she might be able to help with a design."

"I didn't realize she was into that kind of thing," I said, my mind still on Ivy.

"Yeah, but she took the office job for stability for her daughter."

How did Shep know more about our front-office worker than I did? "I thought she didn't like you."

"I think she needs the money," Shep said softly.

I gave him a look. "Don't take advantage of her."

Irritation flashed in his eyes. "Why would you think so little of me?"

I raised a brow.

"I'm not as big of an asshole as you think."

"Kinsley's a single mother. I wouldn't mess with her." I didn't know what his

endgame was with her. But I thought he saw her as a challenge. She didn't want him, so that made him desire her more. But in reality, he had no intention of more than a one-night stand.

"I wouldn't hurt Kinsley or her daughter."

There was a bite in his tone when he mentioned her daughter "Her daughter's a cutie."

"Yeah, she's the best."

If he wanted to help Kinsley and her daughter by giving her a job, I'd support that. He had good intentions. But he didn't see the string of broken hearts he left in his wake. I didn't want Kinsley to be the next one.

"Hopefully she can help with colors and patterns. I'm hopeless when it comes to this stuff."

"Even though you've worked around this your whole life?" I asked him, wondering if it was that he didn't trust himself, not so much that he couldn't figure it out.

"I need a woman's touch," Shep said in a lighter tone.

"Sure, you do," I said, wondering when he was going to grow up.

"Seriously though. It's been too long."

I paused, letting my screwdriver fall to my side. "Are you saying that you haven't been with a woman in a while?"

Shep gave me a look. "Don't let it get around. I'm telling you because you're my brother."

"Why would you want everyone to think you're a playboy when you're not?"

He shrugged. "I do whatever people expect."

That was probably the only honest thing Shep had ever told me. "What do you want?"

"If I don't hit the bars so many times a week or bring home a woman every now and then, I'm going to lose my reputation."

I raised a brow. "Honestly? You could probably stand to lose it."

"I'm not like you. I'm not a good guy. No one expects much from me beyond a good time."

"That's not true." But my protest was weak. I didn't expect much from him either. I was so used to covering for him, whether it was at school, work, or with our parents.

Shep sighed. "I want Dad to give me more responsibility."

"You want to manage a project?" I asked him.

"I think I can do it, but Dad seems to think I need a babysitter."

Dad needed me to keep Shep in check. "You think he should give you a chance?"

"Yeah, if he asks you about it, can you put in a good word?"

"Shep—" I couldn't even say how many times he'd come into work late or left early. He'd get distracted and not stay on task.

"I'm going to prove to everyone that I can handle it."

"Shep—" I sighed as he stalked out of the room. He was pissed at me, which wasn't new. I was usually honest with him. And I wanted him to do better, be more responsible.

I was screwing up with everyone it seemed. I'd knocked Ivy up when she wasn't ready to be a mother. And now, I was telling Shep he wasn't good enough for more responsibility at work.

I wasn't sure how to fix things with either of them.

I needed to talk to someone, and there was only one person I trusted. Hudson. As the eldest brother, he was the one I went to for advice, especially now that Marshall was gone most of the time.

I texted him to see if he wanted to hang out after work.

He was quick to invite me to dinner. I hoped we'd get a chance to talk alone.

I wasn't sure if Elena knew I was the father.

Ivy was so private; I had a feeling she didn't even tell her.

Probably giving me an out if I didn't want to be involved.

But Ivy was going to find out I was a lot harder to run off than that.

I had no intentions of giving this baby up. Or Ivy, for that matter.

I ran home to shower before heading over to Hudson's place. The lack of communication with Ivy was starting to drive me a little crazy. If I didn't hear from her by tomorrow, I'd text or stop by to see how she was doing.

I rang the doorbell, and Elena opened it. "Cooper, it's so good to see you." She enveloped me in a hug.

"Thanks for having me over."

"That was Hudson, but you're always welcome here."

I stepped inside, seeing how much Elena had put her touch on the place without officially moving in with my brother yet. She'd hung family photos in the foyer, and there were extra throw pillows and blankets on the couch.

"Hudson is outside at the grill if you wanted to talk to him."

"I do, actually. Thank you."

She returned to the kitchen, and I didn't get the impression she knew anything about me being Ivy's baby's father. Outside, Hudson stood by the grill. "You wanted to talk about something?"

I rolled my shoulders back as I joined him. "You probably already know."

He frowned. "Know what?"

I sighed. "Ivy's pregnant."

He arched a brow and stilled. "Wow."

"Elena knows about the pregnancy, so I assumed she told you."

"We tell each other a lot, but if Ivy told her to keep it quiet, she'd respect that." Hudson glanced over at me. "I'm surprised that Ivy is pregnant though."

"Yeah, she's always been so independent."

He turned his attention back to the grill. "Do we know who the dad is?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm the dad. But don't say anything. Ivy wants to keep the baby a secret, and probably me too."

His eyebrows raised. "I didn't even know you two were a thing."

The tension between my shoulders increased. "We're not. We had a fling, I guess you could say."

"Was it just the one time?"

"It was more than once but not much." I shifted on my feet, not really comfortable discussing this part of our relationship.

"Are you seeing each other?"

"Ivy didn't want anything serious."

"And now she's pregnant," Hudson said flatly.

"I need some advice."

Hudson shook his head. "I feel like I'm giving out a lot of this advice lately."

"My situation is different than Dalton's. Ivy doesn't want anything from me. If I say I don't want to be involved, I don't think she'd even tell anyone I was the dad." I couldn't imagine walking around the island pretending that her son or daughter wasn't mine too.

Hudson turned the hamburger patties over. "Are you saying that you don't want to be involved?"

"No. Of course not. But she doesn't expect anything from me. It's a little weird."

"Ivy's a tough one. She came from a difficult situation, but you'd never know it, talking to her. She's erased that part of her with the expensive clothes and that SUV."

"I wondered why she never bought a house. She's a realtor."

"She might be afraid of commitment and tying her money up in property."

"Her past shaped her into who she is today." I'd have to remember that.

"You want something with her beyond the baby?"

"I think the baby put a stop to anything going on between us. She's pushing me away, and I don't know what to do about it."

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His brow furrowed. "How did you leave it?"

"I asked if I could attend the first doctor's appointment."

Hudson nodded. "Did she agree to that?"

"Yes. Or at least I think she did. But I haven't heard anything from her."

"Have you reached out to her?" He placed the cheese on the patties.

"I was trying to give her space."

"I'd text her, and if you don't hear anything, then show up at her place. I have a feeling Ivy's not going to make this easy for you."

"It's like she expects me to let her down."

Hudson whistled. "I don't remember her father ever being around."

"Me either."

"I don't think she talks about her family either." He transferred the patties to a large serving platter.

"I saw her with her siblings at the park recently. I started helping her brother, Duncan with basketball."

"I'm surprised she let you do that."

"Duncan wanted my help. I don't think she can say no to him."

"You have a ways to go before this baby will be able to express his or her desire to see their dad."

"How do I navigate this?"

"You have to be patient and show up. Eventually she'll get that you're here to stay."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I didn't want to talk about it with Elena here even though she might have more insight into Ivy's psyche. I wouldn't betray Ivy's trust.

Elena walked out with a bowl of pasta salad.

"You need help?" I asked her.

"Yeah, if you could get the glasses and the lemonade pitcher from inside."

"On it," I said as I headed inside, grabbing the items she requested and setting them on the outdoor table. Elena had added lights that hung from the palm trees and lanterns on the patio surrounding the pool. They added a nice ambiance to the space.

Hudson set the cheeseburger patties on the table, and we helped ourselves to buns and condiments.

Elena passed the pasta dish to Hudson. "How are things going with you?" she asked me.

"Good."

"I thought you might have a problem you wanted to talk about?" Elena exchanged a glance with Hudson. "It seems like the Kingston brothers stop by for a little wisdom from time to time."

"This time, I needed Hudson's ear." There was a hint of apology in my voice.

Elena smiled. "That's understandable, but if you need a female's advice, I'm always here."

"Thanks, Elena. I appreciate it." Elena put her touches on the decor in Hudson's home and on our family.

"I actually have something I want to talk to you about," Elena said, her voice filled with excitement.

"What's that?" I asked before taking a large bite of the burger. Spending time with family was nice. But I still felt a little off-kilter.

Elena exchanged a look with Hudson, broadcasting that they'd already discussed the idea. "Home renovation shows are so popular right now."

I nodded. "There's a never-ending stream of them."

She took a large breath and then launched into her pitch. "What if we did it ourselves? We could post video of our work online. There're several platforms that would allow us to stream."

"You've been talking to Brady about this?" I asked, cognizant of the fact that he'd recently admitted to streaming a video game show online to kids.

She nodded. "He opened my mind to the possibility."

"We'd have to get releases from our clients," Hudson said.

Elena's gaze darted around nervously. "We were thinking it would be nice to start with Shepard's renovation of your grandmother's house. It's a beautiful home, a mansion by most people's standards. It's a sought-after destination spot, the house has history, and Shepard has charisma."

I chuckled. "You want to make Shep a TV star?"

Elena smiled. "Not exactly. I just thought it would be good to start with one of our own spaces. We wouldn't need to sign any releases or talk to our clients about it."

"The idea is that if it's successful, clients will come to us and ask if we'll include their project," Hudson said.

"You're seriously interested in doing this?" I asked them, a little surprised that Hudson was already on board with the idea. "Shep's making noise about wanting more responsibility at work, but I'm not sure this would count."

Hudson's forehead wrinkled. "Mom said something to me about that."

I raised a brow. "She did?"

Hudson nodded. "She wants us to put in a good word for him with Dad."

"You know how he is. I should be managing my own projects. Instead, I'm always with Shep in order to keep an eye on him."

"Mom's always had a soft spot for Shep," Hudson said matter-of-factly.

I wouldn't share my thoughts about Shep with Elena and Hudson. I felt like the lesser

twin. Not as charming. I was diminished in his shadow. "Shep said he's going to prove us wrong about him."

Hudson shrugged. "We'll see if he makes any changes at work."

"We're thinking that this could be ideal for Shepard. He could play to the camera and bring positive publicity to the business."

"When we participated with the magazine article, it had some negative blowback," I pointed out. It was Elena's job with the island magazine that led to her shadowing my brother and them developing a personal relationship. But it wasn't without some issues when the article went viral.

"Then there was some noise when Brady donated money to Hazel's library's after school program," Hudson added.

Elena frowned. "You're not wrong. But I'd say overall the publicity has been good for you."

I leaned back in my chair. "Dad won't see it that way."

"I think it's something we should consider," Hudson said carefully.

I sighed, knowing what he was getting at. "You want me to talk to Shepard about this?"

"You're closest to him," Elena said hopefully.

"He's just started to do some demo on the house and mentioned something about Kinsley helping with the design."

Hudson frowned. "Why not get Luna to help?"

"She's in Colorado, working on a project there," I said.

"That's perfect then. You can ask what he thinks about filming it. We don't have to make long videos. We could start with short ones for our social media pages and see what the response is."

"I'll talk to him." I had a feeling Shepard would love to do it, and like most things he did, he'd probably excel in front of a camera. Even if he wandered off task, the video could be edited.

Hudson was quiet for a few seconds, and then he added, "And maybe you should stop covering for Shep. Let him pull his own weight."

I played with the edge of my napkin. "I've worked hard my whole life to keep him on task."

"It won't be easy, but it would be healthier for both of you."

It would be a necessity if I was going to have a baby soon. I'd need to be more present with the baby, and early morning start times might be difficult. I wouldn't have time to look out for Shepard too. "I think you're right."

Hudson grinned. "I usually am."

I was grateful for my family. They'd support me. I wasn't so sure about Ivy. Would she continue to push me away, or could I convince her I was here to stay?

Chapter Eleven

Ivy

I had the sudden urge to make a push to earn more money. I needed to stockpile funds for the months where I might not be able to work. I decided to advertise more aggressively for new clients in the coming months. I couldn't wrap my mind around juggling a baby and work.

Would I put a baby in daycare? I hated the idea. But I wanted to work. It was so much a part of who I was. I enjoyed it, and I craved the security that came with it.

I didn't want to pull back. Especially when I wasn't sure if I'd have Cooper's support. Did I need it?

I'd never ask for anything. I didn't need Cooper to step in and save the day. I wouldn't get addicted to having him around, only to lose him again.

So no matter how sweet it was when he offered to help, I couldn't let myself even think about the possibility.

I rested my hand on my belly that was still perfectly flat. "It's just you and me, baby." I rested my head on the seat. "And Duncan and Rae."

I could support us.

A knock sounded on the car window, and I jumped. It was Cooper.

I pushed the button to roll it down. "What are you doing here?"

I was here to do a walk-through of the home. Usually I'd call Cooper to do his inspection, but I couldn't bring myself to talk to him. I was worried about what he'd say. That he'd change his mind and decide that this was too much for him.

"Kinsley told me that you were closing on this one soon. Don't you usually ask me to take a look at any houses that are coming up for settlement?"

"Usually."

His forehead wrinkled. "Then why didn't you call me about it?"

I opened the door and got out. "You have time to go through it now?"

He stepped back. "That's why I'm here."

He waited for me to unlock the door to the house.

"I also wanted to see how you were doing. You didn't answer my texts beyond saying you were fine. I was worried."

My back stiffened. "I said I was fine."

Cooper looked away. "I didn't think you'd tell me if there was an issue or if you weren't feeling well."

That made me feel like a shitty person because it was accurate. "I'm not used to anyone checking on me."

"I get that. But I'm here for you. I want to know how you're feeling. If you're having a

craving, I can pick food up for you. I can rub your back if you're sick."

I nodded, my throat tightening. "Okay."

"When is the first appointment?"

"I have to wait until I'm eight weeks along to make the initial appointment."

"Is that normal?" Cooper asked, his forehead wrinkled with concern.

I was touched that he was so worried for me and the baby. "They won't let you come in before that unless there's an issue. But I think at this point there's nothing they can do for the baby if I miscarry."

Cooper's eyes widened. "Are you worried about that?"

I shrugged. "A little."

Cooper sighed. "I think I'm going to have to get some books on pregnancy."

"I've been reading online." And making lists for everything. It was becoming a bit of an obsession.

"How are you feeling physically? Any symptoms?"

"I'm more tired than usual. But that's it." It was awkward to be having this conversation in the foyer.

Cooper nodded. "Let me do the walk-through so you can get home and out of those heels."

"They don't bother me," I said as I followed him to the powder room.

"They might when you start to show," Cooper said as he turned his attention to the toilet.

"I haven't thought much about that yet. How I'll start to show and everyone will know."

He looked under the tank. "Are you worried about that?"

I laughed without any humor. "I don't want the gossip. Ivy's unmarried and pregnant? Who knocked her up?"

He glanced at me. "We'll tell everyone we're together if it's an issue."

"You'd do that? You'd pretend we were dating to stifle the rumors?" I asked, tipping my head to the side.

Cooper sighed. "Ivy, we were sleeping together. I'm not one that sleeps with two women at the same time. When I'm with someone, I'm exclusive. It's not a stretch to say we were seeing each other."

I chewed on my lip. "I'm not sure what I want to do."

"Whatever you need me to do or say, just let me know." He fiddled with the faucet and stuck his head under the sink. When he was satisfied it was running okay, he slid out.

"Why are you being so nice about this?" I finally asked him when he stepped into the hallway.

Cooper paused, his hand cupping my cheek. "You're the mother of my child."

His breath ghosted over my lips, and under different circumstances, I'd wonder if he was going to kiss me. Now there was this pregnancy that effectively stopped anything from happening between us.

"You're important to me. Your well-being and your happiness."

I sucked in a breath because it was a nice thing to say.

He shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal. "If you're worried about gossip, we'll just say we're together."

I wasn't sure what worried me more: people talking about how I was just like my mother or Cooper pretending to be my boyfriend. "I'll have to think about it."

Cooper winked at me. "I'm a great boyfriend. I'll bring ice cream over at night and make popcorn for you while you put your feet up and watch a movie. Run a bath for you before you get ready for bed each night."

My lips twitched. "That sounds heavenly."

"Have you ever had anyone take care of you?" Cooper's gaze searched my face.

"Not like that," I couldn't help but admit. What he described sounded like quicksand. If I gave into the temptation, I'd be lost.

"I want to take care of you."

That sent a tingle down my spine. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. Just different.

His hand dropped from my face, and he stepped back. "I hope you'll let me. But I respect that you prefer to take care of yourself."

I wanted to call him back, to tell him I was on board with everything he'd just said. But the words got stuck in my throat. I always took care of myself. I never depended on anyone else. I shouldn't change who I was for Cooper Kingston. Not even if I was carrying his baby.

He sounded so possessive when he said I was the mother of his child. His declaration made me feel wanted, cherished. I couldn't let him sweet-talk me like this. I wouldn't be able to resist what he was offering.

I could handle the gossip. It sucked, but it couldn't be any worse than what I endured in school. I'd prove everyone wrong. I could be a successful businesswoman and a single mother. People weren't expected to get married anymore when they got pregnant.

We'd moved into the kitchen, and I sat at one of the stools.

"Your brain is working overtime," Cooper murmured.

"How do you know?" No one called me out like Cooper did.

"I can practically hear your thoughts from over here. You're worried about what people will think. What people will say. But you've decided that you'll overcome all of that."

I blew out a breath. "It's frustrating how well you know me."

He smiled. "I've been paying attention to you for a while now."

"Are you saying you liked me before we hooked up?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I was attracted to you. But I'm not sure I would have made a move if we hadn't been alone together."

I nodded. "Being alone together like this is how we got into trouble."

"And there's no reason why we shouldn't continue to take care of each other's needs," he said softly.

"Are you suggesting a physical relationship?" I asked him.

"I wouldn't be opposed. Dalton mentioned once how horny Oakley is, now that she's pregnant."

"Damn pregnancy hormones." I hadn't experienced that yet, but I'd read it on one of my online searches.

"We can be as much or as little as you want us to be. I'm just asking that you let me be there for you and the baby. Labels don't matter to me."

I thought about it while he moved around the kitchen. For once, I wasn't paying attention to his work. "Okay."

"Okay, what?" Cooper asked to clarify.

"We can do it your way." I had a feeling I was going to regret this.

His eyes lit up. "You're okay with a physical relationship?"

I swallowed hard. "We might as well enjoy ourselves. I'm pregnant. Not dead."

Cooper crossed the room, turning my stool so that he stood in front of me.

I let my legs fall open as he stepped between them.

"I'll always take care of you," he murmured before he lifted my chin and kissed me.

The worries, doubts, and what-ifs fell away as I gave in to the familiar sensation of his mouth on mine.

My hands ghosted over his shirt, feeling the hard muscles underneath.

"I wish we had a bed. I want to take my time with you. I want to taste you." His eyes flashed with desire as he stepped back, holding his hand out to me.

When I put my hand in his, he tugged me to stand. He kissed me again, his hands ghosting over my ass, then tugging the zipper down.

He removed my skirt and then dropped to his knees in front of me. He guided my panties down my legs, and then off.

"Take off your blouse and your bra. I want to see you."

I was wet just standing there with him on his knees. He waited while I slowly unbuttoned my blouse. I let the shirt fall to the floor. Then I unhooked my bra. I was naked in front of him.

His gaze roamed down my body. "Gorgeous." Then he nudged my legs apart as he parted my folds. He placed one leg over his shoulder, opening me up to him.

I was vulnerable in this position. I usually preferred to be on the giving side of oral sex, but I had a feeling Cooper would make me feel good. He'd probably ruin me for

all other men, and I didn't want to miss a minute of this. My fingers tangled in his hair, holding him to me.

He lifted his head long enough to say, "Tweak your nipples for me."

I nearly moaned at his naughty words, but I followed his directions. I wanted his mouth on me too much to argue.

He hummed his appreciation under his breath as he leaned closer to lick and suck. My knees immediately softened and went weak. I wobbled on the one leg, so I leaned against the stool, giving him more control over my body. I was opening myself up to him.

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I'd never felt more exposed. But I pushed those thoughts away and let my eyes drift closed.

He nipped my clit with his teeth, my eyes flying open. "I want you to look at what I'm doing to you."

I whimpered, sweat beading on my forehead. He was driving me crazy with desire. I tugged on his hair. "Coop."

"You need this, baby?" He rolled my clit between his fingers, and I was powerless to say no.

"Yes. I need your mouth. Your tongue. And your cock," I said, feeling powerful telling him exactly what I wanted.

His eyes had a glint of challenge in them. "You'll get all of me and more."

It was the more I was worried about. But I was fairly sure he was talking about some far-off thing in the future. Nothing for me to worry about now in this moment. I just wanted his mouth on my clit.

"Please." My tone was breathy, desperate even.

"I love when you beg." He gazed up my body, and I'd never felt more beautiful. "You're so gorgeous when you're naked, your nipples hard, and your clit swollen for me."

"This is all for you," I said honestly, breaking with my usual code of conduct with men. I never mentioned how much I needed or wanted them. I didn't want to encourage anyone. But I couldn't stop the honest words from flowing.

He was giving me exactly what I needed.

He fingered me, and in combination with his mouth, drove me higher. I bit my lip, not wanting to orgasm yet.

"You want to come on my cock?"

I nodded shakily. "God, yes."

He rose to his full height, turning me gently so that my elbows rested on the stool.

"Mmm. Cooper will do for now."

I couldn't protest or call out his cockiness, not when he'd left me on the edge. I needed him to get me there.

He nudged my legs wider, his fingers dipping into the wetness between them. I arched my back, enticing him. I'd never felt more desired.

I needed this. I needed him. It didn't make me weak. I felt powerful when I was with him. Usually felt weaker when I gave into a man's desire.

His cock nudged my entrance, and I cried out.

"Do we need a condom?" His voice was guttural, telling me he was holding himself back.

"I was recently tested," I said over my shoulder.

His jaw clenched. "Me too."

"And I'm already pregnant." I still couldn't quite believe that fact.

He ran a hand down my spine, sending tingles through my body. "That's too bad. I wouldn't mind knocking you up again."

His words were pure fantasy. Some kind of caveman need to possess. I let him get away with it because it made me dripping wet. It shouldn't. But it did. I let it go because it was a fantasy. We were just talking dirty to heighten our desire. It didn't mean anything. It was just sex.

I kept repeating that mantra to myself as his cock eased inside me, somehow feeling bigger than the last time. Maybe it was the removal of the barrier between us that made it more intense.

His hands gripped my hips as he sank deep. I bit my lip against the incredible sensations assaulting my senses. He reached underneath me and rubbed my clit. I wouldn't last long.

I arched my back, urging him to move, to go deeper, harder.

He gripped my hips, pulling all the way out and driving deep. I moved with him, meeting him thrust for thrust.

I wasn't falling deeper with him. This wasn't emotional. It was just good sex. Although if I was being honest with myself, nothing had ever felt quite like this. Cooper saw me in a way that no one else did, and it stood to reason that sex felt different too. More intense. More intimate.

I shoved off that idea and gave into the rising orgasm.

His fingers found my swollen clit again, and I went off like a rocket, spasming around his cock as my arms gave out. I slumped over the stool as my body shook with the aftershocks of the most intense orgasm I'd ever had. I wrote it off to pregnancy hormones.

There was more blood flowing to my nether regions, setting off a cataclysmic orgasm. It wasn't the situation. Or even Cooper for that matter. It was biology.

He thrust one more time, lodging himself inside me, covering my body and nipping my shoulder. I savored the sting, needing the reminder to stay in the present. There wouldn't be a house of our very own in our future.

We were co-parenting and enjoying our physical proximity. This wasn't the start of a new relationship.

He carefully eased out, and I felt his semen dripping down my leg. Sex was messy without a condom. Not that I'd ever attempted it.

It had the added impact of being more intimate when he grabbed a paper towel, wetted it at the sink, and cleaned me.

It was a sweet move, one no man had ever dared perform for me before.

I usually gave off a keep-your-distance vibe.

But that mode must have been faulty, because Cooper had no problems infiltrating it.

He helped me to stand, turning me so that I was pressed against his naked body, my nipples still pebbled. If we stayed like this, I'd want another round, and that was unacceptable. I couldn't start craving this man who was the father of my child. Distance was more necessary than ever before.

I needed to pull away and fast before he had more of me than I wanted to give. I pressed out of his hold, hurrying to grab my clothes. "I forgot I'm taking my siblings out for dinner tonight."

"Do you mind if I join you?" Cooper's request was sweet, and if I was into relationships, I would have taken him up on the offer.

"That's not necessary." Not if I wanted to protect my heart.

Cooper remained silent as I gathered my clothes, throwing them on to cover myself. I felt like I was hiding more than my body. He'd gotten a glimpse into my soul, one that I never gave freely. I felt vulnerable, splayed open for him to take advantage of.

I wouldn't meet his gaze. I had a feeling it would be tender, and that would gut me. This was different from how it was supposed to be. A physical outlet had been an attractive idea, especially since my sex drive was heightened with the pregnancy, but I couldn't allow this to happen again.

I kept my distance from him so he couldn't draw me in for one more kiss.

He watched me, not even bothering to grab his clothes.

"You'll lock up?" I felt flustered, my stomach in knots, the urge to flee overwhelming.

He nodded. "You can count on me."

I ducked out of the house, my self-respect in shreds. How could I keep going like this and not fall for the incredible man he was turning out to be?

Chapter Twelve

Cooper

The waiting room of the doctor's office was white and sterile. Ivy's knee bounced on the chair next to mine. I reached over and touched her thigh, only temporarily stopping the motion.

I wasn't sure if she was nervous because of the exam or if she was worried about people finding out about the pregnancy. She'd chosen a doctor's office outside of town, and so far, I didn't see anyone we knew.

Ivy was a butterfly I'd never catch. She was beautiful but elusive. The only thing that tied us together was this baby I'd come to want more with each passing day.

Over the last few weeks, we'd had sex when I saw her at the inspections. I wanted more, but I knew enough not to push her.

I was biding my time, infiltrating into her life even as I gave her space. If I pushed too hard, she'd run away, and I'd never catch her. I was always cognizant that she could bolt at any second.

I wanted to make her feel good. So far, she was more tired than usual and horny. She hadn't said anything about feeling nauseous, which relieved me. I didn't want her to suffer because she was carrying my baby.

I wanted to take care of her, so I showed up at her condo with dinner from time to

time, and even ice cream for dessert. I always left after giving her an orgasm. I never asked if I could stay. I kept the visits short.

"Ivy Buckley," the nurse called from the front counter where she held a clipboard, presumably with Ivy's information on it.

We stood and followed her to an exam room where she weighed Ivy and checked her blood pressure.

The nurse handed Ivy a paper gown. "Go ahead and change. You can keep your bra on, but take everything else off. The doctor will be with you shortly."

The woman left, and Ivy quickly shucked her clothes and slid into the gown. She sat on the exam table, the paper crinkling as she moved.

"Are you scared about the baby?" I asked her.

She covered her belly with her hand. "The baby was unexpected, but now I'm growing to like the idea of being a mother. I never thought I would be, and that makes me scared that I could lose him."

I stood and moved closer to her. "That's probably normal. But if it happens, I'll be right by your side."

I wanted to remind her she could have another baby, but that might not be with me. This baby was the link between us. The one thing that had the power to break down her impenetrable walls.

It wasn't just that. I couldn't imagine not becoming a father now that I'd gotten used to the idea of it. I hadn't planned for this, but I wasn't ready to lose him or her either. I wanted to meet this baby.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," Ivy said.

"I'm Dr. Edison. It's nice to meet you both." He shook our hands. "Are you ready to see your baby?"

"Yes," Ivy said, her voice wavering slightly.

I reached for her hand, interlacing my fingers with hers as she lay back so the doctor could perform the internal ultrasound.

When the blob appeared on the screen, I wasn't sure what I was seeing.

The doctor pointed to a small mass. "This is your baby."

I was overcome with emotion. We were having a baby. This was real.

"Is everything okay with the baby?" Ivy asked.

I had a feeling she felt a little guilty for not wanting this pregnancy at first. Now she was all in and scared she'd lose the baby as a result of her initial reluctance.

Dr. Edison nodded. "Everything looks great. Want to hear the heartbeat?"

"I didn't even know we could do that yet," I said.

"Sometimes you can." The doctor withdrew the wand and used a second instrument on her belly. When the whooshing sound filled the room, I asked, "Is that the heartbeat?"

"It's more rapid than ours."

I couldn't get over how fast it was beating. It was as fast I'd imagine a butterfly's would be.

When he removed the instrument, the sound fell away, and I was left with the overwhelming sense of protectiveness for Ivy and the baby she was carrying. It was my job to support both of them.

"Do you have any nausea?" Dr. Edison asked Ivy.

"No, actually. Does that mean the baby isn't as strong or viable?" Ivy asked, and I was struck that she hadn't shared this concern with me. I figured she was relieved not to have morning sickness.

"Some say that nausea can verify the pregnancy is still viable. I think that comforts those that suffer from it. But a lot of new moms don't experience any discomfort. You're one of the lucky few."

Ivy's forehead wrinkled. "But miscarriage is still a possibility?"

"In the early stages. So it would be a good idea to wait to tell your family and friends for another month."

The doctor finished the exam and then turned away to wash his hands. "You can schedule your next appointment in a month. Congratulations to you both."

He walked out, and I was struck by the fact that he was the first one to congratulate us.

I helped her get off the table. "It's hard to believe, isn't it? We're going to be parents."

She moved to the chair where her clothes were carefully folded. "It makes it more real."

"It was kind of amazing though, hearing the heartbeat."

"Yeah." There was something about the tone in her voice. She was upset.

I waited for her to finish getting dressed, and then I stepped closer. "What's wrong?"

She blinked away tears. "I'm responsible for this human being."

"We're responsible. I'm in this with you," I assured her.

"It's so scary. I never intended to be a mother. I don't even know if I'll be a good one."

I tipped my head to the side, feeling a little incredulous. "You're amazing with your siblings. You spend time with them, you plan for their future, and you provide for them. If that's not the definition of a good, caring mother, then I don't know what is."

She blinked up at me.

"I have no doubt you'll be an incredible mother. No one will be fiercer than you in protecting this little one."

Ivy shook her head. "You sound so confident about that."

"That's because I am."

She rested her head on my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her.

This was one of the first times she'd allowed herself to be vulnerable with me.

She'd admitted to feeling scared and unsure.

I reveled in the opportunity to be there for her.

I wondered if there would be more chances as she allowed herself to relax around me.
To lower her guard.

Her stomach growled.

I leaned back to see her face. "You want to grab lunch?"

"Sure." Ivy stepped back, and I missed the contact immediately.

Other than sex, she never allowed me to linger. There was no cuddling. I wanted to get her in a bed in the worst way.

Lunch was an opportunity to discuss what things would look like as co-parents.

Would we each need a nursery? Would she allow me to watch the baby in my place or spend time at her place, to help her?

I was getting a little ahead of myself, but I was a planner.

I wanted to take care of everything so she didn't need to worry.

We chose a food truck so that we could sit on a picnic table with our toes in the sand.
We ordered fish tacos and lemonades.

Ivy took a bite. "What is it about being pregnant that makes everything taste better?"

I chuckled. "I hadn't heard that."

"I'm speaking from experience." She took another large bite of her taco.

"Now that we know the baby is real, do you want to talk about logistics?" I asked her.

Her brow furrowed as she chewed and then sipped her lemonade. "What logistics?"

"Do you want me to move in with you at some point so I can help at night? I've read that babies can be up at all hours. I don't want you to handle that alone."

Ivy shook her head. "I haven't even thought that far ahead."

"I can set up a nursery at my place too." I had plenty of money saved up to do whatever was necessary. "Do you want me to get two of everything and have it delivered to your house? I can assemble everything for you too."

Ivy chewed her lip thoughtfully. "I have lists of things I'll need. I've already researched the safest items."

"I didn't realize you'd done that." I'd hoped to take something off her to-do list.

"I've been looking at that since I first found out. Research helps me relax."

I filed that information away for later. "So you know what you want?"

"I just need to order everything. I've been holding off because I'm worried it will jinx the pregnancy."

I reached across the table and covered her hand with mine. "Miscarriages can happen to anyone. I don't think you will jinx it."

She chewed her lip. "I'm not ready to buy anything yet. Maybe in a few more weeks."

"Can you share the list with me, so I can take a look?"

"Of course." She hadn't said anything about me helping out at her place. I took that as a good sign that she hadn't said no.

"I'm happy to be here for you, however you want my help."

I had a feeling she'd want to do everything herself, but it wasn't necessary.

"I haven't thought about how things would be afterward. Other than to worry about how I'll work."

"You intend to go back to work right away or after a maternity leave?"

"I don't get paid if I don't work, so I'll need to keep doing something."

She didn't have certain benefits like she would with a regular nine-to-five. "You have health insurance?"

She nodded. "You don't need to worry about that."

"I'm happy to pay for anything you'd need to so you can stay home."

She shook her head. "That's too much. You can buy the diapers or something. But I can provide for our home."

"You should be able to work and stay with the baby if you want. I'm happy to support you."

"You know I don't want you to do that. Besides, you'd only end up resenting me."

"You're carrying our baby. You're the one who's doing all the work. I just want to help in any way I can."

"And you are," Ivy said curtly.

I took that as my cue to back off for now. I didn't want her to feel pressured to go back to work right away, but at the same time, who would watch the baby, because I worked too? "Maybe I should talk to my dad about stepping back from work for a while."

Her brow furrowed, and she shifted slightly to face me. "Why would you do that?"

"So I can take care of the baby while you work. I want to bond with the baby too." How could she argue with that?

She held up her hand. "I think we're getting ahead of ourselves. We have a while before we need to think about this stuff."

"Are you planning on reserving a daycare? I've heard you need to hold your place fairly soon."

Ivy blew out a breath. "I don't want to leave the baby at a daycare. But I don't have anyone who could babysit. Maybe I could look into a nanny."

I liked the idea of that. I'd heard that babies were more exposed to germs at daycares with other kids.

Ivy was thoughtful. "It's not like I work a set number of hours. My job is flexible. I can do as much or as little as I want."

The air was warm today and the breeze light. We had a few months to get used to the

idea of being co-parents, of working together so that we could care for this baby. But what would it be like when he or she was born?

"Our baby will be around the same age as Dalton's. They'll grow up together. Or at least, I hope they will."

Her nose scrunched. "I'd heard that Oakley was threatening not to let Dalton be involved."

I knew the girls talked about the drama from Dalton's baby's mother.

"It's a mess because Oakley has a lot of power."

Dalton spoke to an attorney, and he's prepared to go to court if she doesn't let him see the baby after he or she is born.

He doesn't have a right to be in the delivery room.

But he would like to be called when she's in labor, and he'd like to see the baby shortly thereafter. "

Ivy frowned. "I don't have any intention of blocking you from seeing our baby. But I'm not sure how I feel about the delivery room yet."

I reached across the table and covered her hand with mine. "There's no rush to make a decision about the delivery. I don't want to make you uncomfortable. You should have whomever you want there."

Ivy looked away from me. "It's not like my mother would be supportive. I suppose I could ask a friend."

"Whatever you want," I said.

She frowned. "But I'd never stop you from seeing the baby."

"I didn't think you would." I was more concerned about whether she'd let me support her. Be there emotionally and financially. So far, she'd rebuffed any financial offers.

I pulled my hand away, and Ivy asked, "Have you talked to a lawyer?" Then she shook her head. "Never mind. It's none of my business."

"I haven't. I don't have any plans to either.

" I couldn't imagine why I'd need to do anything at this point.

I knew how the system worked, thanks to conversations with Dalton.

But I wanted to work with Ivy as much as possible, and I held out hope that she'd be a lot more reasonable than Oakley had been.

"I can't imagine why Oakley would want all this drama around her when she's pregnant. I just want quiet so I can think about everything I need to do."

"Maybe she likes the drama. I can't figure her out. But it hasn't endeared any of us to her. If she thought it would draw Dalton in, it backfired."

Ivy nodded. "Yeah, that's what I thought. He's doing the right thing."

Whether Ivy would let me in to support her as a mother-to-be was the issue. "Thanks for letting me come to the doctor's appointment. It made everything more real."

Ivy nodded. "You're welcome to come anytime."

When the office staff had repeated the appointment time and date, I'd committed it to memory. I wanted to know that Ivy and the baby were okay. "We're going to get through this. I don't have all the details worked out yet. But I trust that we can figure this out together."

Chapter Thirteen

Ivy

For the next few weeks, I worked harder and longer hours in anticipation of the baby coming. I wanted to have more money saved, knowing I'd need to take time off when the baby came.

At the next doctor's appointment, I'd be twelve weeks pregnant. Cooper was looking forward to sharing the news with his family and our friends. I knew they'd be supportive, but I wasn't so sure about how my mother would react.

It might not be the circumstances I'd anticipated, but I still wanted this baby.

We had an active sex life, but I kept boundaries in place.

I kept our physical interactions to houses we were inspecting or my couch.

I never invited him into my bedroom or asked him to stay. That was a line I didn't want to cross.

I was nervous about this next appointment. I had a feeling Cooper was going to insist that we tell everyone about the pregnancy, and I wasn't prepared for everyone to know.

In the exam room, Dr. Edison asked, "Are you having any worrying symptoms?"

Ivy frowned. "I'm more tired. Peeing more often."

Dr. Edison chuckled. "That's normal. You're going into the second trimester, and your energy should return. It's a good time to get things ready for when the baby comes. Start working on your nursery and your registry."

I was itching to get started on my spreadsheet. I'd forwarded it to Cooper, and he hadn't mentioned anything about how long it was.

When the doctor left the room, Cooper asked, "Do you want to grab lunch and do some shopping? Get a head start on that list of yours?"

"That's a good idea because I'm not going to have a shower."

"Why not?" Cooper asked as he opened the exam room door for me to exit ahead of him.

I shrugged. "Who would throw me one? Mom doesn't have the money or desire to do anything."

His brow furrowed. "Did you tell her about the baby yet?"

I frowned. "We said we'd wait."

"Why don't you wait and see what she says about the pregnancy? She might want to do something for you."

I rolled my eyes. "I know what she's going to say. That I didn't learn anything from her. Why would I think the father would stick around?"

Cooper halted and looked at me. "Seriously?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. It's what I've been imagining in my head."

His jaw tightened. "I'll come with you."

I shook my head. "That's not necessary. I can handle it."

"I need you there when I tell my family, so it only makes sense that I'll be with you when you tell your mother. I want your brother and sister to know that I'm going to be part of your life. Even if we're not officially together."

I'd appreciated that Cooper respected my boundaries.

He was fine with a physical relationship while at the same time being present in my life for the doctor's appointments.

He'd impressed me so far, but this was the easy part.

There wasn't a screaming baby that needed to be taken care of twenty-four seven.

He was free to come and go as he pleased. I'd be the one who would be living with this change.

I was touched that he wanted my sister and brother to know that he was supporting me. It was a healthy thing for them to witness. But I didn't want to get their hopes up that he'd be in our lives going forward.

"Let's talk to my family first. We get together on Sunday afternoon for the pool and dinner."

I blew out a breath. "I'm scared. What if people think differently of me? What if I lose all my clients?"

He placed an arm around me and pulled me in close. "That's not going to happen because you're an amazing realtor. The best on the island."

"I don't know about that."

"You're good at your job."

I was successful at what I did. I tended to know what was happening on the island before other people because they felt comfortable confiding in me. "I hope you're right."

"I know I am."

Everything was so easy for Cooper. He had a huge supportive family, and he couldn't imagine mine being any different. Even when his family was faced with scrutiny and questions, they banded together against them and came out of any situation stronger.

I was by myself. I didn't have a family backing me or the clout of a respected family name. All I had was my own. It wouldn't be enough if island gossip trended against me.

"Let's grab lunch and then get started on your list. We can buy the nursery furniture. I don't think anyone will get that from your registry."

I paused as we approached his passenger-side door. "What registry?"

Cooper cleared his throat. "When you sent me the list, I created a registry for you."

"Why would you do that? I want to buy my own things for the baby."

"We'll take care of the nursery. But everyone will want to get you something. You

might as well have them get you things you need."

His reasoning was sound. "I don't want people to think they need to get me anything."

"You have a lot of friends. They will be happy for you. Let them buy you gifts."

I chewed my lip as he helped me inside the truck's cab. I appreciated that he was a gentleman, but I didn't feel comfortable with him creating that registry, and I didn't want to be there when he told his parents. It made everything more real.

He drove to a restaurant, and we sat at a table on the deck overlooking the water. I couldn't believe that everything would be different in a few short months. I wouldn't be able to go to a restaurant without considering whether the baby needed to eat or nap or would cry and ruin everyone's lunch.

"What are you thinking about?" Cooper asked me once we'd placed our order.

"How everything is going to change. My world is going to be all about this baby soon." I touched my stomach, wondering when I'd feel the telltale bump. I wasn't prepared for this.

Cooper nodded. "I thought the same thing. It's hard to imagine. I just hope I'm ready when the time comes. I'm reading as many books as I can so I'm ready."

"You are?" I asked him.

"Once I saw your spreadsheets, I realized how little I know about all of this."

I could understand that. But I was surprised he wanted to be that involved.

Showing up for a monthly doctor's appointment wasn't that time-consuming.

But researching took time and effort. I'd spent many evenings deep in online searches about childbirth and what to expect when the baby was born. "Me too."

When we'd finished our food and were waiting for the check, Cooper said, "You want to drive off the island and to a department store to get the items on your list?"

I shrugged, touched that he wanted to go through that much trouble. "We could just order online."

"Don't you want to see it in person? You can even check out a few of the strollers you listed. Find out which one is easier to use."

"That would be a good idea and save me the trouble of returns."

He grinned, pulling out his credit card to pay the bill. "Let's do it."

I wondered if he always paid the bill with the women he dated. Then I had to remind myself that we weren't dating. I was merely his baby's momma. I didn't like that characterization, but it was my new reality.

On the drive, he turned toward me and asked, "What kind of mom do you think you'll be?"

"I hadn't thought much about it, other than being present, both financially and emotionally. I'll always be there for my child. I don't want to be working all the time."

"That's commendable."

"What about you? Have you thought about what kind of dad you want to be?"

"I want this child to know that I love them so whatever I need to do to make that clear."

That was an answer I hadn't been expecting. Not having a present father, I'd lowered my expectations for Cooper. I was surprised by everything he did, any interest he showed me. I wasn't sure I'd ever get over that feeling.

He grinned. "This baby will have me and my large extended family."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. It was nice but a little foreign to me. I only had my mother and then my brother and sister. Mom was an only child, and when she graduated from high school, her parents moved away. They didn't visit often. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd seen them.

Cooper parked at a department store, and we went inside, checking out the various cribs and changing tables. I was impressed that Cooper seemed to know the safety standards. He'd done his research.

I was partial to a white crib. "I'll order this when I get home."

Cooper looked around for a sales associate. "Let's order it now and be done with it. We need a set for both houses."

It seemed wasteful for us to buy two of everything. But how else did co-parents manage this situation? There was no way I could deal with Cooper moving in with me or me with him, even though his house was my dream home.

We found a sales associate and placed an order for the large furniture to be delivered to our respective houses. I was pleased when he didn't offer to pay for my set. We each paid for our own. That was practical. It was important to me that I provide for my child.

We wandered around the rest of the store, debating what kind of bottles we'd need and a breast pump. It was overwhelming. "I think I need to talk to someone who's been through this and can give me practical advice. It's not always about safety. It comes down to convenience."

Cooper nodded.

"I'll look for a social media group for new moms and see what they say."

"I think I read somewhere that the baby decides which bottle they like."

I blew out a breath. "No matter how carefully we plan this out, the baby's going to make his own decisions."

"I think so," Cooper said, and warmth spread through my body.

It felt like we were closer in that moment. That we'd connected somehow.

"I still can't quite believe I'm pregnant. Maybe when my belly starts popping out."

Cooper maneuvered us to the front of the store. "I think it will be real for me when we tell my family. They're going to be so excited for us."

"Will they?" I asked, not quite believing that an unplanned pregnancy would make any parents happy.

"Absolutely. They'll especially love that you live close, and they'll get to see the baby all the time. I'm sure they'll want to help out and babysit."

We walked outside into the sunshine. The heat radiated off the pavement. "I still can't believe that they're going to be happy about this."

He paused at the passenger side of the truck and opened the door for me. "If you want to go, just give me a sign, and I'll get you out of there."

I shook my head. "I shouldn't want to run from a nice family."

He gave me a hand up to the seat. "My family is different from yours. It's understandable that you have mixed feelings about it."

Once I was situated with my legs inside the cab, I said, "I'm sure it will be fine."

"I'll be with you the entire time," Cooper said with a wink before he shut the door.

That was the problem. Cooper was around more often, bringing me dinner or dessert several times a week.

He'd said that he'd ordered too much food or wanted to share his favorite food with me.

He made it seem like an afterthought and not his plan.

But I was starting to wonder if he had some kind of endgame.

Was it to make me rely on him and then pull the rug out from under me and disappear?

I couldn't let go of the image of him walking away from me and the baby.

Maybe it was because I'd thought of that exact scenario so many times over the years.

How did my dad walk out? Did he tell Mom he was going?

Or did he just disappear without saying anything?

Mom never talked about the specifics. She'd said you can't trust a man to be there for you.

But she continually chased that very ideal, and she'd been hurt time and time again.

I wouldn't make the same mistake, no matter how attractive Cooper was. I saw glimpses of him being an amazing father. But I couldn't trust my judgment.

My heart ached as I looked at the strong line of his jaw. He was so good looking, so determined to be a good dad. How could I trust that this would last?

Chapter Fourteen

Cooper

I shook off the excess shaving cream from my razor against the sink, excited to tell my family about the baby but nervous about their reaction. I hadn't mentioned that to Ivy because she was stressed enough for the both of us.

I knew my parents would support me, but what if they asked about our relationship? We weren't together, but I was bringing her to dinner. It was an unconventional situation, and we were doing our best to navigate it with mutual respect.

Would my parents' exuberance over the pregnancy freak Ivy out? Would she run? I knew she wasn't used to the workings of a normal family dynamic. But would she think less of herself and her family as a result?

I only wanted to support her. All I could do was be there for her the best way I knew how.

The news should take the pressure off Dalton. But I was worried it would be too much for Ivy.

I dried my face, grabbing my swim trunks and a towel, before heading toward Ivy's house. I'd insisted on driving her so that she couldn't leave without me. I didn't want her running away without talking to me about what was going on in her head.

When I got to her condo complex, she was waiting for me on the sidewalk in a long

green dress. You couldn't tell she was pregnant, at least not in that outfit.

I pulled up to the curb instead of parking like I'd planned. She opened the door before I could get it for her.

When she was seated and pulling on her seatbelt, I said as calmly as I could, "I would have gotten that for you."

Her brow furrowed. "I can open my own door."

I let out a breath. "It's not about ability. I want to be the man who opens doors for you."

Ivy's eyes widened at that admission, but she remained silent.

Hopefully, she understood that I wanted to do things for her. "My mom taught all of us manners."

She nodded finally. "I'll wait next time."

"And one more thing... Can you wait inside in the air conditioning? I don't want you to get sick waiting in the sun. I read that pregnant women are more prone to heat-related illnesses, and we live in Florida." I looked over at her, and her expression softened.

"I can do that."

I pulled away from the curb, pleased she hadn't fought me on that. "Have you thought about moving since you're on the third floor and there's no elevator for the complex?"

Ivy sighed. "I don't want to spend money on a house right now either. I don't want to

tie up my cash in case I need it for something. Daycare isn't cheap."

I glanced over at her, gaging her mood. "You can always move in with me."

Her nose pinched. "That's not a good idea."

"You could sell your condo and save money for a few months."

Ivy was quiet for so long I didn't think she was going to answer. Finally, she said, "That actually makes sense."

"It would allow me to help you for those late-night feedings or whatever you might need for the end of your pregnancy."

"I promise I'll think about it."

I was shocked she was even considering the idea. Maybe the security of money was more important to her than her desire to be seen as independent.

"If you want to leave, squeeze my hand or something."

Her lips twitched. "Maybe we can have a code word. Maybe something like banana. "

I chuckled. "Yeah, no one will think it's weird if you say banana out of the blue, and then we say our goodbyes."

She grinned wider. "Not suspicious at all."

When we had exchanges like this, I felt closer to her. We shared this secret that no one else knew about. And we were the only ones who could navigate it.

I pulled up to my parents' house, where there were already a few Kingston Construction trucks parked.

Ivy wiped her hands on her dress. "I don't know why I'm so nervous."

I wanted to alleviate her concern. "No one will think less of you because you're pregnant. They're going to be happy for us. You'll see."

She blew out a breath. "Let's get this over with."

She reached for the door handle but then looked back at me to ask, "Were you planning on getting the door?"

"Yes, thank you."

Ivy's laugh followed me as I got out and rounded the hood of the truck. I opened the door and lent her my hand to assist her to the ground. "I should probably buy another vehicle for the baby. This one is tall and doesn't have a second row."

"I can take him in my SUV."

She'd taken to calling the baby him; I wondered if she instinctively knew he was a boy, or it was just easier than saying him or her. "I should have a family friendly car too."

"It's up to you."

We both needed to make changes in our lives for the baby. She was the one carrying the baby but both of our lives would be different.

On the porch, I didn't bother to knock, just turned the knob and opened the door.

Ivy's eyes were wide, and I interlaced her fingers with mine, tugging her inside. I followed the boisterous laughter to the kitchen where everyone was gathered except for my sister, Luna, who was spending the summer in Colorado.

The conversation died down as they saw us in the doorway.

Mom's gaze dropped to our joined hands, and I figured it was the time to make the announcement before everyone got the wrong idea about me and Ivy.

She was already tugging her hand free of mine.

"We have an announcement to make," I said.

"Don't tell me you're engaged," Shep said as he grabbed a tortilla chip and dipped it into the fresh salsa.

I chuckled easily, used to my family's banter. "Not engaged. But we're pregnant."

The only sound was Shep chomping on a chip.

Hudson and Elena were the first ones to step forward, probably because this wasn't news to them. "Congratulations, man." He thumped me on the back and then pulled Ivy into a hug.

She looked bewildered as he let her go.

Hudson inclined his head. "How are you feeling?"

She cleared her throat. "Great, actually."

His nose wrinkled. "I've heard that morning sickness can be pretty bad."

She smoothed her hands down her skirt. "Thankfully, I'm not having any of that. I'm just tired and hungry all the time."

Elena skipped me and hugged Ivy, murmuring, "It's Cooper's? When were you going to tell me?"

Ivy grimaced. "We decided to do it all at once."

Elena glanced over at me. "You're a team now?"

Before Ivy could say no, I interjected, "Yes."

Mom stepped in front of me with Dad slightly behind her. "I can't believe you're gifting me with another grandchild."

"There's going to be more Kingstons running around the island," Brady said, his arm around his fiancée, Hazel.

"Are you happy?" I asked Mom, blocking out my brothers' banter.

"I'm ecstatic. I can't wait to hold my grand babies." Mom squeezed me tight, and then she turned to Ivy. "Thank you for bringing another Kingston into this world. You've made me so happy."

Mom hugged her without waiting for her response and, when she pulled back, said, "Welcome to the family."

"That's not—" Ivy looked frantically at me.

"Oh, we're not together. We're just having a baby," I filled in quickly.

Mom tipped her head to the side. "Weren't you just holding hands, or do I need to go to the eye doctor again?"

"Now, Joy, if they say they aren't together, then they aren't together," Dad chided.

"I just want to be sure. It wasn't too long ago that Brady and Hazel were pretending to be engaged, and now they're engaged for real.

" She threw her hands up in the air. "I can't keep up with this generation's relationships.

They're together. They're not." Mom moved over to the counter.

"All I have to say is, keep giving me babies. I'm not getting any younger."

Dad rolled his eyes at her antics. "Congratulations, son. We couldn't be happier for you. No matter how you create your family."

I accepted his hug. "Thanks, Dad."

"And, you, welcome to the family," Dad said to Ivy.

Ivy's eyes widened over his shoulder, but she didn't protest. She'd learn that it was best to keep quiet around my family. She wasn't going to change their mind. She'd always be included as the mother of my child.

Shep stood in front of me. "What's the deal with everyone settling down lately? Are you trying to make me look bad?"

"You do that all on your own," I said as he slapped my arm.

Ivy gasped softly at my words.

Shep winked at her. "You'll get used to it. We give each other shit."

"Language," Mom chided.

Shep hugged Ivy, whispering something to her that made her laugh. I wanted to know what he said, but then Brady and Hazel were in front of me, offering their congratulations.

Everyone was genuinely happy for me.

"Where's Dalton?" I asked.

"Oakley wanted him to put the nursery together," Mom said, and I could tell by the looks of disgust on everyone's face, it wasn't news to them.

"At her house?" I asked.

"Yes," Mom said tersely. "You know Dalton, he wants to take care of her. Doesn't want her overexerting herself."

I looked over at Ivy. "I'd do the same for Ivy."

Mom's face softened. "There's nothing wrong with what he's doing. I just don't like her attitude. She knew it was family dinner night, but she refused to come over."

"She loves to mess with him," Shep said, and no one disagreed with him.

"Now, who's ready for dinner?" Mom said.

We all jumped into action grabbing the plates, side dishes, and the main dish, taco casserole.

We always ate on the deck. There was a large table with enough seats for all of us.

When the babies got bigger, she'd need a bigger one, or maybe even a kiddie table.

It was hard to believe that everything was changing.

We were getting older and settling down, some of us getting engaged, and more of us having kids.

"I sure hope Marshall and Hayden can get leave soon to see us. So many things are happening around here. They're missing out," Mom said.

"Maybe he can come when Dalton's baby is born," I said, knowing his baby was due a few months before ours. I hoped that our babies would grow up together, knowing the love of my large family and the devotion of Ivy's siblings.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:08 am

We ate, talked, and laughed. No one asked questions about our plans, which I was grateful for. They must have sensed it was a sensitive situation.

When we were finished, I leaned back in the chair, enjoying just being with my family. Ivy had been quiet throughout the meal, but she'd eaten two servings. I could tell Mom was happy that she'd enjoyed her food. She loved to cook for us.

"Why don't a few of you start a bonfire? It's the perfect evening for one," Mom said as she got up, and we all jumped to our feet, gathering dishes.

Brady intercepted me. "Help me with the fire."

"Sure," I said handing the dishes to Dad. We headed outside, grabbing wood, then followed the narrow path to the beach.

Brady set the logs on the fire pit. It was a quiet night. A few families and couples were walking on the beach, but no one had set up camp on our private strip. "So you and Ivy?"

"We're co-parenting."

Brady squatted with the fire starter in his hand, attempting to get the fire burning. "How did you get together?"

"We've always been attracted to each other. But it was supposed to be casual."

"It wasn't planned." It wasn't a question.

"No. And she was a little taken aback by it."

He raised a brow. "But she's okay with it now?"

"It was a shock. I get the feeling Ivy plans everything, and this threw her off. She's still trying to get her bearings, and she's worried about what everyone else thinks."

Brady shrugged. "You're adults, so what does it matter?"

"I think reputation matters quite a bit to Ivy."

Brady nodded. "Because of how she grew up?"

"Yeah, she takes care of her siblings as much as she can. She didn't want to bring a child into the world because she wanted to be there for them."

"She still can be." He poked the wood, trying to get the initial spark to ignite more pieces of timber.

"She wanted to pay for their college," I said, proud of her.

Brady whistled. "That's expensive for anyone. But amazing she wanted to do that."

"I don't think her plans have changed. She's been working on bringing in more clients before the baby comes so that she has money to stay home for a bit after he or she is born."

Brady's brow furrowed as he lit the timber. "You're going to support them."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "It's not that easy. Ivy fights me every step of the way."

Brady chuckled. "I hate to say this, but I think I'm going to enjoy the show."

I frowned, throwing more wood on the fire. "What are you talking about?"

"It wasn't long ago that Hazel and I were the center of attention. I'm looking forward to it being you and Dalton for a while. And we all know how this is going to turn out."

My jaw tightened. "What do you mean?"

"You and Ivy."

"What about me and Ivy?"

"You obviously like each other. You have so much chemistry; birth control was an afterthought." He waited a beat for me to protest, but I didn't.

I had forgotten to put on the condom twice. Even though we corrected course, it hadn't changed the outcome.

Brady grinned. "You're obviously going to get together. The co-parenting line is bullshit."

I grabbed a stick to have something to do with my hands. I poked the already burning fire. "Ivy doesn't want to be in a relationship."

Brady threw his stick to the side and dropped into one of the Adirondack chairs. "Yeah, okay."

I glared at him. "You don't know her like I do. She's stubborn."

"She might resist you for a while, but it won't be long before you're together again. If you're not already." Brady raised a knowing brow. I refused to rise to the bait, but Brady let out a loud guffaw. "Oh, man, you're so screwed."

I threw the stick into the fire and brushed off my hands. "You're an asshole; you know that?"

"I'm a happy asshole. I have Hazel, we're engaged, and living together. I got her puppy, Max. Everything I've ever wanted."

"And you're rubbing that in my face?"

He sobered, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his thighs. "Not at all. I just want you to have what I do, and I know from experience you're going to go through some shit before you figure this out. It's going to suck for you but be entertaining for me."

"I'm glad you're enjoying this," I said as the rest of our family joined us.

The guys broke off to play volleyball, but I hung back with Ivy.

"You can go play with your brothers." Ivy waved in the direction of our beach court.

Elena approached us with a glass of lemonade for Ivy. "You have some explaining to do."

"That's my cue to go," I said as I jogged toward my brothers who were still deciding on teams. We usually did youngest versus oldest, which had gotten more competitive over the years. Shep and me split up to make the teams even. This time, I was on Hudson's side.

Hudson threw the ball at me. "That went well."

I cradled the ball in my hand. "Yeah, Mom and Dad seem happy."

"I think they're used to surprises these days. First Luna leaves the business and gets engaged to that ex-military man from Maryland?—"

"I wouldn't say that to Axel's face." He was big, and I wouldn't want to tussle with him.

Hudson continued, "Then Dalton knocked up Oakley."

"Hey, watch your mouth. That's the mother of his child."

Hudson grinned wide. "You're growing up, brother. I like it."

I groaned. "I'm never going to be as boring as you though."

Hudson raised a brow, then gestured for me to serve. "That's all you got?"

"I'm going to bring it on the court." I smirked, moving into position. I immediately clocked Ivy seated next to Elena, who was talking a mile a minute. I was sure Elena was grilling Ivy about me. I hoped Ivy was saying good things.

I served the ball, feeling content that everything was falling into place for me.

Chapter Fifteen

Ivy

I was dreading this conversation. Elena would be hurt that I hadn't talked to her about Cooper being the father of my baby. I wanted to confide in her earlier, but I'd promised Cooper we'd do it together.

Elena leaned in to hiss, "Why didn't you tell me your baby daddy was Cooper?"

"We promised not to say anything to anyone until twelve weeks."

Elena groaned. "Since when can't you confide in your best friend? The one who bought you the pregnancy test, I might add."

I looked at the volleyball court, wondering when I'd started to think of Cooper as my partner in this. "When you're pregnant and the daddy tells you not to."

Elena's brow furrowed. "Was that his stipulation or yours?"

"I was worried about a miscarriage, and the doctor said most people wait."

"You're feeling better about becoming a mother?" Elena asked softly.

"I've come to terms with the idea. It wasn't how I'd planned it, but I'm going to be okay."

"You hadn't planned for it at all."

I chuckled. "I wanted to see Rae and Duncan grow up and get them through college first."

Elena frowned. "You can't put your life on hold for your brother and sister."

Was living life having a baby, or did she mean meeting someone and falling in love? "I'm doing that now. Whether I like it or not."

"Cooper seems happy about it. He was grinning the whole time everyone congratulated him."

I nodded, watching his muscles flex as he dove to hit the ball. "He's going to be a great dad."

Elena paused and studied me. "You're not worried about him leaving anymore?"

"Every minute of every day. I force myself not to expect anything so I won't be disappointed."

"That's a sad way to live."

I sighed, because it was the only way I'd ever known. "It's easier this way. Expectations only hurt people in the long run."

"You know, your dad, whoever and wherever he is, is an asshole and nothing like Cooper." Elena's tone held a note of bitterness.

"I don't know my father, and I barely know Cooper."

"Maybe you're destined to have a family, including a sexy Kingston as your significant other," Elena said suggestively.

I shook my head. "Not everyone gets the fairy tale like you did."

"I fought it too, as I remember. I didn't think it would last, and it did. Maybe you're wrong about Cooper."

I chuckled. "I'd hate to be right."

"Then why don't you let go of your old beliefs and give him a chance? I have a feeling he wants more than to co-parent with you."

The sex was amazing, but each time we were together, it only got hotter. My desire for him grew, and I wanted more. It was a scary feeling, to want more from someone when you weren't sure if they had staying power.

"Not everyone is your father. You have proof all around you."

"The thing is, the only proof I need is my own father," I said, sharing my heartbreak out loud. I'd wondered about that when I was a kid. Why was my father the one who left? And I concluded it had to be me.

"You know it had nothing to do with you. He left before you were born."

I sighed. "Logically, I know that. But this doesn't have anything to do with reason."

"It sounds like you have some things to work through before the baby comes. You don't want to pass on your baggage to your child."

I turned to glare at her. "Why do you have to make so much sense?"

Elena threw back her head and laughed. "Tell that to Hudson."

"Ugh. I don't want to deal with my stuff."

"I'd known for a while that my beliefs around love and family were a little jaded."

But I'd never had to confront those feelings.

As long as I stayed distant from others, they never dug too deep.

But Elena was right; I didn't want to pass on these beliefs to my son or daughter.

Elena tipped her head toward where Cooper jumped into the air and spiked the ball over the net. "I would think there would be plenty of motivation to heal so you can move on with a certain someone."

He'd removed his shirt so his muscles were clearly visible.

"Cooper wants to take care of you and that baby. You should let him."

"He asked me to move in with him," I said quietly so no one would overhear.

Elena's eyes widened almost comically. "What did you say?"

"I said I'd think about it."

"What's his reasoning for that? He must have a good one for you to consider it."

"My condo is on the third floor, and there's no elevator. I can't imagine lugging everything a baby would need up three flights of stairs."

"Me either."

"He suggested that I sell my place and save up money to buy a house."

Elena frowned. "You don't have the money saved? I thought you'd been saving for a long time."

The only thing I spent money on besides a professional wardrobe and my SUV was paying off student loans and savings.

I knew the power of money, and I never wanted to be short again.

"I have money invested for Duncan's and Rae's college, and I want to make sure I don't use all my savings for the downpayment on a house.

They just keep getting more expensive with the rising interest rates. "

"You know their college education isn't your responsibility," Elena said gently as we watched the guys volley the ball back and forth.

I particularly enjoyed when Cooper dived on the sand to get a low ball. He didn't get it over the net, but the move was pure eye candy.

Elena slapped my arm. "Stop ogling your man, and pay attention."

With a sigh, I turned my focus to Elena. "He's not my man, and I know I don't have to pay for their education. But I want to. Now that I understand the power of investing, it's really not a big deal to put money in the account and watch it grow for them. I want them to have more than I did."

"But now you have your own child to think about. You want to ensure that he or she

has everything they need."

My nose wrinkled. "You're making a lot of sense."

"I know you love that house."

"In another world, it would be mine."

Elena grinned. "How about in this world?"

"It's Cooper's house, and I'd only be living there temporarily. It makes sense for several reasons: I can save money, avoid the stairs of the condo, and then he can help me with the middle-of-the-night feedings."

"Are you sure those are the only reasons?"

"It would make things more convenient."

Elena was quiet for a few beats. Then she leaned forward. "Are you saying that you two are still going at it?"

I gave her a look. "Going at it?"

Elena rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

"I have needs which get worse with pregnancy."

Elena hummed.

"He's taking care of them. As he should because he's the reason why I'm in this state."
I gestured at my belly.

Elena sighed. "Maybe I'll get pregnant too."

"I don't think you two could possibly have more sex." I'd heard enough over the last few months to burn my ears off. I'd learned to tune her out because it only made me want someone for myself. For the physical part anyway.

Elena sighed. "I saw the way Cooper looks over at you to make sure you're okay and that he doesn't need to rescue you from me. I can imagine he'll get more protective when you start to show. I can't wait to see how Hudson will be."

"I think it's different when you're serious about the father."

Elena leaned forward. "You're having sex, you're already pregnant, and you're moving in with him. If that's not a relationship, I don't know what is."

Before I could respond, she got up to grab a drink from the cooler someone had thought to bring to the bonfire. Then she got pulled into a conversation with Jonathan and Joy.

I couldn't deny that a committed relationship sounded nice. But for me, they always carried a low level of fear. I couldn't trust that it would last and the man wouldn't leave. It only intensified when I thought about the potential of him leaving our baby. I couldn't do that to my child.

I sat in silence, watching the guys play for a few minutes. It was entertaining to watch, not just because Cooper was shirtless and athletic, but their banter was engaging. I was so engrossed in the action; I didn't notice when Joy sat next to me.

"You have to let us throw you a shower."

"That's sweet but not necessary. We already went shopping and got everything we

need for the nurseries." Then I paused, remembering that we might move in together. If that was my plan, I'd need to cancel one of the furniture orders.

Joy's expression dimmed slightly, and I felt bad.

"There're other things you could buy, like baby clothes."

Her face lit up again. "Oh, I love shopping for baby clothes."

"I heard they grow out of them fast," I said, relieved I'd recovered her good mood.

"I was lucky I had so many boys; I was able to reuse most of it." She waved a hand at me. "What am I thinking? Your mom might be planning something."

"We didn't talk to her yet. I guess we'll do it sometime this week before the rumors get around."

"You told us first?"

"It was important to Cooper."

Joy nodded. "I'm sure your mother will be thrilled."

I didn't answer because no one knew my mom like I did. She most certainly wouldn't be happy for me. She'd probably tell me that I was repeating her pattern of getting pregnant outside of a solid relationship.

"You let me know if she's not planning one, and we can do that for you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kingston. That's really nice of you."

" I had no intention of letting anyone throw me a shower.

I couldn't imagine being on the receiving end of numerous gifts.

It was so foreign to me. I could get whatever I needed, especially if I moved in with Cooper.

That possibility was sounding more attractive the more I considered it.

"Please, call me Joy."

Cooper appeared in front of us. "You ready to head out?"

He'd remembered that I tired more easily. I appreciated the thought. "That would be great."

"I'm sure you're tired. I remember being wiped out with my pregnancies," Joy said.

"The doctor said I should feel better soon."

"Now's the time to get everything ready. By the last trimester, you'll be exhausted and swollen."

I laughed, even as I worried about how I'd be on my feet so much in my job. I'd make it work. I had to.

We said our goodbyes, getting a second round of well wishes before finally heading out. It took more time than I anticipated to talk to everyone.

In Cooper's cab, he kept a hand on the back of my seat. "It wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Not at all."

He rested his forearm over the wheel. "How was the conversation with Elena?"

"She actually encouraged me to move in with you."

Cooper grinned. "I knew I liked that girl. And not just because she makes my brother less of a grump."

I looked out the window at a family on one of the tourist bikes the entire family could ride. "What she said made sense."

"What was that?"

I glanced over at him. "I could save more money and buy my own place sooner."

His smile dimmed. "It would only be temporary."

Was he hoping it would be more? It would be awkward to live with him and our baby if he was dating someone else.

I had no plans to make what we were doing exclusive once the baby came.

From what I read, I would be exhausted and probably wouldn't be interested in sex for a while. Our focus would be on the baby.

"You'll be close so you can help out with the baby. It's practical." The arrangement felt secure to me. There was always the fear that Cooper might not be interested in me at some point. But I could move out whenever I wanted.

"I think it's a great idea. When were you thinking of making the move?"

"I'd like to do it soon, during this second trimester. Everyone says it's a good time to set everything up. We'd only need one nursery, so I'll cancel the second set of furniture. I can always buy one later if I need it." I was already saving money with that move. "I can pay you half for yours."

"You're not paying for the nursery in my house. You're supposed to be moving in to save money, and I'm not expecting you to contribute financially."

"I can buy groceries."

Cooper considered that for a few seconds and then nodded. "Okay."

The idea of moving in with Cooper was a little scary, but the thought of saving money and maybe buying a beach house of my own one day won out over that fear.

For the first time, I felt a little crazy. I was doing something outside of my comfort zone. In a way, I was depending on Cooper to follow through with this offer. But as I looked at his face, I thought maybe I could trust him.

"I'll make space for you in the guest room, and we can set up the baby's room in the second. Have you thought about colors or whether you'd like a theme?"

"Not really. It's tough not knowing the gender."

"Do you plan to find out?"

I appreciated that he made it sound like that was my decision. "I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"It would be nice to know for planning purposes, but it would be nice to keep it a secret too. But I'll defer to you. If you want one of those gender-reveal parties, that

could be fun."

The thought of another party thrown in our honor made me sweat a little. "No party. I'd rather it be something for just you and me."

Cooper reached over and squeezed my hand that had been resting on my thigh. "I like that."

I let out a breath. I was taking baby steps to be a little different than I had in the past. Hopefully, this meant I was willing to heal the hurt. Let go of the beliefs that no one would be there for me. Every day, Cooper proved me wrong.

Maybe I could build a future that looked a little bit like Elena and Hudson's. I just had to let go of the constraints that held me in the past. It was daunting, but for the first time, I felt like I could do it one step at a time.

Chapter Sixteen

Cooper

I couldn't quite believe that Ivy had agreed to move in with me. I was shocked that she even considered the suggestion. She seemed to be moving out of her comfort zone. Her desire for independence warred with her need for safety and security.

If I could help her feel more secure, then I was all for it. She'd wanted a week to pack her things, and I insisted on stopping by most nights to help her pack.

She was feeling more energetic every day in her second trimester. But I didn't want her overdoing it.

Her moving in with me was an opportunity I wouldn't waste. Maybe she'd want to pursue a relationship with me but that was a long game strategy. I needed to be patient.

On Saturday morning, my brothers showed up with their trucks to move her things. I already had furniture in the spare room, so her bedroom set and couch would be left here so she could stage the house for sale. Secretly, I hoped she'd never need the items that were going there.

When I arrived on Saturday to help her move, Ivy was carrying a box from the living room to the kitchen. I plucked it out of her hands. "You're not supposed to be doing anything today."

She frowned. "I want to help."

"We'll need coffee."

Ivy sighed; her hair was piled on top of her head, and she wore baggy clothes. "I feel useless."

I set the box in front of the door and moved closer to her. I tugged lightly on one strand of hair that had escaped her bun. "You could never be useless."

She tipped her head to the side. "I'm not carrying anything on moving day."

"You're supposed to be taking it easy. You're cooking our baby in there." I covered her stomach with my hand and was surprised that it was no longer flat. She had a slight swell. "When did this happen?"

"Sometime over the last week, I popped."

I felt a little awed by the proof that our baby was growing inside her belly. "The baby supposedly can hear us talking."

"You'd better be nice to me then," Ivy chided.

I smiled, unable to remove my hand from the evidence of our baby. "I always am. But seriously, you're not to lift anything today. I don't want you to do anything that could put this little guy at risk."

She sobered. "I wouldn't."

"I know." She struggled with feeling productive and useful. It was hard for her to sit back and let someone else do a job that she could do herself. The next few months

would be a challenge for her, but I'd be with her every step of the way.

She wouldn't be able to put physical distance between us anymore. Not with us living in the same house. I'd ensure that she was eating and getting enough rest.

A knock sounded on the door which was partially ajar. "Are you decent?"

I rolled my eyes, taking a step back from Ivy. "Yes."

Shep walked in and wiped his hand over his forehead. "Whew. I wasn't sure what I was going to walk into."

"Thanks for helping out today," Ivy said, ignoring his teasing.

Shep crossed the room and hugged her.

Ivy's stiff shoulders eventually relaxed into his hold. She'd have to get used to the fact that our family was touchy-feely.

When he pulled back, he scrutinized her. "Are you sure you want to move in with this guy?" He threw a hand over his shoulder at me. "He stinks."

Ivy laughed. "Does he now?"

His nose wrinkled. "Yeah, and he's really messy."

I rested a hand on Shep's shoulder. "I think you're talking about yourself."

"Nah. I'm very organized and clean."

I snorted because that had never been the case.

Hudson appeared in the doorway, his hands rubbing together. "Are we ready to move?"

Ivy stepped close to greet him. "I'm all packed up."

"Perfect. Less work for me then." Hudson pulled Ivy in for a one-armed hug, then turned his attention toward me. "Tell me where to start."

"You can start carrying boxes out." I glanced around the room, noting that she'd written in black marker on the sides. "They're labeled for the room they go in."

Hudson nodded in appreciation. "Someone's organized. That will make the unpacking job go more quickly."

Ivy's lower lip protruded. "It was the one thing I was allowed to do. Cooper won't let me lift anything."

Hudson nodded. "He's a good man."

We got to work, used to not having Dalton at events like these anymore. He was preoccupied with getting his new house ready for the baby.

When I first volunteered to help Dalton renovate, I didn't think I'd be having a baby too. But I'd made promises I wouldn't break.

Family came first. I'd figure it out.

In no time, the trucks were full with the first load, and we headed over to my place. I'd already cleared out the guest room so that she could start unpacking her things into the drawers and the closet.

I'd texted Brady and told him to meet us here when he said he might be late. When he pulled up, I was just walking outside for another box.

He grinned when he approached. "You're moving her in, huh?"

"It seemed like the easiest way to stay close to her. I can see the baby and help her out."

"You know what happens when you live in close proximity, right?" Brady asked, amusement tinging his voice.

"No. What?" Irritated, I leaned on the side of the truck.

"You can't resist each other anymore, and all the reasons why you shouldn't be together fall apart."

He was speaking from experience. Hazel and he had pretended to be engaged and moved in together. They quickly fell into a real relationship. "You would know."

Brady nodded. "Best decision we ever made."

"This is more for convenience than anything else. I'll be close to her and the baby and can help out."

"You have a few months before the baby's here. Plenty of time to focus on each other," Brady said as Hudson jogged down the steps to join us.

Hudson raised a brow. "You two gossiping?"

I sighed. "A break."

"Are you getting old already?" Hudson continued with his jibes.

"You're the one who's old," I shot back. Sometimes, we sounded like the kids we used to be, and I loved the familiar camaraderie.

We each grabbed boxes and headed inside. It was quick since Ivy had already labeled everything, so we had everything unloaded in no time.

Hudson stood in the doorway, "We'll head over to her apartment and get the rest of it. Why don't you help her unpack?"

I wanted to keep an eye on her and craved time alone, so I readily agreed. The guys filed out, and I closed the door behind them. Then I went in search of Ivy who was in her new bedroom, folding her clothes to put in the dresser.

"Do you need any help?"

She looked up at me. "The third bedroom is empty. Did you get rid of your stuff?"

Her eyes were suspiciously shiny. "I wanted to make room for the baby's furniture."

"Everything seems so real all of a sudden. Moving in with you, the baby bump, and the nursery."

"That's because it is real," I said gently, sitting next to her.

"This wasn't how I imagined things would be, but I'm leaning into it. This will be good, right?"

"I think so." I put my arm around her and tugged her in close. After a few seconds, she sniffled then straightened.

"What do you need help with?" I asked, not wanting to make a big deal of her emotions.

"Can you hang my clothes up?" She pointed at the items already arranged on hangers, laying on the bed.

"Sure thing." I got up and moved to the other side of the bed, hanging up her blouses, dresses, and pants. These were the clothes she wore to work. I wondered if she'd need to buy a new wardrobe as her belly grew.

I heard the stomping of feet, indicating that the guys returned, but I stayed with Ivy, wanting her to be moved in and comfortable. We finished her room, and then I moved to the kitchen where I attempted to find room for her pots, pans, and dishes.

Hudson hovered by the island. "That's everything. We locked up her place."

"Thanks for helping today. I really appreciate it," I said to him as Ivy joined us.

She smiled at him. "It was nice not to hire movers this time."

I exchanged a look with Hudson. There was no way I'd let her hire movers when I had my brothers and their trucks. She wasn't used to having people near to her who could assist. She'd soon learn that our family always stepped in to help.

"We're going to need to come up with a plan for Dalton's place. Are you going to be able to help?" Hudson asked me.

I nodded, putting Ivy's mixer on the counter. It was heavy, and there was no room for it in the cabinets. "I'll make time."

Hudson shook his head. "You have a baby on the way too. You should be focused

here."

I frowned. "I'm not leaving the work to everyone else."

Ivy watched the exchange with interest. "I don't want to interfere with what you already have going on. You won't even notice I'm here."

I gave her a look because I was positive; I was going to notice the woman who'd been the center of my fantasies living in my house. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. What would it be like when she was walking around in tiny sleep shorts and tank tops?

Ivy frowned. "Your family comes first."

"You are family now." I gestured toward her stomach, and she covered it with her hand.

"The baby is family. I'm just?—"

"You're family too," Hudson said firmly.

It was interesting because no one had ever said Oakley was part of our family.

But then again, she'd done nothing but cause Dalton grief.

She didn't come to family dinners, so we didn't know her well at all.

Even when they were dating, Dalton kept her separate from us.

Maybe because he knew she wasn't the one for him.

"If you need me to return the favor—" I said to him, knowing that Elena hadn't officially moved in with him yet.

He waved a hand in my direction. "Elena's worried about leaving her grandmother in her house alone. When she's ready to move in, I know you'll be there."

"Whenever you need me."

My brothers left, leaving us alone.

"You want something to eat?" I grabbed a water and set it in front of her.

"I'm always hungry." She twisted the cap and drank a long pull from it.

It wasn't quite dinner yet, so I arranged a plate of grapes, cheese, and crackers and set it in front of her.

We devoured the plate, and I made a mental note to whip something up for dinner.

When we were finished, Ivy said, "I'm hot and sweaty. I think I'm going to take a shower."

"You have everything you need?" I didn't want her to have to hunt for her things.

"I think so."

"There are fresh towels in the bathroom." I followed her to the hall bathroom that she'd be using. "If you need a soaking tub, you can use the master."

The thought of her stripping down and bathing in my tub was enticing.

"This should be fine," she said, looking over the small space.

It didn't seem right that she was getting the smaller room and unrenovated bath. But I hoped to convince her to switch or join me at some point. I was prepared to play the long game. I'd gotten this far. What were a few more weeks or months?

"I'll leave you to it," I said as I backed out of the room, my mind already filtering through the images of her undressing and stepping into the shower.

In the kitchen, I heard the water come on. I cleaned up our snack and opened the freezer door to look for something to cook.

When I found myself staring at the items in the freezer, not seeing anything but a vision of Ivy naked in the shower, I grabbed the hamburger patties and took them outside to the grill. Out here, I wouldn't be fantasizing about my new roommate.

I couldn't hear the shower, but I wasn't able to shut my brain off. I knew what she looked like naked, and I'd memorized every gasp and moan she'd ever made. I wouldn't be able to erase that from my memory banks.

I thought her living with me would be a temptation for her, but I hadn't thought it through. This was harder for me. I wanted to give her space and let her come to me, but I wasn't sure how long I could hold back from making a move.

I placed the patties on the grill, trying to focus on what else I could serve for dinner.

While the patties heated, I went inside to see what I had for a side dish.

I'd made some pasta yesterday, so I pulled that out and grabbed cucumbers and tomatoes to add to it.

I cut everything up and tossed Italian dressing into the pasta, making a cold salad.

The meal wouldn't win any culinary awards, but it would taste good after a long, hard day.

By the time Ivy came downstairs, the burgers and pasta salad were finished and on the table outside.

She wore a T-shirt and soft shorts with her hair piled on top of her head again.

She hadn't bothered to dry her hair. Technically, there was nothing sexy about her look, but I wanted to kiss her anyway.

She was tempting. Living together wouldn't quell my desire for her anytime soon. "Hungry?"

"Always," she said with a smile as she sat at the table, grabbing a bun and a patty from the platter. "I can't believe you had enough time to make dinner."

I shrugged. "I'd already cooked the pasta, and the burgers take no time at all."

She smiled softly. "I'm going to get spoiled if you keep cooking for me."

I sat across from her, wishing I could be closer. But the table was a nice barrier for my thoughts. "You're pregnant. Ensuring you're fed is the least I can do for you."

Ivy smiled wide, and for once, it didn't look practiced or forced. She was relaxed. I wanted to see that look on her more often. Here, she didn't have to be polished Ivy, the professional. She could be herself.

"Do you want to go for a walk on the beach after dinner?"

Ivy's eyes sparkled. "That would be lovely."

"You might as well enjoy the perks of living so close to the water while you're here." I hadn't intended to mention the temporary nature of our arrangement. I didn't want to remind her that this would come to an end, especially when I didn't want it to.

We finished eating, then cleaned up. We took off our shoes and walked down the path to the beach, heading to the right of my house. We walked in silence for a bit, the breeze a welcome relief to the heat of the day.

Ivy turned her face to the water. "I never get tired of this view."

"Me either," I murmured, but I was talking about her.

I was going to have to take advantage of her living under my roof. I didn't have much time before the baby was here to convince her I was the real deal.

Whether she'd believe me was another thing.

Chapter Seventeen

Ivy

On Sunday morning, we went to my mother's house, since I missed my afternoon date with my siblings for move-in day. I was nervous about what she'd say about my pregnancy.

I knocked, then walked inside. Mom had made sandwiches, which were arranged on a platter in the middle of the nicked kitchen table.

Rae and Duncan were fighting from their spot on the bench. "I want to play video games first."

"You got to play first last time," Duncan shot back.

"You two, settle down. Your sister is here."

"I brought Cooper with me too."

"Can we play basketball?" Duncan asked as Cooper sat next to him.

"Not today."

"Oh, I talked to Mom, and she said it was fine for you to play in that Wednesday league. I can pick you up and drop you off," I said to him.

His eyes round, he asked, "Seriously?"

I smiled. "Seriously."

"I'm going to tell my friends." Duncan got up from the table and disappeared down the hallway. I'd bought both of them a tablet so that we could communicate through email. They were a little young for cell phones.

Rae nibbled on a sandwich as I poured lemonade for her.

"You wanted to talk to me about something," Mom said absentmindedly as she sipped her water.

"We wanted to tell you that we're pregnant," I said, sitting next to Rae, my heart pounding hard.

Mom's brow arched. "Oh?" And then she focused on Cooper. "I assume you're the father?"

"That's right."

"Are you getting engaged?" Mom asked, her voice lifting in what sounded a lot like hope.

I shook my head. "We plan to co-parent."

Mom sighed long and hard. "Good luck with that. Most men don't stick around."

"Mom—" I chided, looking toward Rae. She didn't need to hear her mother's vitriol toward deadbeat dads. Thankfully, Rae was reading a book next to her plate. "What do you think, Rae? You're going to be an aunt?"

She lifted her gaze. "Can I play with her?"

"She might be a boy. We don't know yet."

Her nose scrunched. "I hope it's a girl."

Rae finished her sandwich and asked to be excused to her room.

"Having a baby as a single woman isn't easy," my mom said.

"You told me often enough," I murmured, exchanging a look with Cooper.

"I intend to be in Ivy's life and to help out with the baby," he said.

Mom sat at the table. "For how long? Until you decide you need to go somewhere else?"

"Well, ma'am, my family is here, and I work in the family's business. I don't have any intention of leaving, and now I wouldn't anyway. Ivy and the baby are my priority."

Mom sighed but didn't say anything further. We ate the sandwiches she provided, talking about the used vehicles I'd researched for her. "Bob at the used lot in Ft. Myers said he could give you a good deal. You just need to get there."

"If I want to get a better job, I'll need a working car. Thanks for researching that for me," Mom said, getting up to clean our dishes.

I carried mine to the sink, and she said, "I warned you about situations like this. I thought you would be smarter than I was."

I looked over at Cooper, whose attention was on Duncan, who'd returned to eat his

lunch.

"It wasn't planned. But I think it will be different."

"I hope for your sake it is," Mom said, bitterness lacing her tone.

I wanted to create a better life for my baby, but I was worried she was right.

At Cooper's home, we fell into a natural rhythm. He'd gotten up early for work, leaving a covered dish of eggs in the microwave for me.

I had a later start, since most showings were in the afternoon and evening.

I spent my mornings researching listings and following up on new-client inquiries and offers.

I'd taken to working on the deck where I had a perfect view of the ocean. It felt like a permanent vacation.

The difference in schedules gave me space from him. I didn't have to worry about running into him in the kitchen for breakfast or even for dinner for that matter.

He'd taken to cooking a meal, wrapping up my serving, and leaving it in the fridge. He went to bed early, so I had the place to myself in the evenings too.

I'd been worried how this would work and how I'd resist him, but so far, it had been easy. Almost too easy.

On Friday afternoon, my schedule was clear, and I intended to come home early to take advantage of Cooper's bathtub. He'd said I could use it anytime, but I'd been waiting for the perfect opportunity.

He usually came home from work around four, and it was only two. I had plenty of time to enjoy the tub before he arrived. I'd be dressed, and we could cook together or order takeout.

I took off my clothes and left them on the floor, not bothering to close or lock the door since I wasn't expecting Cooper to come home anytime soon.

I ran the water, adding lavender bath salts, before testing the temperature and climbing in.

I rested my head against the rim, letting the warm water fill the tub.

When it was full, I turned the water off and resumed my relaxed position.

I couldn't believe I hadn't tried this before.

It was heavenly, especially after a long week at work when I was on my feet more often than not.

I closed my eyes, breathing in the lavender scent. If I opened them, I'd see the palm trees' leaves in the window that made me feel like I was bathing in a jungle. This was heaven.

I wondered what my life would look like in a few short months.

Would I be in the house all day with the baby?

Would I try to take him or her for walks on the beach or the paths around the island?

I liked to think I'd be active, but I was worried about what I'd realistically be able to manage on my own.

I lived with Cooper, but that didn't obligate him to help. I was the one who'd be home all day in the early weeks and months. I hadn't bothered to reserve a daycare spot because I didn't like that option as much as a nanny.

Then there was the issue of needing childcare when I worked odd hours, like evenings and weekends. Cooper could potentially help during those times, but I hated having to rely on that as a possibility. What if he decided he didn't want to help or he didn't have time?

I forced myself to stop thinking about the what-ifs and enjoy this heavenly bath while I had access to it. This really was my dream house.

This sitting room in the master was perfect for a makeshift nursery or even a space for me to work when the baby was moved to a separate bedroom. But this wasn't my space. Living here was a dream, and I'd long ago learned to stop contemplating those.

I only believed in what I could see. Actions spoke louder than any words. I created my reality. The mantras played over in my head until I drifted off for a nap.

I was having the best dream. Someone was playing with my hair, sending tingles down my spine. A hard and very naked body moved behind me so that I was resting against his chest. I sighed in contentment, wishing this dream would never end.

And then his hands cupped my breasts, running a thumb over my nipples, and my eyes flew open. That felt very real.

Hard thighs bracketed mine, and the ridge of Cooper's cock pressed against my back. I turned so that I could see his face. "When did you get here?"

An amused smile spread over his face. "I came home early. I saw your schedule on that calendar you shared with me when you moved in.

"You wanted to see me?"

"We've been like ships passing in the night or not passing at all really. I missed you."

My heart melted at the sentiment.

"Then I came home to find you naked in my tub." His fingers drew circles on my hip.

"It was a nice surprise."

"I'm sorry. I thought you wouldn't be home for a while yet."

"You can use my tub whenever you want," he said, his eyes dark with desire.

"This is your space," I countered, clinging to the illusion of boundaries.

He stopped me with a kiss on my upturned lips. "It's yours too. And I want you to enjoy a bath whenever you want."

I wanted to argue with him, but he turned me so that I was straddling his lap. He made sure my knees weren't resting on the tub itself, which I appreciated. Ever since I'd gotten pregnant, I couldn't bear any weight on my knees. It was too painful.

He ensured I rested entirely on his thighs.

His lips curled into a smile. "I hope you don't mind that I joined you."

I shook my head, my body already moving into overdrive. I wanted him now, and didn't feel like I'd need any more foreplay to ease him inside me. I reached between us, cupping his dick with my hands, squeezing gently, and then pumping him.

He jerked in my grip. "I won't last long if you keep that up."

I rose up slightly so that I could line him up properly. His gaze was fixated on the spot where the tip slid inside me.

"You don't have to—" Cooper's gaze flew to mine when I pressed a finger over his lips.

"Shh. I want to enjoy this dream I'm having."

He wrapped his arms around my back. "What's it about?"

"I was taking a bath, and I must have fallen asleep because I was dreaming about this huge cock filling me. It was absolutely divine." I closed my eyes as I eased down his length, relishing the burn from the stretch.

His hands ran down my back as I moved over him. Each pass down his cock drove my desire higher. Then his mouth closed around my nipple, and I was lost to the sensations, needing more.

When his hand slipped between us, his fingers found my swollen clit, and I went off without any warning. Light danced behind my eyelids as my mouth opened on a gasp.

He moved his hands to my hips, guiding me over his cock, as he chased his release. He drove one more time from underneath and held me in place as he emptied himself inside me. I wrapped my arms around him, enjoying the moment.

As the orgasm faded from my consciousness, I realized what we'd done. We'd had sex in his house. It wasn't a bed, but it still felt serious. Other than fooling around on my couch, I hadn't allowed things to go further in our personal spaces.

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This felt too intimate. We weren't supposed to be getting closer while I lived here. This arrangement was merely for convenience and so I could save money.

"You're panicking," Cooper observed, his hand touching the fluttering pulse on my neck.

My face pinched. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

"You didn't want to have sex?" Cooper asked, choosing his words carefully.

I frowned. "Not here."

He tipped his head to the side, considering me. "What do you mean?"

"This is your house."

"How is this different from anywhere else we've been together?"

I laughed a little hysterically, not quite believing that he didn't get it. "It's completely different. We're not in a relationship. We shouldn't be pretending that we are."

"That's not what I was doing." His hand sifted through the knots in my now-damp hair. "I was enjoying your body. If you don't want to have sex anymore, I'll respect your decision."

I sighed, not sure I could give this up. "I wanted to keep things more casual. That's all."

"I think the act of sex is intimate no matter where it occurs or who with," Cooper said thoughtfully.

I had rules about where and when and with who, and I certainly knew when it was time to end things with someone when it got to be too deep.

But with Cooper, I wasn't sure how to handle him.

He had an answer for everything. It was like he could anticipate what I was thinking and how to cut off my doubts.

He stroked my damp hair. "I thought we were doing what felt good and not worrying about anything else?"

"We were."

"Then stop worrying. This is your time to relax and take care of yourself."

His lips pressed against my temple, and I melted into his embrace. I wanted to let go of my worries, rules, and expectations. I wanted to do what felt good. What he offered sounded delightful, and I couldn't argue with him.

"Let's get out of this water before we look like prunes. I stopped at the store on the way home so I could make you dinner."

"What are you making?" I asked as he surged out of the tub, drying off, before helping me out.

"Pasta with shrimp. I found a recipe online," he said.

"Do you normally cook so much?" I asked him as he covered me with a huge, warm

towel. He must have a towel warmer somewhere in here. Maybe it was the towel rack because he hadn't taken the towels out of anything.

He grinned at me. "Not when it's just me. I enjoy cooking for more people."

"I'm not going to argue with that."

He started to dry me off, taking his time on my body. I felt cherished, and my heart contracted in my chest. I wasn't going to survive his care and attention. He was too good to me.

He made me think that something between us was not only possible but inevitable. I couldn't be treated like this and not fall for him.

I'd never allowed myself to be this close to anyone. Was living here a mistake?

"You want to change into something more comfortable while I get started on dinner?" His tone was gentle.

I wasn't going to survive living in close proximity to him.

At my nod, he said, "Take your time." Then he turned and left his bathroom.

I gathered my clothes and headed toward my room where I changed into soft shorts and a tank top. I didn't bother to put on a bra because my breasts had been tender lately. I looked in the full-length mirror. My breasts were larger and my bump visible under the white tank.

I ran a brush through my damp hair and headed downstairs where pasta was boiling on the stove.

Cooper looked up from his pot and said, "Why don't you sit outside? We can eat out there."

I grabbed one of the pregnancy books I'd bought from a local bookstore earlier in the week and went outside to sit on the cushioned couch. It felt decadent to let someone else cook for me while I relaxed.

The breeze lifted my hair, and I couldn't focus on the words in the book. Not when the ocean stretched in front of me.

Families walked along the water, kids running ahead to chase a bird through the surf. It was the perfect evening, and I couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

A few minutes later, Cooper brought a bowl of pasta and set it on the table. "I'll grab more dishes and silverware."

I sat at the table, feeling a little useless since I wasn't helping him.

Cooper returned with two bowls, forks, and two bottles of water.

"It's gorgeous out tonight."

Cooper nodded as he set everything down. "This is my favorite place to be."

"I can see why." Not everyone got to live their dream of visiting a beach, much less living on one. He was lucky to have this.

He dished out the pasta. It was linguine with mushrooms and shrimp. "I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will. It smells amazing."

"What are your plans for the weekend?"

"I take my siblings to the park in the afternoon."

He raised a brow. "You want to do something together in the morning?"

"Like what?" I asked, intrigued.

"I'm supposed to help Shep with his house. You could come over and see the progress. But if you want to do something else on Sunday?—"

I twirled the pasta on my fork, my heart beating fast now that I figured out what I wanted to do. "I'd love to see Shep's house, and I've always wanted to go minigolfing."

Cooper paused and looked at me. "You've never been?"

"It's so expensive, or at least it was when I was growing up, and then you get older, and things like that are just for kids."

Cooper grinned. "We can go minigolfing."

I had visions of golfing and then eating an ice-cream cone.

I remembered it was one of those dates that was popular when we were in high school.

Not that I ever let a guy take me anywhere.

I always rebuffed that kind of attention back then.

I was focused on getting a college scholarship so I could have a better life.

I had vowed never to depend on anyone ever again, and here I was living with a man. I'd justified the move in my head, but now I was questioning the intelligence of the situation. We finished eating dinner, and I helped him clean up.

"You want to go for that walk now?"

"Sure, let me grab a sweater." The breeze in the evening could be cool.

When I returned, he held his hand out for me, and I rested my palm in his. It felt good to hold his hand. He was probably doing it so he could help me balance in the sand. He was usually worried about my safety. But it felt good.

Once we reached the edge of the surf, I asked, "Why did Shep get the house?"

"He was closest our grandmother."

"Did you get jealous of her attention for him?"

Cooper fell silent for a few seconds. "It wasn't that she liked him better. They just bonded in a different way. They understood each other. So no, none of us was jealous."

"You weren't upset that your twin got her house?" It had to be worth millions.

"We all inherited something from her, so it's fine. I think Shep feels closer to her there, and we'd never begrudge him that."

"That's sweet." Cooper surprised me more every day with how thoughtful he was. How deeply he felt about things. His personality around Shep had been muted

because he had lived in his shadow. But I'd gotten to know him better the last few months.

"I hope I'm not preventing you from seeing your brother."

"I'd already decided to give him some space. He can't grow if I'm always keeping a close eye on him. As Dad always said, he has to sink or swim. I'm done keeping him afloat."

"If you want to have time with your brothers or friends, don't worry about me. I can cook when I have to."

Cooper grinned. "When I have to?"

"I work in the evenings, so it's always been easier just to pick something up on the way home."

"I'll let you know if I'm not cooking dinner and going out instead. But I've been enjoying staying home lately. There's someone who I look forward to seeing at the end of the night."

I grinned. "And who might that be?"

He moved close to me, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. My breath hitched at his tender touch. "You."

Then he kissed me on the beach for anyone to see, and I didn't care. I wasn't worried about sending the wrong message or falling more for him. I was starting to think the fall was inevitable. I just hoped I could pick myself up after he was gone.

Chapter Eighteen

Cooper

I got up early to work at Shep's house. He was still working on ripping out the numerous bathrooms, so I used my key to get in and met him upstairs. The house was enormous and would take a long time for him to renovate with him working on it by himself.

I preferred to hang out with him here more than at the bars.

I followed the noise to one of the guest bathrooms. This one was a Jack-and-Jill style, connecting two bedrooms.

"You decided to work on this before the master?"

Shep placed his hands on his hips. "Yeah."

I raised a brow, but he didn't offer any more information. If I stepped into the other bathrooms, I'd find that he'd already started work on those too. He tended to go from one thing to another, unable to focus on finishing the initial project.

It used to drive me crazy, but now I was used to it. And this wasn't a work project, so there was no completion date. If he wanted to live in a house with multiple ripped-up bathrooms, that was his prerogative.

Shep stood next to the toilet. "Can you help me carry this out front?"

I moved into position. "That's what I'm here for."

We lifted it together and carried it awkwardly down the stairs and then outside.

"I swear the old ones weigh more."

"Probably true," I said as we heaved it into the dumpster.

"My neighbors aren't going to like the dumpster sitting here for a long time."

"You have an HOA here?" I asked him.

"No. But the neighbors are very judgy. Anytime I go out for a jog, someone stops me to ask when the construction will be completed, as if I have an entire crew out here helping me."

"And what do you say to that?" I asked, amused, as we stood in the shade of the front palm tree. A brick wall surrounded the front yard, giving it a private feel.

"I say I'm a one-man crew and I have a day job, so it might be a while. They don't like that answer. But I mention how one person is quieter than a crew, and that smooths them over."

"You have a way with people." It used to drive me crazy in high school when the girls flocked to him.

Shep grinned. "What can I say?"

A SUV pulled up to the front gate. "That's Ivy."

Shep pulled out his phone and probably hit the Okay for the gate to open. "She wants

to see the place?"

I nodded. "She's been trying to get into one of these mansions for a while now."

Shep glanced over at me. "She could have asked me anytime."

Maybe I didn't want her to. I wanted to show her my family's legacy.

She pulled up with a wave and parked her white SUV next to my truck. As always, her vehicle was pristine, whereas mine was covered in a thin layer of dust. There was no point in attempting to keep a work truck clean.

I opened her door for her, and she got out. "Morning, Shep."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "What's this I hear about you wanting to see my house, but you're going through Cooper?"

"Oh, I didn't want to bother you." Ivy ran a hand over her small bump.

"It's not done yet. Everything's pretty torn up."

She waved a hand at him. "I don't mind."

"Be careful where you're walking," Shep said, and I nodded, intending to keep her safe.

She'd thankfully chosen to wear sneakers for the walk-through.

I held my hand out to her, and I was pleased when she placed her palm in mine. "I'll give you the tour."

"I can't believe I finally get to see inside one of the Captiva mansions. I've seen pictures when they're for sale, but I've never been inside one. They don't hold open houses for these places."

I pushed open the door for her. "This has always just been my grandmother's house."

She smiled softly. "Are her things still here?"

"Generations of my family's items are here.

It doesn't make sense to remove them when they hold so many memories.

"That was another reason why most of my siblings weren't interested in the house.

They wanted something more modern they could put their own touch on.

Shep had to contend with keeping the old and modernizing. Not an easy task.

We walked into the grand foyer with the staircase. A study was to our right, and a formal living room to our left. I took Ivy through the living room where she stopped to run her fingers over the piano. "Do any of you play?"

"We all had to sit for lessons with Grandma."

"That's sweet." She smiled, her gaze wandering around the room. "I can't even imagine living in a place like this."

"You haven't even seen a tenth of it yet."

"Let's get going then. I'm going to be hungry soon."

I'd noticed that Ivy ate several meals throughout the day. She'd started calling them her second breakfast, second lunch, and so on. It was adorable.

"He hasn't touched anything in this room yet."

"It's grand. Maybe a little dusty." Her nose scrunched.

"He has someone who comes in to clean. But it's tough to stay on top of such a large house."

We moved through the formal dining room with its mahogany table and chairs. There were a few side pieces filled with various sets of plates and serving dishes. Each one had some significance, whether it was Grandma's set or her mother's. None of us wanted to get rid of the things in this room.

Ivy looked up. "I think I'm in love with this chandelier though. I've always wanted one for my future walk-in closet."

"Your future closet?" I asked, curious to hear more about the things she wanted in life.

"When I allow myself to dream. But I don't do that often." Her expression fell, and she tried to move past me, but I stopped her with a hand on her wrist.

My thumb swiped over the delicate skin where her pulse kept a beat. "What do you mean? You rarely dream?"

She sighed, her gaze meeting mine. "It's a waste of time; don't you think?"

"Uh, no." I'd been dreaming about Ivy naked for the last few months. It was most definitely not a waste of time. "What do you mean?"

"In my experience, dreams don't come true."

I frowned. "Didn't you dream of being a secure, responsible adult at one point?"

Her brow furrowed. "Does anyone dream of that?"

I wondered if she was referring to her father coming home. I had a feeling it might have been a strong desire of hers, and she was hurt when it didn't happen. "It's okay to dream about things. Sometimes they come true."

Ivy snorted. "Not for me they don't. I work hard and save everything I can so that I can take care of myself. I want something; I buy it. That's not a dream. It's hard work."

"Dreams do come true. I'll show you."

She rolled her eyes but didn't tug her wrist away. "How are you going to do that?"

"You've always wanted to live in the beach house, and my house is your favorite. Now you're living there."

She sighed. "I'll give you that, but it's temporary."

"Mmm." I'd leave that alone for now. "You have to tell me what other dreams you have before I can make them come true."

"I told you I don't dream of things. Especially if I want them to happen."

I shook my head. I couldn't believe she was this stubborn about something as exciting as dreams. Then I looked around at the room we were in. "You've always wanted to tour a Captiva mansion and now are."

She sighed. "I'll give you that one too."

"I think it's possible you haven't been paying close enough attention to when your dreams come true. You're so focused on the negative; you don't see the positive."

She pursed her lips. "That might be possible."

"You wanted a father figure for Duncan, and then I came along, helping him with basketball." I had kept my promise to him, meeting him most Saturdays after my weekly basketball game.

"How do you know that was a dream of mine?" Her voice was soft.

"I guessed." But I was right. I could see it in her eyes. But I didn't want to push too hard. Not yet. "Let's see the rest of the house."

She let out a breath, and I wondered if that conversation had put her on the spot. That's not what I wanted. I wanted her to feel like being with me and that my home was a soft place for her to land. She could count on her needs being met. But I had a long way to go to convince her of that.

I let go of her wrist, and we continued into the living room and kitchen area. Each room was separated with walls.

"This needs to be opened up." The back wall had large windows showcasing the view of palm trees and the ocean beyond.

"I think that's the plan."

She walked through the rooms, deep in thought. "You can maintain the historical qualities of the house while still modernizing it."

"I think that's been why he's hesitated to do anything. He's worried about ruining something."

The corners of her mouth lifted. "Unless he plans to install carpet on the ceiling, then I think he'll be okay."

"You've seen a house with carpet on the ceiling?" I couldn't help but ask.

She shook her head. "Not in real life. On TV."

"Ah, okay. There's no carpet on the ceiling here, and I don't think he plans on adding it."

She wiped her hand over her forehead. "Crisis averted."

The rooms had dark wood trim and could be lightened. There was even a wood-paneled butler's pantry off the kitchen.

Downstairs, there were a game room, a bar, and another TV room. Upstairs there were six bedrooms and bathrooms.

"This is amazing," Ivy said as we moved from one bedroom to another. Each one was filled with old, heavy furniture. "I wouldn't have the heart to replace it."

"I think he's planning on keeping everything he can up here."

The master bedroom was grand with double doors to enter the room, a large sitting area, two master baths, and the room itself. There were paintings on the walls that left a lot to be desired.

"Do these paintings have any sentimental value?" Ivy asked looking at a painting of

the woods and a deer.

"I don't know."

"I think it makes the room dark and not cozy. I'd definitely remove these if they don't have sentimental value."

"They've always been here, as far as I know."

"Sorry, I can't help but comment on the salability of any house I'm in."

"Is that what you did when you toured my place?" I asked her.

"That place is divine. You wouldn't have any problem selling it."

I threw my head back and laughed. "Why would I want to sell it when it's fulfilling a dream of yours?" My new favorite goal in life: make this woman's dreams come true. Every single one.

Her lips quirked. "You're impossible."

I drew her close to me and kissed her temple. "But you love it."

She shook her head.

Shep walked into the room. "You two ready for something to eat? I can throw together some sandwiches."

Just then, Ivy's stomach rumbled. "I'm starved."

"Come to the kitchen when you're done," he said with a wink. "Don't get anything

dirty." He turned to leave.

Ivy pulled away from me, and I let her go. I could be patient, showing her everything she was too blind to see. She had friends and family that cared about her. She had people that wanted to step up for her, but she wouldn't let them.

I just hoped she didn't convince herself that I was bad for her. I had a feeling once she made her mind up about something, it was almost impossible to change it.

We headed downstairs to the kitchen.

"What would you do in here?" Shep asked almost as soon as we walked in.

"I'd open up some walls. You're going to see the living room and that view of the ocean. It's very closed in and dark in here."

Shep nodded as he pulled out rolls and began adding cold chicken to them. "That's what I thought. I'm just always worried about changing the historical integrity of the house."

"I think in this case, you can keep the woodwork detail and the original furniture that is still in good shape in most of the rooms. Kinsley has an eye for staging if you want her to hunt down some items that would blend with the old."

Shep winced. "I'm trying to get her to help me. She's not too fond of me."

"I can talk to her if you want," Ivy offered.

I knew Kinsley had some issue with Shep, but I had a feeling this project was too enticing for her to pass up.

"I can convince her to help me. It's just a matter of time." Shep's tone was smooth and easy as if he hadn't ever met a challenge that he couldn't conquer.

We ate our sandwiches and chips on the patio on the back of the house. I'd been here a million times as a child, but I was seeing it differently through Ivy's eyes. She'd grown up in a trailer. Was this too ostentatious for her? Would she think we were spoiled rich kids?

We had everything we needed: money and love. We worked hard and earned everything we had. I didn't want anything to derail the progress I'd already made with her. I suspected a pullback was inevitable.

Chapter Nineteen

Ivy

After the tour of Shep's house, we hung out with my brother and sister at the park. Cooper tagged along with us to ice cream. Then he insisted on buying us dinner. I was exhausted by the time we got home and fell into bed without a bath.

The next day, we were supposed to go minigolfing, but I wasn't sure if he'd remember. I'd gotten used to believing that promises would be broken.

When I showered and went to the kitchen for breakfast, Cooper was already there, his hair damp as he manned the stove. "You want eggs and bacon?"

My stomach growled in response. "The baby does apparently."

Cooper grinned. "Happy to oblige."

A flush of something that felt akin to affection rolled through me. I sat on the stool and watched him work.

He managed to pour me coffee between checking the stove, cutting up avocados, and cooking toast.

When everything was on a plate, he added the avocado slices on top of the eggs and slid it over to me. "Eat. My baby's hungry."

"I think you mean our baby," I corrected before taking a bite.

He grinned. "Our baby."

I liked the sound of those words on his lips a little too much. Our baby. Our house. How did I know this would last? The familiar panic edged in, but I fought it. I wanted to enjoy this moment. For once, I even wanted to believe that this could be my reality.

I fought the logical side of my brain that said everyone left, everyone disappointed you, and I could take care of everything by myself.

Sometimes, it was too much. I wanted someone else to worry about the details.

To make the big decisions. That was a slippery slope.

If I leaned on Cooper, he had the power to walk away, and I'd be devastated.

"You still up for a game of minigolf?"

I raised my gaze to his, a little surprised. "You still want to go?"

Cooper nodded. "I love minigolf. Haven't been in years."

"You don't have other things to do?" I asked, giving him an out.

He leveled his gaze on me. "I have a billion things I could do. I thought we'd start with what we want to do. And I want to take you minigolfing. My baby can't grow up with a mother who's never been."

I shook my head with a laugh. "Now I know you're being ridiculous."

He flashed me a smile as he plated his food and sat next to me. "I'm taking you minigolfing, and we're getting ice cream afterward."

Warmth bloomed in my chest. "That feels like a date."

"We went about this all backwards. I knocked you up, moved you in, and now we're going on a date."

"You don't have to call it that. I'm not someone you're dating. I'm just the mother of your child," I said quietly, the toast dry in my throat.

"There's no just about it." The challenge I saw in his eyes prevented me from arguing the point any harder.

"Minigolf it is then," I said lightly, hoping he didn't see how important it was to me that he'd fulfilled a promise he'd made. It was one more piece of me that he'd see.

"You're going to love it."

I'd dreamed of minigolfing as a kid. That some boy on the island would ask me out and take me to the place every other girl went to on Friday nights.

And when someone had finally asked, I'd already heard the rumors going around that I must be easy since I lived at the trailer park.

It might not have been true, but I couldn't chance it, so I refused.

I had bigger plans for my future than ruining it on some boy.

When I was younger, they'd tease me about being dirty, as if living in a small house meant you weren't up on your hygiene. Those were hard memories to shake, but I

hoped today's outing would clear them.

After breakfast, he drove us off the island, past a couple of elaborately decorated minigolf locations. "What will it be? Jungle or pirate?"

"I kind of want to feed the alligators," I said, hoping he wouldn't think I was ridiculous.

When he put the truck in park, he turned to me. "Why don't we do both, and then we can rate them? It's research for our child."

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity. "We don't have to go to both."

He winked at me. "You want to though."

I nodded seriously. "I am interested in seeing which one is the best."

"Let's do it. But we'll have to eat ice cream in between to fortify ourselves."

"I might need more than that. I didn't eat my second breakfast yet." I pointed out, knowing how my appetite delighted him.

He got out of the cab and opened my door. "Come on. We have to fit in food somewhere."

At the pirate-themed course, Cooper paid for the game and the alligator treats over my objections. "This is a date. I always pay."

My nose wrinkled. "But it's not."

"You said yourself; it's a date."

I crossed my arms over my chest, prepared to argue more about this, but we were in the middle of the tiny shop area, and he opened the door and walked out.

Over his shoulder, he called, "I want to feed the alligators."

I ran after him. "Don't use all the food. I want to do it too."

He handed me a cup, keeping one for himself. Then we threw the pellets at the tiny alligators, watching them swim closer. There was a barrier between us.

We spent a long time with the alligators. I was fascinated with them. When we finally moved onto the course, we were behind a family of five. The kids were hitting the balls too hard and then having to hunt them down in the ponds and the waterways.

Cooper put his arm around me. "Is that how our child will be?"

We watched while the children tried to dig a ball out of the pond with the fountain in the middle.

"I have no idea. I was an only child most of my life.

" And we certainly didn't do family outings like this.

I played around the trailer park with other kids.

We weren't going to minigolf or the movies.

That stuff cost money my mom most certainly didn't have.

Every once in a while, she dated someone who would pay for us to go out, but those opportunities were few and far between.

"Our child should have a sibling," Cooper said with confidence.

"You'll have another child someday." It would be with someone else though. Someone who deserved a man like him. That thought sunk into the pit of my stomach. It was hard to ignore the old negative beliefs about myself. They'd protected me for so long.

Finally, the father told the kids to move onto the next hole without completing this one. He probably saw that we were waiting. But I was in no rush to be done with this day.

Cooper motioned for me to go first.

The first time, I whiffed. "Well, that was embarrassing."

"Here, let me." He wrapped his arms around me from behind, his arms bracketing mine.

I could barely breathe in without feeling dizzy. And it had nothing to do with being pregnant.

His hands closed over mine, and we moved in tandem. I was sure he was trying to teach me a skill, but I was hyperfocused on the feel of his hard body surrounding mine. Together, we hit the ball down the green.

I moved away from him so that I could see where it went. "It's so close to the hole."

"Why don't you finish it off, and then I'll go? I don't want to knock yours out."

"Good idea." This time I got into position without his help and hit it lightly. It only took two tries for it to drop into the hole.

He marked three on his score card, and then he tucked it into his pocket. I watched him hit the ball, and it ricocheted off the barrier, going into the hole.

"You got a hole in one!" I cried.

He bent down to snatch up the ball, and he came over to me, wrapping his arms around me and kissing me on the lips. He lifted his face, gazing down at me with a look of affection.

"You ready for the next one?"

"Absolutely." I couldn't remember the last time I felt free. I didn't have any work or obligations for the rest of the day. I could enjoy this time with Cooper. For once, I refused to give into my worst fears.

He guided me a second time, and my hit was just as good as the first. We teased each other as we moved from one hole to the next. From time to time, we had to wait for the family in front of us, and we told the parents several times that we weren't in a rush.

In fact, when we got to the cave, he cupped my cheek and kissed me. It was soft and sweet and left me aching for more. The pregnancy hormones were real. But it was a sweet move. One I wanted to experience again and again.

He must have gotten a go-ahead signal from me, because for the rest of the course, he touched me whenever he could, guiding me to the next hole with a hand on my lower back and sneaking into a corner to kiss me.

It was romantic and sweet and made me think that this is what I'd been missing when I was a teenager. But at the same time, I didn't want to experience this with anyone else.

When we were waiting for the last hole, I said, "You take anyone special here when you were in high school?"

"We usually came in groups. What about you? Did you date?"

"Not when I realized the boys only wanted one thing from the trailer park girl.

" They actually called me much worse, but I had the wherewithal not to reveal that truth to Cooper.

I knew he'd be angry about something that happened years ago.

It wasn't worth remembering or even rehashing with someone else.

Cooper grimaced. "I can't believe they treated you like that."

"My mom was easy, so why wouldn't I be?"

He put his arm around me and pulled me into his side. "You don't believe that."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course not. And people treated me differently in college. It was like starting over. It was what I needed."

"Then why did you come back?" he asked, his voice filled with curiosity.

"This place is in my blood. I love it so much."

"I'm glad you still had good memories of this place, even after how people treated you."

"I knew what they said behind my back. People thought I was no good or would end

up like my mom. And maybe I wanted to prove them wrong."

"Is that why you have designer purses and your car is immaculately kept?"

"I work hard for what I have, and I take care of my things."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"I'm grateful that I'm able to support myself and the baby."

He grinned, covering my bump with his hand. "This little one will be loved by so many people."

"Congratulations," the mother who had been in front of us said.

"Thank you," Cooper said.

"Good luck to you," the dad said as he ran to catch up with his kids.

"Was that a warning or actual well-wishes?" Cooper asked me.

I laughed. "I think it might have been a bit of both. I know it won't be easy but?—"

He grinned, pulling me closer. "I'll be with you every step of the way."

For the first time, I heard his words and felt them in my body. "You're not getting rid of me."

He grinned wider at my statement. "You ready for some ice cream?"

"I've been looking forward to it all day."

We finished the last hole, Cooper won a free game for next time, and we ordered twist cones, savoring them at the picnic tables in the shade.

"You want to play the next course, or do you want lunch first?" Cooper asked.

"Lunch. Are you judging me for eating dessert first?" I asked as I licked the ice cream.

His gaze followed the movement. "I'd never judge you. Besides I'm eating dessert first too."

He found a restaurant around the corner where we ate fish tacos and drank a concoction of fruit juices. It was delightful. For once, I was able to truly let go of everything. There was nothing else in my head but him.

I was looking forward to another round of golf, and then I wanted to take him home and have my way with him. It would be the perfect way to thank him.

At the second course, Cooper said, "I think we need to jump in the pool after this."

"I'm not a strong swimmer." That's why I'd avoided the pool since we'd moved in. Not that the topic had come up much.

He tipped his head to the side. "How can that be? You grew up around the water."

I shrugged, a little uncomfortable with his shock. "We weren't members of the local swim club, and it wasn't like we had one."

His brow furrowed. "What about the beach?"

"I played in the sand and stayed out of the surf."

He was quiet for a few seconds, and then he said with conviction, "I can teach you."

"You don't have to."

"You'll need to learn so the baby will be safe."

His words settled over me. He worried about the baby and me. I loved this feeling of being supported, taken care of. It didn't make me panic as much as I thought it would.

"Okay."

He raised his brow. "You'll let me teach you?"

"You act surprised that I would."

He held his hands. "This is not a criticism. But you're fiercely independent. It's one of the things I admire most about you. But I think you could be stronger if you let people in more often."

"Let's start with learning how to swim. I want to be able to protect my child around the water."

This course was busier with families and couples. We had less time to sneak into corners and kiss, but he touched me whenever he could, and we bantered back and forth.

On the way home, we stopped for smoothies, which I appreciated. Cooper was always thinking of me and my needs. Plus, it hit the spot after a long hot day.

He glanced over at me. "So what's the verdict, jungle or pirate?"

I grinned. "Pirate. I loved the alligators."

"We should go to the Everglades and do one of those water tours then," he said flippantly, like it was no big deal to plan more outings together.

"I never even thought about doing something like that."

"Stick with me, and you'll do all kinds of cool things." His voice was full of confidence.

I almost said I intended to, but that was too much too soon. I didn't like to look that far into the future. How did I trust that he'd stick around? That he'd be here with me in a year? Two?

The thought was overwhelming.

Chapter Twenty

Cooper

After our second round of minigolf, I took Ivy home. She looked exhausted, and as soon as we got home, she went into the bedroom for a nap.

While she was sleeping, I cut chicken and pineapple to make kabobs, then covered it in a spicy cajun seasoning. I cut up a watermelon I'd purchased earlier in the week and grilled the kabobs.

I hoped by the time she woke up, the food would be ready. Then I had plans to take a dip in the pool. I wanted to teach her how to swim, but I also wanted to touch her.

Resisting Ivy was impossible, and I didn't want to anymore. As soon as she was wet and pliable in my arms, I needed her to ride my cock in the pool.

I wanted to be so close to her that she knew in her soul that I was the one for her. The plan was partially selfish because I couldn't keep my hands off her. But there was a bigger plan. One I hoped would work.

When the meat was done grilling, I set it on the table and grabbed the linens my mom bought as a housewarming gift when I moved in. I never had any reason to use them before. I thought Ivy would appreciate them.

I lit a few candles down the center of the table, bringing out the vase of fresh flowers I'd bought earlier in the week from the grocery store.

The flowers and candles added to the ambiance of the outdoor space. I lit the tiki torches around the pool.

I wanted Ivy relaxed and focused on me. Not worried about the future or what anyone would think. At the end of the day, it was just us. We made this baby, and we were creating our future. No one else's opinion mattered.

I was filling the glasses with lemonade when the slider opened.

"What are you doing?" Ivy asked, her voice rough with sleep.

I turned to see that she'd brushed her hair, but her eyes were puffy. She wore the same dress from earlier, the one I wanted to lift over her head to see what she wore underneath. But first, I needed to feed her. "I made dinner."

Her eyes widened as she took in the table. "I can see that."

I pulled out a chair for her. "I hope you like grilled chicken and pineapple."

"Who doesn't?" she asked as she sat and let me push her closer to the table. Her gaze followed me as I moved to sit across from her. I piled kabobs on her plate and spooned watermelon cubes into a bamboo bowl before passing it to her.

"Everything looks delicious."

"I thought our date day called for a special dinner. Not that this is anything fancy."

She looked around. "You lit candles and the tiki torches. It feels intimate and cozy."

Her face was illuminated by the candles, and her skin was flush from her nap. She was gorgeous, and I couldn't believe she was here with me.

Convincing her to move into my place hadn't been easy. Getting her to this point was the most difficult thing I'd ever had to do. And I wasn't about to give up now. Every day, things became clearer for me. She was the woman for me.

"This is really nice. Thank you."

We dug into our food, talking about the day and how she was feeling.

Ivy played with her glass. "Spending time in the heat did a number on me."

"I was wondering if you wanted to take a dip in the pool after dinner." I figured the water would feel good on the aching muscles she'd been complaining about recently as her body stretched to accommodate the baby.

"I think that would feel good."

I played music over my speakers. It was rare for me to have any guests. I always saw Shep out or at his house. The family tended to congregate at Mom and Dad's, so it was nice to entertain her here.

When Ivy bit into the pineapple, she moaned, and my heart skipped a beat. "There's just something about grilled pineapple. I can't resist."

"Feel free to eat whatever you want. I cooked more than enough for the two of us."

"Mmm. I'll take you up on that." She licked pineapple juice off her finger, and I wasn't sure I was going to survive this meal.

I adjusted myself, hoping she didn't notice my discomfort. Watching a woman eat wasn't supposed to be sexy.

I almost wished I had ice cream so I could watch her lick it again. Or better yet, whipped cream so I could eat it off her body.

I fanned myself with the napkin. "Do you think it's hot out here?"

"A little," Ivy admitted.

I got up to turn on the overhead fan. I needed to finish eating so I could dunk myself in the pool. We resumed our meal, and when we were done, I placed the leftovers in a container in the fridge, leaving out the watermelon to snack on.

I'd already put on board shorts, so I pulled my shirt over my head and dove easily into the deep end. When I emerged, I brushed my hair back, noting that Ivy was watching me closely. I trod water. "Come in."

She nodded before standing up and lifting the dress over her head. She only wore a sheer bra and matching panties. My mouth was dry because she was essentially naked.

I could have asked her about a swimsuit, but I didn't have the heart to tell her to cover up. I loved this side of Ivy, the one who was the confident seductress. Who wasn't always worried about the connection we might form by being together.

She stepped off the edge into the water in the shallow end, not even getting her hair wet.

"Come here," I said gruffly.

She arched one delicate brow. "I'm not a strong swimmer."

"I want to see what you can do, and I've got you." I reached my hand out to her, and

she glided through the water. She kicked off the side of the pool, then started to sink. She moved her arms awkwardly.

I moved toward her, my hand going to her stomach. I lifted her so that she'd feel the sensation of floating. Her arms paused in the water.

I wanted to unhook her bra. But I needed to teach her how to swim first. "Can you roll to your back? I'll be right here the whole time."

She nodded jerkily before she flipped over. Her butt started to sink, but I quickly placed my hand on her lower back, supporting her.

"Remember what this feels like so you can find this position on your own. You can always roll to your back and float. It saves energy."

"I don't want to be stuck out in the ocean and needing to do this."

I frowned. "But if you find yourself in deep water, you'll know what to do."

Her gaze found mine, and it felt like she was drawing strength from me. She was always so confident. It was attractive to see her vulnerability. I was pleased she didn't push me away or refuse to do any more.

"You can use a kickboard to get used to actual swimming." I helped her move to shallow water and then grabbed the kickboard I'd placed there earlier in anticipation of a lesson. I handed it to her. "Do you know how to use it?"

"I put my hands here and kick."

"That's right." I helped her get the right grip on the foam and then showed her how to stretch out her body and kick with stiff legs.

She mimicked my movements, and I kept pace next to her.

When she reached the end of the pool, she held onto the edge. "I can't believe I swam the whole pool."

"Why don't you do one more round? You can do that every day to build endurance, and once you're comfortable, we'll do it without the kickboard."

Her nose scrunched. "Won't I be too big to do this soon?"

"Exercise is okay as long as you're not feeling dizzy or lightheaded. You ready to go back?"

She looked across the water, her face filled with determination. "Yeah, let's do it."

I waited for her to push off the wall and then swam next to her, prepared to step in if she struggled. She made it back to shallow water and regained her footing.

"What did you think about that?" I asked, taking the kick board from her hands.

"That wasn't bad, but the kickboard is keeping me up. I don't know how to do that without help."

"We'll practice every day until you get it without assistance. It's similar to finding your balance on a bike."

She smiled. "Now that I learned early on because it was my main source of transportation."

"Your mom bought you a bike?"

"My neighbor had outgrown his. It was a boys' bike, but I didn't care."

I sat on the seat that was on the edge of the pool and pulled her toward me. "How are you feeling?"

"A little tired but good."

I settled her over my lap, running my hands over her back. "You're a good student." I'd expected more pushback and fear of the water. But she was brave.

She shrugged, drawing my attention to her hard nipples. "I need to learn."

"It's a necessity if you're going to be around water. We'll need to get a fence around the pool too."

"Yeah, I already looked into it. It's pricey."

"I'll get it." I almost said because this is my house, but I didn't want her to feel like a guest. I wanted her to believe this place could be hers too.

She frowned. "You shouldn't have to pay for everything when it comes to the baby."

"I'm not." She'd offered to pay me for half of the nursery room furniture, but I told her to save the money in case she needed to buy her own set.

I'd won that battle, but I wasn't sure how much more she was going to fight me on everything.

I cupped her breasts, brushing my thumbs over her nipples.

"I don't really want to talk about baby stuff right now. "

Her mouth fell open on a gasp as she pressed her breasts into my hands. I reached around and unhooked her bra. "No one else can see you. We're secluded here."

She nodded, and I loved that she trusted me.

I sucked on one nipple, tweaking the second with my fingers. Her hands tangled in my hair as she gently kept me pressed to her breast. She moved over my aching dick. But my shorts were still between us.

I let go of her nipple, and she slid off my lap so that she could tug my trunks off. She threw them away from us so that they floated in the water. I'd have to remember to grab our clothing later.

Then she removed her panties and slid over me, her bare pussy gliding over me again. I cradled her ass, helping her move over me. I wasn't going to last long if she kept it up.

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She reached down and gripped my cock, slipping it between her folds to her entrance. She sank over me, and I forgot everything except for the feel of her. Her skin was flushed, her nipples hard, and her eyes bright with desire.

There was nothing that I wouldn't give this woman. I just wished she'd stop fighting me. I hoped she come around and give into the idea of us.

I banded an arm around her back, assisting her in her movements when she began to tire. I reached between her legs, rubbing her swollen clit. She cried out, her body jerking above mine.

I took over, lifting her body and guiding her down as the waves of pleasure went through her. I let go then, spilling my seed inside her.

I loved the sight of her swollen belly, her engorged breasts, and the look of satisfaction on her face. She rested her forehead against mine. "Sex in the pool was naughty."

I let out a laugh. "The naughty part was you getting in the pool in your see-through bra and panties."

She laughed then, her expression carefree. "I thought you might like that."

I held her to me. "You're a vixen; you know that?"

"I'm just doing what feels good," she said, parroting my words back to me.

"I can't complain about that." We drifted in the pool until our skin was wrinkled. I insisted on drying us off. I left the clothes and the watermelon, leading her upstairs to my room. "Sleep with me tonight."

Then I held my breath because she'd never been in my room for much of anything.

She finally nodded. "Yeah, okay."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "You want to take a shower?"

"Sure."

In my bathroom, I turned on the water, letting it warm up before getting inside. I soaped her hair, then worked it into her scalp. She let her head fall back, and from the occasional moans, I figured she was enjoying my ministrations.

Then I turned her so that the water could rinse out the bubbles. I snagged the body wash, cupping her breasts until she whimpered.

I didn't want to have sex in the shower. I had plans to take her in my bed, and I wanted to get her so worked up that she wouldn't protest the horizontal surface. She never said she was against sex in beds, but she'd carefully avoided them.

I figured it was part of her system of beliefs. If she didn't have sex in someone's bed, she couldn't fall for them or some nonsense.

I wanted to break down all her walls and show her how life could be different. I wanted her to rely on me and not worry that I'd ever let her down.

I lathered every inch of her until she was warm and pliant, then waited patiently for the water to rinse her off.

She moved to cup my dick, and I stopped her with a hand on her wrist. "Not here."

She arched a brow. "Then where?"

"You'll see." I reached around her to turn off the water and then grabbed a towel from the warming rack. I wrapped it around her, rubbing her dry. Then I quickly towed off my body. I reached for her hand, leading the way into the bedroom.

At the foot of my bed, I turned her to face me so that I could kiss her. She sighed into my mouth, and I tugged her free of her towel. It fell to the floor, and I pulled her toward me, her soft body against my hard.

Then I turned so that I fell onto the bed behind me and reached for her at the last minute. She tumbled on top of me. Laughing she asked, "Was this your sneaky way of getting me in your bed?"

I quickly turned us so that she was pinned beneath me. "Now you're not going anywhere."

She smiled up at me. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

With a growl, I lowered my mouth to hers, my cock already seeking her warm center. I glided through her folds, forcing myself to be patient. And this time when I entered her, it was slow and tortuous.

She gripped my forearms as if she was afraid that I was going to pull out and leave, and maybe she was.

Maybe this was at the heart of all her fears.

She never expected anyone to stay. So, fast sex was easier to predict.

And it was expected the parties walked away afterward.

If she had no expectations, she couldn't be hurt.

I intended to change that for her. I wasn't sure how I was going to do it or whether it would be successful. But I had to try.

I sucked on her nipples as I moved slowly inside her, pulling out to the tip before gliding back in. I finally released her nipple, sitting back so I could change the angle. I wanted to hit that spot inside her that would feel unlike anything else.

I wanted to drive her higher than ever before.

When the moans escaped her mouth, I knew I was on the right track. I gripped her thighs as my dick disappeared into her channel.

I circled her clit, relishing in the way her body spasmed hard around me, squeezing my orgasm from my body. We came at the same time. The endorphins rushed through my body, making me feel like I could fly.

I rested my body over hers for a second before rolling to the side and bringing her with me. I couldn't even speak; the moment was so intense, so incredible. I'd never felt anything like this before. I just hoped she didn't get spooked.

Instead, she curled into my side, her head on my shoulder and her fingers playing with the short hairs on my chest.

I kissed her head, the feelings of tenderness washing over me in waves. I held her tight, never wanting to let her go.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ivy

Cooper set an omelet in front of me. "I'm working on the flower boxes at the senior center today, and I could really use your advice."

I glanced up at him. "You could use my advice on what to plant in flower boxes?"

Cooper nodded as he wiped his hands on the kitchen towel. "You have an eye for colors and design."

My forehead wrinkled as I picked up my fork. "Wouldn't a landscaper be a better person to ask?"

"We've always worked on their flower boxes. It's a little out of our wheelhouse, but we never say no to helping Phyllis." Cooper turned away from me to pour coffee into two mugs. He'd taken to brewing decaf, and I'd almost convinced myself that it was the same as regular.

"And you think I'm the best one to ask for help?" I cut into my omelet. This time, he'd made it with mushrooms, tomatoes, and parmesan cheese.

"You don't have any appointments scheduled for the day, and then we can spend more time together." The last few weeks, he'd been trying to spend as much time with me as possible. He'd said he wanted to get to know me better. That it would make him a better father.

I wasn't so sure about that as an effective plan to be a good dad, but it was sweet, and I was enjoying the attention. "So you want company?"

"Yes, I would like to plant flowers with my baby momma," he said with a sweet smile.

I pursed my lips. "You know I don't like that phrase."

He sighed. "How about roommate?"

"Much better." Anything but baby momma . That reminded me too much of my mother and the gossip surrounding me and my siblings about our absent fathers.

He picked up my hand, holding it between his. "Ivy, will you please join me this morning? I could use your help and wisdom planting flowers. Will you make a few old people happy? And me?"

I couldn't help but laugh at his antics. "Yes."

He kissed the top of my hand before he let it go, and tingles erupted on my skin. I felt a little flustered as I pulled back.

He grabbed the toast and placed it on a plate between us.

The fact that he cooked for me was nice, but I was worried it would be tough to go back to living on my own, especially when I had a baby to take care of. But I'd vowed to stop worrying about the what-ifs and enjoy my current reality which came with tasty meals and earth-shattering orgasms.

The least I could do was help him with whatever he needed at the senior center.

"It's going to be fun." He arranged his omelet on top of one of the slices of toast,

I savored the flavor of the mushrooms as I bit into the fluffy eggs. "I don't have a green thumb."

"It'll be fine," he said between bites.

I never let anyone commandeer my life, but I had to admit it was nice when I was less scheduled and more open to the possibilities.

Last week, he'd taken me to an art festival that had handmade jewelry that I loved.

He'd bought a set of earrings that I'd spent a lot of time admiring.

I didn't need something like that, especially with a baby on the way, but Cooper had insisted that I should have something pretty.

He finished his omelet, rinsed off his plate, and placed it in the dishwasher. Then he leaned a hip on the counter, lifting his mug. "I'm going to make you love spontaneity."

"I prefer to plan ahead." I had a hard time switching gears, but I'd found myself less likely to schedule things for myself now that I was living with Cooper.

I'd arranged more appointments during the weekdays when he was working.

Nighttime and weekend appointments were inevitable, but I'd managed to keep them to a minimum.

It was good practice for when the baby arrived.

Childcare wouldn't be available at those times unless I found a nanny with a flexible schedule. Maybe a student who was taking classes.

I'd need to work on interviewing possible candidates. The baby would be here before I knew it. Cooper had been working on the nursery and Dalton's house in his spare time.

I stood. "I'm going to take a shower. Should I wear gardening clothes?"

"Wear a sundress so we can go to lunch afterward," Cooper said.

That seemed a little odd, but Cooper didn't want me to overdo things, so maybe this was his way of getting me to take it easy. "Okay."

I still showered in the guest bath and kept my clothes in the spare bedroom. I didn't want to get too used to being in Cooper's room. When the baby came, things could change. We'd fall into our respective roles as parents. He might not see me the same way.

I quickly showered, putting a longer dress on that skimmed my heels. Then I slid my feet into comfortable sandals. My feet ached if I wore heels or was on my feet too long, even though my bump was still modest.

I figured I had a few more weeks before my belly got bigger and I was more uncomfortable.

So far, Cooper hadn't been repelled by my changing body.

He seemed to revel in the subtle changes, and he never missed an opportunity to touch my stomach, wanting to know when he'd be able to feel the baby kick.

It was sweet, and it made me think he'd be a great dad. But I didn't have much experience with one of those.

Downstairs, Cooper was already showered and dressed in a polo shirt and cargo shorts. They weren't work clothes, but maybe he intended to do light work before we enjoyed lunch.

We took his work truck to the senior center. "I need to talk to Phyllis before we get to work."

"Okay," I said as he took my hand, holding it all the way to the front door, which opened automatically.

When I'd asked why he wanted to hold my hand, he said it was in case I lost my balance, which he'd read was common with pregnant women. I was a little suspicious that it was a couple move. But I enjoyed it too much to put a stop to it.

We walked into the cool lobby which was fairly empty for the time of day.

"I think she's in the common room," Cooper said as we continued walking to the room toward the right of the building. This one had large windows that showcased the side garden. He paused in the doorway, and a bunch of people yelled, "Suprise!"

I looked at Cooper in confusion. "It's not my birthday."

He grinned. "It's your baby shower."

I followed his gaze to the sign that said Baby Shower. There were balloons and streamers everywhere, including the lanterns we'd assembled for Brady and Hazel's recent engagement party.

"This wasn't necessary—" I began, as a few older women approached: Mabel, Blaire, Edith, and Sofia.

Mabel clapped her hands together. "We love any chance to have a party. When we heard that you needed a shower, we were happy to host."

I didn't ask for a shower, but all I could do was look at Cooper for assistance. He was no help because he'd covered his mouth with his hand, and I was fairly sure he was hiding a laugh.

"This is lovely, thank you."

Edith touched my stomach. "Everyone knows that carrying high is a boy."

Blaire waved a hand. "You carry your first baby high. Then your muscles get weaker and more stretched out, so your second one is lower. It has nothing to do with the sex."

The women bickered about the sex of our child, and I poked Cooper. "Did you know about this?"

"Of course I did. I was tasked with getting you here." He pulled me close, and I looked up at him. "I didn't ask for a shower."

He lowered his head. "But everyone wanted to celebrate us and this sweet baby you're carrying."

Tears sparked in my eyes because this baby wasn't even born yet and so many people supported us.

It also touched me how Cooper spoke about our child.

He always had a positive thing to say, and he'd speak to the baby, saying how he couldn't wait to meet him.

How could my dad have thought the opposite?

I tried to remind myself that his leaving had nothing to do with me, but it was hard.

"Hey, stop hogging our girl," Elena said, grabbing my hand and tugging me away from Cooper.

I wasn't a fan of being the center of attention, although I couldn't ever remember a party that was thrown in my honor. This had to be a first.

"Were you part of this?" I asked her.

Elena grinned. "Well, the ladies"—she pointed in the direction of Mabel, Blaire, Edith, and Sofia—"took the lead, but we helped."

I held myself stiff, looking around the room at the sheer number of people who were there. "I want to be mad at you."

Elena pulled me in for a hug. "Get over it."

Then Daria hugged me. "You deserve this."

"Yeah, you're always doing so much for us," Hazel added, and I knew she was talking about how I helped her plan a party to get Brady back. Surely, I could get through the shower without too much trouble.

They directed me to a large chair by a table piled high with gifts. A smaller table off to the side had a pink and blue frosted cake.

"We're here to celebrate you and this precious baby. Everyone wanted to get you something," Mabel said to me.

"We're going to open presents now?" I just remembered I'd never been to a shower before.

As she handed me a box, Elena said, "You open, and I'll write down who it's from so you can write a thank-you."

My palms were clammy as I opened the first one. I held up a yellow onesie that took my breath away. How was I going to be responsible for something this small?

Joy sat close by. "I wasn't sure of the gender so wanted to get you something that could work for either."

I sniffed. "Thank you."

Hazel appeared with another chair, and Cooper sat next to me. I smiled gratefully at him. I wasn't sure that men attended baby showers, but I could use his support. It took some of the focus off me.

We quickly went through the presents, which included the things I'd listed on my spreadsheet and tons of clothes and diapers. It was overwhelming but also nice. I was worried about the cost of everything a baby would need. This would go a long way to setting us up for success.

When we'd opened the last present and Mabel had directed staff to cut the cake, I leaned over and asked, "How did they get me all the things on my list?"

Guilt crossed over his face. "Remember? I created a registry from the list you made, and then I shared it with everyone."

"It feels weird that so many people want to buy us things."

"That's what you do when someone is getting married or having a baby. Your friends and family want to help you."

I blew out a shaky breath.

"You deserve this." He stood and held out his hand to me. We accepted a slice of cake and sat at one of the larger tables with my friends.

"Were you surprised?" Elena asked me.

"I had no idea. Joy had mentioned throwing a shower, but I assumed I would know about it and be involved in the planning."

Elena smiled. "We figured you'd tell us you didn't need one."

"You know me well," I said dryly.

"Everyone kept asking when you were having one. They wanted to come out and celebrate you and Cooper. You have a lot of friends on the island."

I knew a lot of people: shop owners, homeowners, contractors, and developers. But I didn't see them as friends. I thought of them more as acquaintances. Maybe I needed to rethink that.

"I'm impressed Cooper was able to keep it a secret," Hazel said.

"I thought it was weird he needed me to plant flowers, but I was supposed to wear a dress. But he's overprotective, so I figured he didn't want me on my hands and knees in the dirt."

"Aw. That's sweet," Daria said.

"See, it's sweet. Not overbearing," Cooper leaned close to say.

"It can be a little overbearing. A little bit." I held up my hand to show him some space between my fingers.

"I would love if a man was all overprotective. Any man at this point," Daria said as the girls rallied to offer suggestions, various dating apps, and blind-date options.

I tuned them out because I had my hands full with Cooper and this baby. "Thank you for keeping it a secret. It was a nice surprise."

"Yeah? You're not mad?" Cooper asked.

There was a crumb on his lip that I removed with my thumb. Cooper's gaze heated. "Not at all. It helped that you stuck around."

"I thought you'd like that."

I was outside my comfort zone in these situations. "I've never had a surprise party before, or any party for that matter."

"Not graduation, birthday? Nothing?" Cooper asked, his eyes widening.

I nodded, not meaning to make him feel bad for me.

He grinned. "We'll have to make sure we celebrate everything from here on out."

I gave him a look, and he chuckled. "Don't worry. You'll get used to the attention."

"I don't think I will."

"You're part of the Kingston family now, and you have a ton of friends. Just look around. They're here for you, not me."

There was a lot of people in the room. It was difficult to accept that my perception might be flawed. That I might have continued to think that people were around me because we were business partners or acquaintances, not because they truly liked or cared about me.

Cooper took my hands in his, resting them on his thigh. "I'd spend a lifetime proving that you're deserving of this and so much more."

My breath caught in my throat, and then Elena interrupted us.

"People are starting to leave. You want to stand by the door as they're leaving so you can thank them for coming."

"Of course," I said, moving to join her. As I thanked each person, I felt overwhelmed but not in a bad way. I let the love sink in. Maybe I'd had a bigger impact on this community than I thought. Maybe, just maybe, I wasn't the poor girl from the trailer park anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cooper

We ate dinner together most nights, unless I was working on Dalton's house. It had become routine to play basketball with Duncan after my weekly pickup games with my brothers, and I joined them afterward for ice cream. I'd carved out time in my schedule to pick up Duncan and take him to the youth basketball league on Wednesdays.

It was a good time for me to bond with him.

As Ivy neared her third trimester, she was more likely than not to fall asleep on the couch. I always carried her to our bed, enjoying seeing her sleep on my pillow.

She hadn't officially moved into my room. I noticed her clothes and toiletries were in the guest room and bath. But something seemed to have shifted after the baby shower. She was more relaxed and open to the idea of us. Less suspicious of my intentions.

It was time to officially ask her to move in with me. It wasn't enough because I wanted so much more. But it was a good first step. I didn't want to scare her.

I set up a small, round table near the fire pit on the beach. The ocean was visible, but the table was secluded behind palm trees.

It was the perfect spot to ask her to move in with me. I hung lights on the branches of

the trees, lit the tiki torches, and ordered food from a local seafood restaurant. I wanted it to be special and didn't think I could cook a nice meal.

As I decorated the space, it felt like I was asking her to marry me. I suspected this was similar in her mind. Finally, I plucked petals off the red roses I'd bought and scattered them on the table and in the sand. Hopefully, it was romantic enough.

On some level, I thought that I could win her with a grand gesture of sorts, but Ivy was more practical than that. She had to feel like she could trust me not to leave her.

I hoped I'd met that expectation or at least quelled some of those fears. When she was due to come home, I went inside the house, checking on the food that was warming in the oven, and waited for her.

When she came in at seven, she dropped her bag and immediately kicked off her heels.

"I can't believe you're still wearing those."

Her belly had popped, and there was no mistaking that she was pregnant. The idea that the baby was mine never failed to fill me with awe.

"People respect me more if I wear a professional outfit."

"They can respect you just as well in flats." I worried that she'd fall or lose her balance in those things.

I swept her off her feet and carried her to the couch, where I set her down so that her feet rested in my lap. I massaged the soles, and her head fell back.

"That feels amazing."

"Are you hungry? I thought we could eat outside."

"I don't care where we eat as long as I can sleep soon. I'm exhausted. I think the third trimester has hit me."

"You don't have to worry about anything. I can take care of cleaning the house and getting everything ready."

She lifted her head, meeting my gaze. "You already do everything."

"I want to take care of you. That's one of the reasons I asked you to move in with me. Foot massage, food, and then I'll get you to bed."

Her face softened. "Yes."

Once I finished with her feet, she went to the bathroom, and I washed my hands in the sink. Then I carried glasses with apple cider to the table on the beach.

When I returned, she stood on the patio, having changed into a comfortable-looking shirt and lounge pants. "I thought we were eating outside."

"We are. I set a table up on the beach."

Her eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Come on." I held out my hand to her, and she took it without any hesitation. She was more comfortable with displays of affection now. When we approached the table, Ivy gasped. "I can't believe you did all of this."

"Do you like it?"

Her gaze was following the circle of lights. "It's magnificent."

I grinned. "I'm glad you like it."

I held her chair for her, and when she sat, I said, "I'll just grab our plates from inside."

She rose as if to help me, but I held my hand out to her. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

She smiled sweetly. "Okay."

Her gaze turned to the gentle waves lapping on the shore, and I hurried to get the food. I took two plates to the table where she was still waiting.

"What's the occasion?" she asked when I sat down.

"I thought you deserved a nice dinner."

Ivy picked up her fork. "Yeah, but this is more than dinner. You hung lights everywhere."

"I did it because I hoped you would enjoy it. Now eat. I have more planned for you tonight."

She shook her head. "I can't imagine what else you have planned unless it's a nice bubble bath."

"That's a good idea." One I hadn't thought of, but I should have.

She hadn't been utilizing it as much lately.

She'd advertised for more clients, and her appointments had slowly picked up.

I knew she wanted to earn more money before she needed to take some leave.

But she was only going to be more tired.

Logistically, it would be difficult for her to keep up as her pregnancy progressed.

I wished she had an assistant or someone who could help. A second realtor would be ideal. But it wasn't my place to tell her what to do with her business.

We dug into our seafood linguine dish. I was happy I'd left this part of the evening to the professionals because it was divine. Occasionally, she moaned, and I was pleased she was enjoying it so much.

When we were finished, I brought out a slice of chocolate cake.

"I'm not sure I have any room for dessert," she mumbled at the same time she lifted her fork and cut a bite.

"Let me know if you like it. We can always save it for later." I would have said after a round of sex, but she had a hard time staying awake these days.

Her mouth closed around her fork. I wondered how I should ask her to officially move in with me.

"Mmm. This is decadent."

"I'm glad you like it." I sighed, nervous about asking her now. I'd built this up so much in my head. "I wanted to ask you something."

She put down her fork and looked expectedly at me. "What is it?"

"You've been spending a lot of nights in my room, but I noticed you keep your clothes and toiletries in the guest room."

She frowned, and I wondered if she was worried I'd ask her to leave. "I didn't want to intrude on your space any more than necessary."

"I want you to move in with me officially. I don't want you in the guest room." It felt like a half-in, half-out situation. I wanted her all in. It was a simple request for anyone else, but for Ivy, I wasn't sure how she'd react.

She tipped her head. "Are you sure? What if you change your mind?"

I laughed as I took her hand. "Ivy, I'm not going to change my mind. I like having you in my space. And it has nothing to do with the baby."

Her eyes were a little shiny. "I'd like that."

The breath I'd been holding came out in a whoosh. I held my hand out to her, so that she stood next to the table.

I cupped her cheeks and kissed her softly. "How about a dance?"

She nodded, and I pulled her into my arms. We swayed to the sound of the waves lapping at the shore. After a minute, I asked, "Did you want to take a bath now?"

"I'd love that." We walked, holding hands, to the house where I started the bubble bath for her and helped her get in. "I'm going to run and clean off the table. Then I'll join you."

She smiled softly. "Thank you, Cooper. For everything."

I felt content, secure that for now, Ivy was happy living with me and planning our future together.

At least in the short term. It was a big step for her, and I hoped things would continue to progress.

I wasn't so secure that I thought she wouldn't have doubts.

But I was confident we'd work through them together.

I extinguished the torches, and took everything inside, cleaning the kitchen before I headed to the bathroom, intending to get in with her and possibly give her an orgasm or two. But her head rested on the rim, and her eyes were closed. Her breath was even. She was asleep.

I knelt next to the tub. "Ivy, we have to get you to bed."

It took a few seconds to rouse her and get her out of the tub and toweled off.

I'd hoped for a different ending to the evening.

I wanted that connection with her, but taking care of her satisfied something deep inside of me, and I suspected it did the same for her.

She wasn't used to this kind of treatment, and I wanted her to feel like it was expected when she was with me. I'd always put her first.

When she was dried off, she sat on the bed, and I carefully brushed her hair. "This is heavenly."

I made quick work of the tangles so that she could lie down.

"I'm sorry I can't stay awake."

"You're helping our baby grow. You need your sleep." I kissed her, and her eyes drifted closed. Then I cleaned up the bathroom.

It would only be a short few months, and then the baby would be here. At that point, we'd both be exhausted. I'd read enough blogs and books to know that babies slept during the day and kept their parents awake at night.

I just hoped we'd built a strong enough rapport that we could survive that adjustment.

I slipped into bed and wrapped my arm around her, careful to avoid her belly. I didn't want her to be uncomfortable. Especially when she was starting to get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom.

She'd grow more uncomfortable, but I wanted to make this as easy for her as possible. I wanted to take care of her. I wanted to prove to her that not all men were alike. That I was nothing like her father.

I eventually rolled to my back, my mind too busy for me to fall asleep. I'd been obsessing about her father lately. What was he like? Should I find him for her? Would it help for her to talk to him? To get some closure? Or would it make everything worse?

I could at least hire a private investigator to locate him, and then I could decide what to do. I wouldn't tell her about it until I had more information. I wanted to protect her from the bad things in life, but at the same time, I wondered if some closure would be good for her.

Thinking your father didn't want you and had abandoned you wasn't healthy.

It would chip away at her if she let it.

And I wanted her to heal. I wanted her to see that there was a better life for her, one without the expectation that everyone would eventually disappoint her.

She could rely on her friends, my family, the adopted grandmothers at the senior center, and me.

I wanted to do this for her. There was some doubt in my mind that this was the right step. But I could always change course. If I found information that would hurt her, I didn't have to pass it along. I could keep it from her.

Satisfied I had the semblance of a plan, I finally drifted off.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ivy

Ever since Cooper asked me to move in with him, he seemed preoccupied with something. He was constantly on his computer and taking calls. He'd said it was something related to a big job, but I'd never seen him so involved with work when he was at home.

I wondered if this was the schism I'd been waiting for. He'd pull away slowly, and eventually there wouldn't be a relationship to salvage.

When he'd asked me to move in with him, it had seemed like a big decision, but it was an easy one to make because we were already spending so much time together. But now I was worried that the changed status in our relationship had pushed him away.

It didn't help that I'd been more tired than usual.

I'd had to carve out time in the afternoon to take a nap on my couch in my office.

It was a necessity if I was going to make it through the rest of the day.

I was usually too tired to have sex at the end of the night.

Had Cooper decided that the baby was too real for him?

I decided to focus on my work so I wouldn't make any rash decisions about our relationship.

Cooper had mentioned something about me working with another realtor, and I hadn't thought much of it at the time.

But now I was considering it. It would allow me to manage or oversee the operations without having to do the legwork myself. It was an interesting idea.

What if I expanded my business in such a way that I could work and take care of the baby? My role would be more office related. And when I was on my feet again, I could resume my regular duties, or I could hire someone to help.

It was an interesting idea, and I'd drafted an advertisement looking for the perfect person, but I'd yet to hit Send on the email to the local paper.

What if I looked outside the island for someone new to the area? That would increase my potential pull of people. That idea motivated me to advertise in Ft. Myers and other communities in Southwest Florida.

Hopeful that this could be the answer to my concerns about juggling work with a baby, I moved onto searching for a nanny. I'd begun advertising on various caregiver apps and sites that claimed to find the perfect fit.

I needed someone who could be flexible, maybe a student who worked days and needed afternoon and evening hours. I shifted through the applicants I'd received on the apps so far and found one who was studying to be a child psychologist. She seemed almost too good to be true.

She'd already served as a nanny and needed afternoon, evening, and weekend hours. I asked if we could meet at a local coffee shop. I sent Cooper a text in case he wanted

to join, but he'd said he was too busy.

That was understandable, but I'd come to expect him to drop everything if it pertained to my pregnancy or the baby. Didn't he care who I left our child with? Or did he think it was my responsibility?

The old Ivy would have been fine with it, but the new Ivy wanted to express her concerns with him and see what he thought. I'd come to rely on his opinion. Probably too much. It was a good reminder that at the end of the day, I could only rely on myself.

I left my office, wishing I had time for a nap instead of meeting with the potential nanny.

But she was going to get scooped up sooner than later.

I needed to come prepared to offer her top dollar.

I'd already decided that a traditional daycare situation would not be helpful since the hours were nine to six, and I needed more flexibility.

The only problem was that there weren't a ton of nannies running around the island. I opened the door to Sanibel Bean, ordering a decaf iced chai before scanning the dining room for the woman I was supposed to meet, Blakely.

A woman with long, wavy, dirty-blond hair waved from her spot by the window.

I moved toward her, and she stood to shake my hand. "It's so nice to meet you."

"You as well."

I sat across from her, feeling a bit like a whale compared to her. She was gorgeous, thin, and tan. "I'd love to have this settled before the baby arrives."

She smiled. "I'm sure it will be a weight off your mind."

"Please tell me a little about yourself. Why do you enjoy nannyng?"

"I love working with kids, and I want to be a child psychologist. I've done several nannyng jobs before, and you're welcome to contact any of them."

"I actually reached out before I scheduled the meeting.

They had nothing but glowing things to say.

" They'd mentioned how she was good with the children, positive, and upbeat.

"Are you sure you're okay with somewhat random hours?

I'm not sure what it will be like to work with a baby so I don't have everything figured out yet.

But I can offer you a certain number of hours a week, and I'm happy to work around your school schedule as well. "

"The hours blend nicely with my school schedule."

"For now, you'd be watching the baby at the house I share with the father, Cooper Kingston. At some point, I'd want you to be able to drive the baby to the playground or to mommy-and-me classes around the island. Do you have a car?"

"I do."

"Great." I felt comfortable with her. "I'd love to offer you the job." I had no doubt that Cooper would love her too. She had the requisite background, training, and recommendations.

She outlined her salary requirements, which were on the higher end, but she was a graduate student. She easily commanded it. "I'm fine with that."

She grinned. "I can't wait to meet your little one and get started."

"I was thinking you could stop by and meet the father, Cooper, at some point and spend some time with the baby before I officially go back to work."

"Sounds good to me. Just let me know when. My current nannyng job will be winding down soon."

The children would be going to school and wouldn't need her anymore. And the timing worked perfectly with my due date. We talked a bit more about expectations and details, and then we said goodbye. Pleased, I sent a message to Cooper that I'd found our nanny.

I wondered if he'd be upset that I'd made the decision without him. When he didn't respond right away, I worried some more.

I needed to get my mind off the situation, so when Elena texted and asked everyone if they were up for dinner out, I immediately accepted. I appreciated that they didn't do drinks when I was invited.

I didn't have any desire to go out to a bar when I couldn't drink and I was exhausted. Instead, we met at a local restaurant. It was popular with tourists, so we had a bit of a wait when we arrived.

"How are things with Cooper?" Elena asked while we sat on the benches by the front door.

"We're officially moved in together."

She frowned. "I thought you already did."

"It was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. I was in the guest room, but he asked if I'd stay in his room. It was more of a formality." He probably realized I needed clear lines drawn.

Elena's eyes widened. "He seems to know how to handle you."

I wasn't sure I liked that characterization. "Yeah, he seems to know me well."

Elena's forehead creased. "And you aren't worried about him leaving or changing his mind?"

"That's a hard one to let go of. He's been very involved with shopping and the baby shower. So patient and thoughtful."

"I sense a but coming."

"He used to be the one who came home early from work and never did paperwork or read emails. Now he's taking calls, he's on his computer a lot, and he's cryptic about what he's doing."

"Hudson usually leaves the work at the office. If they have issues, they meet during work hours. They aren't exchanging emails or having discussions at home."

"You're saying I'm right to be worried?"

"Maybe he's planning a surprise for you, and you won't want to ruin it."

"But he already surprised me with the baby shower. He can't be having another one."
That would be too much.

Elena chewed on her lip. "Maybe he's planning something for the nursery or for you when the baby comes. Like the push present."

My brow furrowed. "The what now?"

"The push present. It's customary to get the mother a gift after the delivery."

I waved a hand. "That's not necessary."

"Cooper's a nice guy. He's going to treat you right and get you something."

I was doubtful he'd ever heard of a push present, but then again, he'd been doing a lot of research into the pregnancy and what came after.

He'd been a lifesaver when it came to those things since I couldn't seem to stay awake long enough to read any of the books.

"So I don't have anything to worry about? "

She chewed her lip. "I wonder if he has a good reason for what he's doing."

"I'll have to wait and see." And try not to freak out. "Luckily, I found a great nanny."
I relayed everything I knew about Blakely.

"She sounds perfect for you."

"Cooper wasn't available for the meeting. I could have waited, but I didn't want to let the nanny go to someone else."

"I'm sure he'll be fine with whoever you chose. You have to be comfortable with her."

"Yeah."

The hostess said our table was ready. Tonight, Daria, Elena, Hazel, Nora, Kinsley, and even Penny were here. Penny had recently moved to Colorado for a job and fell in love with the town and the local doctor.

We ordered, and when the waitress took our menus, Penny said, "So much has changed since I left. Ivy's pregnant?—"

"I'm engaged to Hudson, and Hazel's officially engaged to Brady now," Elena said with a smile.

"My mom keeps me apprised of everything going on. I think she secretly hopes I'll move home."

"Are you planning to move back?" Nora asked.

"I love Colorado, the cool weather, the snow. And it's Lincoln's hometown. He moved there to be closer to his family."

"I think that's so brave of you to go there when you didn't know anyone," Daria said.

"It was a little scary. In the first few weeks, I got sick and went to see Lincoln at his practice before a huge snowstorm was due to blow in. He was worried about me living alone, so he made a home visit, found me passed out on the floor, and took care of me."

Daria sighed. "I can't believe you got snowed in with a sexy doctor."

Hazel nodded. "It's like a romance book. You were forced to spend the night with him, and by the time the snow melted, you'd fallen in love with each other."

"Well, snow doesn't melt that fast in Colorado, but we knew it was the beginning of something amazing. And we were right." Penny smiled widely.

I felt a little uncomfortable with her story. It was too good to be true and so quick. How did she fall in love with a man she barely knew? How did she trust that it would last? "Weren't you a little worried that it was fast?"

Penny's gaze settled on me. "Of course I was. But then he took me to meet his family, and he vowed to show me that he was all in with me. He was very convincing."

Kinsley covered her heart with her hand. "That's so romantic."

"I wouldn't mind being stuck in a storm with a hot guy. Too bad those stories are made for movies and books and not real life," Daria said, sipping her wine.

"But it happened for Penny. Who's to say it can't happen for you?" Elena asked her.

"Nothing interesting ever happens to me. I lead the most boring life," Daria said flippantly.

"That can't be true. How many people can say they own a seashell shop?" Nora asked.

"That my grandmother opened, and I continue to run. I don't have any great overcoming story," Daria said.

"I don't think you need to overcome anything to feel good about your life," Elena said.

Did I have an overcoming story? I liked to think I'd done better than my mother.

That I was stronger and more financially secure.

But did that mean I'd made it? Or that I'd succeeded at something?

I wasn't sure I wanted to be characterized that way.

I wanted to be Ivy, the amazing realtor and hopefully loving mother.

"I feel like I'm going to grow old, pick up crocheting, and join the local knitting club," Daria said dryly.

Elena nodded. "There's nothing wrong with learning those things if you want to."

"I might spend too much time with my grandmother. I'm becoming just like her. Cautious and careful. I don't take any risks," Daria said.

"What risks do you want to take?" I asked her, genuinely curious about her innercrisis. I couldn't relate to her feeling boring. My life had been anything but lately.

She frowned. "I feel like I should get out of my comfort zone and do something new."

"An adventure company just opened." Nora pulled up the website. "They offer zip-lining, biking, and kayak tours. You could look into that."

Daria chewed her lip. "Yeah, maybe."

I had a feeling it would be a while before she took that step.

She was stuck in a rut, just like I was.

I'd recently moved away from my old beliefs and ways of being.

I had to trust that whatever Cooper was up to, he wasn't going to leave me and the baby.

That he'd always put us first when it counted.

It was good to spend the evening with my friends.

We talked about their lives and concerns.

It was more relatable than usual. Probably because I was more open to listening to them.

To relating their struggles to mine. We were similar, and we could help each other through these things.

I just had to be willing to lean on them.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cooper

I hated keeping anything from Ivy, but I didn't want her to know that I was looking for her father. She wouldn't be happy about that. But I had to know why he'd abandoned his daughter before she was born, and I wanted to impress upon him the damage he'd left in his wake.

Tonight, Ivy was out with her girlfriends, so I went over to Hudson's for dinner.

When I got there, he asked, "Everything cool with you and Ivy?"

I couldn't blame him for thinking I was there because something was wrong. That was the usual reason for one of my visits. "The baby's healthy, and we're getting the nursery done. She has everything on her to-do list checked off."

Hudson raised a brow. "Why do I get the impression that all the items on your list aren't taken care of?"

I sighed. "I did something, and I'm not sure Ivy's going to be happy with me when she finds out what it is."

Hudson carefully turned over the chicken slathered in barbecue sauce. "Shouldn't you talk to her about it then?"

"It's complicated." I blew out a breath. "It's her father."

Hudson paused and looked at me. "Is he back?"

I shook my head. "I hired a private investigator to find him."

He raised a brow. "You did that without talking to Ivy?"

My stomach rolled at the concern flashing in his eyes. "Yeah."

"What if she doesn't want to find him?" Hudson asked.

I swallowed hard. "The investigator hasn't found anything yet. But if he does, should I tell her? Or do I confront him by myself?"

Hudson was quiet for a few seconds, probably sorting out the best way to address it with me. "You have to tell her. You can't keep it from her, at least not for long. When she finds out you've been hiding things from her, it won't go well."

I was pleased that my brother knew her so well and didn't judge her. He accepted her as she was and wanted me to be careful with her. "I want to protect her."

Hudson leveled me with a pointed look. "Ivy's used to doing everything on her own, and she's very private. She'll view this as going behind her back. It will feel like a betrayal to her."

I ran a hand through my hair, conflicted. "She should have closure regarding her father. Why should she go through life thinking that him leaving was her fault? Why shouldn't she know if there was another reason?"

Hudson shook his head. "He left before she was born. That says more about him than her."

"I'm not sure she sees it that way."

"Be there for her when she needs you to listen. But I'm telling you, she's going to be upset with you, no matter how altruistic your feelings are." Hudson removed the chicken from the grill, along with the peppers.

We sat down to eat, the night heavy with humidity.

"How are things otherwise?"

I wrapped my chicken and peppers into a soft tortilla with hot sauce. "I've read about possible worst-case scenarios that can occur late in pregnancy. I don't share those with her though."

Hudson nodded. "You don't want her to worry."

"I want to protect her from everything." It was this all-consuming feeling that grew larger each day we were together.

"You're with an independent woman who won't appreciate you hiding things from her. You should be upfront with her."

"I need to find him first."

"Did you ask Ivy's mom about him?" Hudson asked.

"I'm not sure she'd tell me the truth anyway." I took a large bite of the fajita.

"I know you want to protect Ivy. I just hope that she sees it that way," Hudson said with a meaningful look.

I had good intentions, and I wanted to look out for her. Ivy might not want me to do those things, but that was who I was. I took care of the people I loved.

"You okay?" Hudson said as he lifted his drink and sipped.

I blinked, a little taken aback by the realization. But maybe I should have known. "I think I'm in love with Ivy."

"Yeah, I figured that. You moved her in, and now you're tracking down her dad. All signs of serious commitment."

"You don't think that was a bad idea with how cagey Ivy can be about relationships?" My stomach tipped when I thought of her reaction to my feelings.

"You can't help who you fall in love with or when. Elena grew up on the island, and I barely remember her. But when we met again as adults, I couldn't get her out of my head."

"Would we be in this same place if she hadn't gotten pregnant?" I asked, wondering if this was the inevitable outcome for us

"It sped everything up; that's for sure. It forced Ivy to deal with things between you. Have you told her how you feel?"

"I asked her to move into my bedroom. The moving-in together was an arrangement to make co-parenting easier on us.

But sharing a bedroom felt like we were truly living together as a couple.

It was a huge step for her. I can't just spring it on her that I love her.

What if she doesn't feel the same way? Or she's not ready to confront her feelings for me?

"The questions were swirling around in my head.

"I'd say there's no rush. She's living with you and having your baby. But she might not appreciate your meddling in her family's business. What if she wants to keep her father firmly in the past?"

I rolled my neck to ease the tension there. "Ugh. Why are relationships so hard?"

Hudson chuckled. "That's what makes them so worth it. In the end, you get everything you want, but it's quite the journey to get there."

"You're saying I'm in the middle of the journey, and I can't give up?" I asked, needing to understand where he was coming from.

"Something like that."

"It's worth it though, right?" I'd seen him and Elena together. They supported each other and their families. It was obvious they were in love with each other.

"I can't imagine life without her at this point."

I had to figure this thing out with her dad because I couldn't lose her.

The next morning, I woke to my phone buzzing with an incoming call.

I checked on Ivy who was curled away from me on the bed.

She'd gotten in late last night and immediately fallen asleep.

I didn't want to wake her, so I slipped out of bed and took the phone into the living room.

I ran a hand through my hair before I answered. "Hello?"

"Jack Knight here. The investigator you hired to find Clint Baker."

My stomach dropped. "Did you find him?"

"I did."

This was what I was looking for, but I wasn't sure I was ready for the answer. "Where is he?"

"He's living in south Florida and working as a mechanic."

That meant he hadn't lived far away when Ivy was growing up. "Has he always lived there?"

"Since he left Sanibel, yes."

He was so close. He could have been a father who saw Ivy several times a year, if not more often. Why had he ghosted Ivy and her mother?

"He had a son about a year after Ivy Buckley and settled down with the mother. They had one more child a few years later. By all accounts, he's involved with his family and supports them."

The air whooshed out of my lungs. He had another family but had abandoned Ivy. This was worse than I thought. I wanted to keep this information to myself, but what if she found out I had him investigated?

"Is there anything else you needed to know?" Jack asked.

I sighed. "That was it. I appreciate you getting the information so quickly."

"No problem. Let me know if you need anything else."

I clicked off the call and opened the slider to sit on the patio.

It was a beautiful morning with the pool shimmering in the morning light and the sound of waves crashing on the shore, but I hurt for Ivy.

Her father abandoned her, then moved on to have another family. A good one from the sounds of it.

Why couldn't he check in with Ivy? Why couldn't he send her mother child support?

I needed to know why for Ivy's sake. I had a feeling there was more to this story. Decision made, I snuck into the bedroom and grabbed fresh clothes, showering in the spare bedroom before heading out.

Ivy needed her sleep, and I needed answers. I'd talk to her about it when I got back. I just hoped she'd be willing to listen. I'd put this into motion, and I couldn't back down now. I was so close to knowing the answers.

I drove to the address that Jack had sent me in his emailed report. I saw the one-story home that appeared to be well taken care of, and then I headed toward the garage that he worked at. I wondered if he was already at work this morning.

I got out of my truck and approached the man who was standing in front of the garage.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Clint Baker. Does he work here?"

The man looked me over. "That's me."

"You're Clint?" I asked him, taking in the man who was in his early fifties in overalls that had seen better days. His fingers were permanently stained with grease and his skin smattered with wrinkles.

"That's right. How can I help you?"

"I'm dating your daughter." I wasn't sure how else to begin this conversation.

His brow furrowed. "I don't have a daughter."

Anger shot through me. "She's the one you left behind on Sanibel Island."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm telling you that I don't have a daughter."

I sighed, assessing whether he was telling the truth. "One you know about anyway."

He leaned forward. "Are you saying I have a daughter that I never knew about?"

His confusion was too genuine to be contrived. "Her name is Ivy Buckley. Her mother told her you took off before she was born."

"What's her mother's name? I was involved with someone on the island, but it wasn't serious."

"Tessa Buckley."

"Yeah, that's her. Are you saying she was pregnant when I left? If so, why didn't she ever say anything? I would have supported her. I'd would have wanted to see my daughter."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I don't know. But they struggled and sure could have used your help."

He was quiet for a few seconds as if he was contemplating his new reality. "Can I meet her?"

I winced. "Ivy doesn't even know I'm here."

"Is she going to be happy about you meddling?"

"No."

"I'll let you sort that out. But when things settle down, I'd love to meet her." His eyes went unfocused as he stared off into the distance. "I can't believe I have a daughter."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that she was pregnant too. That seemed like something that she should reveal. "She thinks you abandoned her. That you left because you didn't want her."

Shock crossed his expression. "I never would have left if I'd known."

I believed him because he supported his current family. He was steady, holding the same job for decades. I wondered if Tessa preferred the story that she'd been abandoned by this man.

"I was with Tess. As far as I remember, we were exclusive. But who knows? That was a long time ago."

"I don't know what Ivy's going to want to do with this information. If she'll want to reach out or not."

"I'll leave it to her then. But tell her I'd love to meet her, and that she has two younger brothers."

Clint pulled out his phone to show me pictures of his sons. They looked like they were taken at a holiday gathering.

All I knew was that Ivy deserved a father who was present in her life. Her mother should have told her the truth. I couldn't imagine hiding this information from my daughter, letting her believe that her father didn't want her.

"I have to get back to work, but let me give you my number. Let me know how she is."

"I'll do that."

We exchanged information, and then I got into my truck and drove to a nearby coffee shop. I needed caffeine after that encounter. I couldn't believe her father was right here all this time. How was I going to tell Ivy that her mother had lied to her?

I couldn't imagine why Tessa had lied about Ivy's father, unless she was so hurt by the breakup, she didn't think he needed to know he had a daughter.

But to push that feeling of rejection onto Ivy was unacceptable.

I wanted to confront her mother, but it was something that Ivy could do when she was

ready.

I had to tell Ivy about what I'd learned, but I didn't want to upset her. Would this be bad for her pregnancy? Or would it bring closure and maybe relief? Her father hadn't known she existed.

Clint was genuinely surprised, and his track record spoke for itself. He was involved with his sons and likely would have been with Ivy too. The positive was that she was gaining a father. That could only be a good thing, right? I hoped she saw it that way.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ivy

When I woke up, Cooper was gone. I had a few showings this morning for a young couple looking for their first home on the island. I tried to keep my mind on the work and not on why Cooper had left without at least leaving a note.

I vowed not to panic or assume that he was pulling away, but it was hard not to when all the facts pointed to my worst fears.

I showed the couple three homes: a condo, a townhouse, and an older home that needed lots of work.

They were disappointed with how far their money stretched on this tourist hotspot.

I was used to these appointments by now.

They'd have to increase their budget, save more money, or wait to buy at another time.

It was possible they'd chose one of the options I'd already shown them too.

The real-estate prices and corresponding interest rates continued to rise from year to year. It complicated my job for newer homeowners. I wanted to find everyone their ideal home, but that wasn't always possible.

It was getting harder to show houses in heels too. I'd need to listen to Cooper and switch to flats soon. Everything ached: my hips, my stomach, and my feet. I headed home with the intention to take my afternoon nap.

Cooper's truck still wasn't parked outside, and I tried not to worry about what he was up to on a Saturday. But if he was at Dalton's or Shep's, wouldn't he have texted by now?

I was too exhausted to deal with it. I'd worry about it when I woke up. I fell onto the bedspread, not even bothering to pull back the comforter, and passed out. I woke up three hours later, feeling groggy.

The room was dark, and I didn't hear any noises in the house. I grabbed my phone, not seeing any messages from Cooper. I couldn't wait any longer. Panic settled into a pit in my stomach.

Ivy: Are you okay?

Cooper: Yeah, just stopped by Dalton to see him. Be back before dinner.

That was something at least. But if he was just going to see his brother, why not say something ahead of time?

I shouldn't panic when he did something different from his previous pattern, but I couldn't help it.

I'd been programmed to look for signs that someone didn't want to be around me so that I could make necessary adjustments to avoid getting hurt.

My mom's boyfriends came and went, whether we liked them or not. My father couldn't even bother to stick around to meet me. Why would Cooper be any different?

I'd promised to give him the benefit of the doubt, and I wasn't doing that.

I was jumping to conclusions. I decided to pamper myself and take a bath in the master bath.

I attempted to read a book, but the words swam on the page.

Unable to concentrate, I got out, dried off, and changed into comfortable clothes that were loose fitting.

When I went to the kitchen, I finally heard the rumble of Cooper's truck in the driveway. I was hungry because I hadn't bothered to eat before I took my nap, so I pulled out some crackers and cheese.

But Cooper didn't look happy when he came inside. He didn't greet me with a kiss or an apology for being so cryptic about his plans.

"Is Dalton okay?" I asked, trying to keep my tone even.

"Yeah, his baby is due any minute now, and Oakley's going back and forth on whether he should be in the delivery room. He wants to be there, but it's her decision."

I rested a hand on my belly, knowing I'd want Cooper next to me. I couldn't imagine doing this on my own. "I hope they can figure something out before she goes into labor."

Cooper leaned a hip against the counter. "Yeah. Me too."

I arranged the crackers and cheese on a plate, waiting for him to say what was on his mind."

Cooper sighed. "I did something. I don't think you're going to be happy about it."

"What did you do?" I asked, unable to imagine he could do anything to upset me, other than disappear from my life.

"I hired a private investigator to find your father."

I lowered the cracker I was holding to the plate, suddenly not hungry. "Why did you do that?"

"I thought you deserved to know what happened to him. You've believed your entire life that he left you. That he didn't want anything to do with you."

I winced because that was my takeaway. "That doesn't mean I want to talk to him or hear what he has to say."

It was his turn to flinch. "I know I should have talked to you first, but I thought you'd say no."

I shook my head. "That was my decision to make. You shouldn't have gone behind my back."

"Hudson said you'd react like this."

Anger flashed through me, hot and heavy. "My father is my business. I get to make decisions regarding him, and I never had any intention of looking for him."

"I wanted to protect you." His voice tore through me.

I placed my hands on my hips. "Explain how searching for my father protects me?"

"I wanted to give you closure. If he could tell you that he never meant to leave you?—"

"Or he confirms everything I've thought about him all my life. He never wanted me, and I wasn't worth sticking around for." The pain sliced through me as if he'd struck me with a knife.

Cooper's jaw tightened. "Do you want to know what he said?"

"You talked to him?" He found my father. The man who'd been suspiciously absent my entire life. If it was so easy to find him, why hadn't he been here all along?

He nodded. "I spoke to him this morning."

"That's why you left so early. But you're already back. That means he's not far from here."

Cooper's expression was serious. "That's true."

Tears sparked under my lids. I hated that my father made me this emotional.

I wanted to blame it on the hormones, but this was a lot for anyone to handle.

"I don't think I want to hear what he said."

"I can't bear it." I moved past Cooper, grabbing my key and purse from the table by the door. I slid my feet into flip-flops.

"Wait," Cooper said, moving after me. "There's more."

I held up my hand, not wanting to hear anything else. "I can't hear it right now."

"Will you let me know where you are? And that you're safe?" Cooper's voice was anguished.

"I'll text you."

"Thank you."

I opened the door.

"And Ivy, please know that I never meant to hurt you." His voice was filled with grief.

"You hurt me when you didn't talk to me about this, when you kept it a secret from me." The pain in my chest throbbed in time with the beat of my heart.

"I'm so sorry," Cooper said softly.

"I am too." Because for once in my life, I'd let myself hope for more. For a relationship with a man. I trusted him, and he let me down. He went behind my back. The betrayal cut deep.

There was something about him knowing the truth about my father that welled up in my chest, making it difficult to breathe. He'd heard firsthand what my father thought about me. It was bad enough that I knew the truth, but for Cooper to hear it from the source?

I got into my SUV, not sure where I was going to go.

My condo hadn't sold yet, so I could go there.

It was the best solution because I didn't want to talk to anyone about this.

And as I drove, I couldn't quiet the nagging voice in my head that said I hadn't tried to sell the condo.

I'd wanted a safety net because I knew something like this would happen.

No matter how much I wanted to believe in Cooper, there was always a part of me that prepared for the inevitable breakup. I always took care of myself, and I couldn't even be upset about it because I needed the condo right now.

I parked in my designated spot and took the stairs to the third floor. It was slow going, but I didn't have any plans to leave today.

I'd burrow into my bed and not come out until I felt better.

I could order groceries to be delivered so I didn't need to walk the stairs again.

I could order nursery furniture, but I didn't know how to assemble it.

I wasn't sure how I was going to navigate the stairs with a baby and a stroller in tow.

This condo wasn't the ideal location for a single mom and a baby. But I didn't have to solve that problem tonight. I just needed to forget about everything that Cooper said: the fact that he went behind my back, that he talked to my dad, and that he knew my deepest shame.

Sleep was the only option. I kicked off my flip-flops and crawled into bed. It was dark and cool, and no one could bother me here. The only problem was that for the first time in my pregnancy, I couldn't fall asleep.

My mind kept replaying my conversation with Cooper. The betrayal. The knowledge that he'd done something without telling me. Something that had the power to destroy

me.

I tossed and turned, unable to even cry myself to sleep. I finally ordered groceries to be delivered, and when the knock on the door came, I was happy to have something to eat.

I opened the door to sign when I saw Elena holding the plastic bags. "Delivery."

"What are you doing here?" I grumbled.

"It looks like you need help." She carried the bags into the condo and placed them on the counter. She started to unpack the groceries. As she pulled out one box of cut-up watermelon after another, she said, "Are you craving watermelon?"

"Something like that." I had a love-hate relationship with it because I craved the sugary sweetness, but it made me pee even more.

I opened the first box and popped one cube into my mouth.

Elena raised a brow. "What are you doing here?"

I scowled at her. "This is my condo."

She gave me a knowing look. "You were supposed to sell it when you moved in with Cooper."

I shrugged. "I couldn't sell it."

She gave me a look. "How hard did you try?"

"This complex is older and not near the beach," I said, plucking another cube of

watermelon out of its package and throwing it into my mouth. "It wasn't a good investment."

"Uh-huh. So you didn't hang onto this place so that you have a place to go when Cooper met your expectations?"

"What are you even talking about?" I asked in a tone that suggested she was crazy.

"You knew he'd disappoint you, and you wanted an escape route."

"I'm pregnant and exhausted all the time. It was too much work to get this place ready to sell."

"You do that for a living, and Cooper would have helped you if you'd asked."

"He did enough." My sentence had a double meaning. He did a lot for me, but he went behind my back. It felt childish, but I couldn't help it. I wasn't feeling particularly generous right now. "How did you know to come here?"

"Cooper's at my house talking to Hudson. Before I left to give them privacy, Hudson asked that I check on you. This was the first place I thought to look."

I stilled. "You know what he did?"

"He told me so that I knew what was going on. Apparently, Hudson already knew about what he was doing."

"Why didn't he try to stop him?" I asked, bitterness creeping into my tone. The watermelon was half gone, and I knew I was going to regret it when I was up half the night in the bathroom.

"It sounded like Cooper had already hired an investigator by the time he talked to Hudson, and Hudson told him it was a bad move not to talk to you first."

"Oh, goodie. Someone else agrees with me," I said, my mouth full of watermelon.

Elena covered my hand with hers. "You know we're on your side."

"He talked to my father." My tears pricked with unshed tears. "He knows that my father never wanted me. That the idea of me was so abhorrent, he left and never came back for me." My own father didn't want me.

"So you talked to Cooper about what he found out?" Elena asked carefully.

I opened my mouth and then closed it. "Not exactly."

She frowned. "Then how do you know what your father said?"

"I don't." I moved into the living room, needing to sit down. My entire body ached, and I didn't think it had anything to do with the pregnancy itself. On top of the pain, the baby decided to kick me repeatedly as if he was already expressing his displeasure with me.

Elena sat across from me, her brow raised.

"Do you know what he said?" I finally asked, afraid of the answer.

"He didn't tell me, but how can you assume what was said?"

I pursed my lips. "Why else does a father leave a child? He doesn't want her."

"It might not be that simple. What if your mother told him to stay away?"

I scoffed. "That's ridiculous. She complained that he'd left her, that he didn't want me."

"What if that was her way of deflecting any blame for the situation? She pushed it on you instead, and you were too young to question any of it."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I should have listened to Cooper."

Elena nodded, pleased. "Yes."

I sighed. "I need to talk to him."

"You don't want there to be a miscommunication that takes this baby's father from them too," Elena pointed out unhelpfully.

"You play dirty."

Elena tipped her head to the side. "This isn't just about you anymore. You have the baby to consider. Doesn't he or she deserve to know their father?"

"Of course." I'd never keep them from Cooper.

"Then you need to clear the air with him."

I sighed. "How do I do that? He's at your place."

"Why don't you go home so you're there when he comes home? I'll help you get everything into your car."

"Fine."

She repacked the grocery bags while I ran to the bathroom, and then we headed down the stairs to my SUV. There was no way I could live in this condo pregnant or with a baby in tow.

At my car, she put the bags in the passenger seat. "Oh, and Ivy? You might want to talk to him about your feelings. If you like him or even love him, he deserves to know."

The tears came then, over the struggle I'd felt internally the last few weeks. "I'm afraid to love him."

Elena met me on my side of the car where I was holding the door open. "So you do love him?"

I nodded miserably, angrily swiping away the tears. "I tried not to. I didn't want to be dependent on him."

"Love isn't dependence. It's something so much bigger and more amazing."

Was that true? Had I made it into something it wasn't? "I'm afraid of getting hurt."

"And this thing with your father was your chance to push him away. You were looking for something, and it fit the bill."

"I don't like that he talked to my father without me," I said softly, feeling defeated. I'd messed up in not waiting to hear the whole story.

"But it's so much more than that. This was your chance to tuck and run. To protect yourself. But if you do that, you'll be just like your mother. Never putting yourself out there and truly living."

"You're making so much sense right now."

"That's because I've been through this already. Talk to Cooper. Tell him how you feel."

"I will." If he wanted to hear it. We hadn't discussed the possibility that he was done with me. That whatever he heard from my father, combined with my childish response, was too much.

What if he decided he didn't want me?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Cooper

I paced the foyer, waiting for the telltale sound of Ivy's SUV pulling into the driveway. Elena had texted me, telling me to go home and hear what Ivy had to say.

I had a few things to say to Ivy too after talking to Hudson. I never told her how I felt. It was long overdue.

When the headlights shined in the foyer, I realized I'd left the lights off. I turned on the porch lights and opened the door.

When I saw that she had plastic bags of groceries, I rushed to grab them from her. Everything inside me was strung tight like a rubber band. I was scared I'd snap at any second.

I didn't want Ivy to leave. I couldn't imagine her living somewhere else.

Ivy's face was red and puffy.

"You've been crying."

Her shoulders slumped. "I messed up."

"It's nothing we can't fix. Come on." I ushered her inside, dropping the food on the counter to deal with later. I helped her sit on the couch.

She looked up at me. "I'm so sorry."

I sat next to her. "I'm sorry too. I should have spoken to you first. I thought I could protect you by hearing what he had to say. Then I could tell you what happened."

"And I didn't hear you out." She took a deep breath and asked, "What did he say?"

"You're not going to believe this, but he didn't know about you."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "How is that possible? My mom always said he left her."

"He left her before she told him she was pregnant. I don't know when she knew about you. But she never bothered to reach out to him to tell him either."

"Oh, my god."

I didn't want Ivy to be upset. I was worried about the baby. But we needed to have this conversation. "I believed him. He doesn't live that far from you, and he has a family. Two adult sons and a wife. He works as a mechanic at a garage. He was upset he didn't get a chance to be part of your life."

The tears spilled over her cheeks, and I did my best to wipe them away.

"He wants to meet you when you're ready."

"Why would my mom keep him from me?"

"I don't know. Maybe she was afraid of the rejection." I couldn't help but think it was a similar thought pattern to what Ivy operated under. She'd learned it from her mother.

"Instead she made me think that he rejected me."

"You can talk to her about it if you want. You can get the answers you're longing for. But you can also move on, meet your father, and have this baby of ours. You can have a different future."

"Is that possible? Can I move forward with my dad and deal with my mother later?" Ivy's voice trembled, and I hated that she was hurting.

"I don't see why not."

I wanted to protect her, but I also wanted her to live the life she was meant to. And hiding from the world because she was afraid of getting hurt was no way to live.

Ivy lifted her gaze to meet mine. "I have to tell you something."

My stomach turned. Was this the part where she told me she couldn't be with me? That she could never forgive me for what I did?

"I'm in love with you. I have been for a while. But I was so afraid of telling you."

Hope surged. "I love you too."

"I don't want to live apart from you. I like living with you."

I held her hand to my heart, which was beating hard. "This is your place now too." I wasn't sure if I was talking about the house or my heart. It was all wrapped up in my mind.

Ivy shook her head. "How can you forgive me for pushing you away repeatedly? For not trusting you?"

"I knew when we got involved that trust might be an issue for you. I intended to be patient. I want a life with you and our baby." The love for these two was overwhelming. Now that I was able to express my feelings to her, it only made them stronger.

"You're too good for me. I don't deserve this."

I cupped her cheek. "You deserve everything. The love. The joy. The security."

"It seems too good to be true."

"I'm always going to be here for you. I'm never going to let you go."

If you need to take a few hours to yourself here and there, that's okay.

Because I'm always going to be waiting for you to come back.

"I had a feeling she'd struggle with the lack of trust for a bit before she believed that she could rely on me to always be there for her."

"I love you so much," she said, blinking away tears.

"I'm right there with you," I said before touching my lips to hers. As my tongue slid alongside hers, it was like coming home. Ivy was it for me. I'd protect her with everything I had.

Ivy twisted slightly in her seat to face me. "I don't know why I'm so nervous."

"You're meeting your father for the first time." I reached over the console to entangle my fingers with hers.

Her eyes shone with unshed tears. Ivy had been more emotional, and I thought it was because she was finally confronting her feelings instead of numbing herself to them. "It's fitting that I'm meeting my father around the same time as my little one will meet you."

I grinned at her. "That's where you're wrong. He can already hear me."

Her lips curved. "That's true."

We decided not to find out the gender of our baby. We wanted to be surprised. But it was easier to call the baby something, and he had been our fallback. Today, we were meeting with Clint, not the rest of the family. He wanted to take things slow and not overwhelm Ivy.

He was aware that she'd been told a different story her entire life and that she was struggling to come to terms with this new one. I think she wanted to believe that he was interested in a relationship with her. But she was cautiously optimistic. "Do you think he'll like me?"

I heard the vulnerability in her question. "How could he not?"

She shrugged, and I knew it was the old insecurity creeping out.

"He never had a chance to before. He's going to want to make up for lost time.

" Or at least, that's what he told me when I called him to set up the meeting.

He was grateful to me for locating him. I don't think Ivy ever would have done it, knowing what she was told.

I pulled up to the restaurant where we were scheduled to meet. I opened the door for

Ivy and helped her get down. She was getting close to her due date. She said she felt like a whale, but I thought she looked beautiful. Her belly was round with my child. She was going to be an incredible mother.

I held her hand as we walked into the restaurant. Clint had texted to say he had a booth in the back, so I headed in that direction. When he saw us, he stood, his eyes full of emotion as he took in his daughter for the first time.

It was a little emotional for me too. When we stopped in front of Clint, I wasn't sure if I should introduce them or not.

Clint stepped forward. "Ivy." His voice was rough. "It's so good to meet you."

Ivy met his gaze. "You as well."

"May I hug you?" Clint asked hesitantly.

She bit her lip and nodded.

I had a feeling she was holding back tears.

Clint hugged her, and she buried her head in his shoulder. They had the same sandy blond hair and stubborn tilt of their chins. I wondered what else would end up being similar.

When Clint finally stepped back, his eyes were shiny too. "Let's sit. I bet you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry," Ivy said to him, smiling at me.

She'd forgiven me for hiring a private investigator to find her father.

This was a better ending than I could have imagined.

She needed to confront her mother, but I wouldn't rush her on that.

That was for her to do on her own. I'd be by her side if she wanted me there, but I wouldn't push her to do anything that she wasn't ready for.

It was more important for her to see that her dad wasn't the villain in this scenario.

He hadn't abandoned her. And now our child would have two sets of grandparents.

We sat in the booth, Clint across from us.

The waitress stopped by our table, and we gave her our order. Then we handed our menus to her, and she left to put the order in.

"I'm not sure where to start," Ivy began.

"Why don't I tell you the story of how I met your mother?" Clinton said, and Ivy smiled.

"I'd like to hear that."

I wasn't prepared for Clint to start there, but it was a smart approach.

He relayed the story of how they'd met at a local bar, and he'd instantly been attracted to Tessa.

She was happy and outgoing. They'd dated for a while, but he was working at a garage where he wouldn't have a chance to work full-time.

He needed to move off island, and her mother didn't want to leave Sanibel.

"If she had told me at any point that she was pregnant, I would have made a different decision. I would have certainly been part of your life. I still can't believe I have a daughter."

"Cooper said you have two sons," Ivy said softly.

He grinned. "You have two brothers." He pulled out his phone and showed her the picture of him with family. "I'd love for you to meet them. When you're ready."

"I'd like that."

"I'd love to keep in touch with you, especially now that you're starting a family of your own."

"I'm a little overwhelmed because it has only been me for so long. I was an only child until my mom had my brother and sister. They're so much younger than me; I'm more of a mother figure to them."

"She looks out for her siblings," I said proudly.

Clint's eyes shone with emotion. "You're going to be an amazing mother."

Ivy chuckled without any humor. "I wasn't sure about that after the example I've been shown."

"I'm sure your mother had her reasons why she didn't tell you the truth. She might have been fighting her own demons. But you're willing to grow and adapt. That sets you apart from her. And who knows? Maybe she'll make some changes in her life too."

"That would be good for Rae and Duncan."

"Don't give up on her just yet," Clint said softly, and it wasn't lost on me that this was his first bit of fatherly advice he'd ever given her.

"You're a good man. I wish I'd known you sooner."

"We can't change the past, but we can move forward in a different way and make a commitment to each other." Clint looked to me as if he didn't want to step on any toes.

"We'd love to have you in our lives."

"Cooper's parents are throwing us a party after the baby's born. It would be great if you could come. You can meet my sister and brother." Ivy fell silent for a few seconds and then added, "I'd like to meet my brothers too."

Clint grinned more widely. I don't think he was expecting a meeting of the entire family to happen so soon. "Do you need any help with anything? The nursery? I'd love to be involved."

"We need to paint the nursery if you'd like to help. We're waiting until after the baby is born so we'll know if it's a boy or a girl." It was important for him to be involved. He couldn't be present for Ivy when she was a child, but he could be there for her now.

We talked about what Ivy was like as a child. She described herself as independent and strong. When boys tried to pick on her, she fought back.

I could tell that Clint was proud of her but sad that he wasn't there to protect and guide her. He was a good man, and I'd done the right thing looking for him. I could

have handled the situation better, but I couldn't regret anything now. Not when this was the outcome.

We lingered over coffee and dessert, none of us wanting to leave.

Eventually, Ivy arched her back. "I hate to break this up, but I'm getting tired, and my back is aching."

Clint threw down cash for the bill, covering the entire thing. I let him because it was something he needed to take care of. "Let's get you home."

When we reached my truck, Clint hugged Ivy gently. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"I'll look out for her," I added, knowing he needed to hear it.

Clint nodded, stepping away. "I know you will." And then he said to Ivy, "I hope you'll call us when you go into labor. We'd love to be in the waiting room."

Ivy blinked back tears. "I cry about everything now."

"You've had a lot of change in a short time. But I want you to know that you can count on me. Now that I know about you, I want to be here for you."

I knew he wouldn't want to step on my toes, but at the same time, we'd make room for him. He was part of her life now too. I hoped one day he'd walk her down the aisle at our wedding.

"I know."

Clint let out a breath as if he was worried she wouldn't believe him. We said our goodbyes and got into the truck.

On the drive home, Ivy said, "Thank you."

"For?" I asked, looking over at her.

"For finding my father. For giving him back to me."

That comment had my eyes tearing up. "I'd do anything for you, and I'm glad it worked out. He's a good man."

She reached over and covered my hand with hers. "So are you."

"You know I'll love you forever. You never have to worry about being alone again," I said to her.

"I love you too, Cooper. You know what I need before I do."

She held onto my hand all the way home, only going lax when she drifted off to sleep. Between Clint and me, she wouldn't have to ever doubt that she was loved and supported.

Ivy

I was exhausted yet unbelievably happy. When the nurse placed my baby boy in my arms, I hadn't known I was capable of feeling so much love. It was like my heart expanded to encompass my family, Cooper, and now Henry.

Cooper was next to me for everything. He held our baby skin to skin in the hospital, murmuring things to him while I drifted off.

He was there in the middle of the night to change the baby and help me to get him to latch onto my nipple.

And then when I was done feeding him, he'd swaddle him and put him in the bassinet.

For the first few weeks, Cooper had taken leave from work to be with me the entire time. I was recovering from pregnancy and childbirth and learning how to take care of a baby. Both of us were figuring it out together.

When he scheduled time to go back to work, we talked about it together as a team, discussing what would make the most sense for us.

He'd scheduled his mother and my friends to stop by every day to watch Henry so that I could shower and take a nap. I was grateful for any help I could get, and everyone wanted to hold him. I was positive I could do it myself, but I didn't have to.

We had so many people supporting us, and it meant more love for our baby.

Today was the party that Joy insisted on throwing to welcome Henry into the world. All our friends and family were invited to Joy and Jonathan's house. Even Rae and Duncan were in the pool.

I'd told Mom that Dad was in my life again, and she said I was an idiot for letting him in after how he'd left me. All I said was that we both knew that wasn't true, and she didn't say anything more. She'd lied to me, and I wouldn't let her continue to disparage my father.

I hadn't officially confronted her about it, and I'm not sure I ever would. I was too focused on moving forward and being happy to delve into the past. And I wasn't ready to invite her to something like this yet. Not when my dad would be meeting Henry for the first time.

"You know your dad is going to love Henry. How could he not?" Cooper asked on the drive over to his parents'.

"It's weird that my father's going to meet my son. He's going to be part of our lives now, when he wasn't before," I said, still not able to wrap my mind around this new development. It almost felt too good to be true.

Cooper glanced over at me. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

My eyes filled with tears. "Yes."

"Then why are you crying?" he asked gently.

I was more emotional than I'd ever been, and I could blame it on the hormones, but I think it was because I was feeling everything for the first time. I wasn't lying to myself or telling myself a story. I was finally letting people in, and it was easier than blocking everyone out.

Cooper reached over to hold my hand “We’re by your side.”

“I know, and I’m so grateful for that. This little guy will have so many people to love him.”

“You know that’s because of you, right? Everyone loves you and, by extension, Henry.”

“I’m starting to see that.” I understood a lot of things I hadn’t before. My world had expanded to include so many people. I no longer saw my friends as acquaintances or Cooper’s family as his. It felt amazing to be part of a community that supported each other.

By the time we arrived at his parents’ house, the cars were lined down the street.

Cooper helped me out of my SUV and took the baby in the heavy car seat. Then he held my hand as we headed inside.

In the kitchen, there was a blue sign that said Welcome Baby Henry above a table of blue-and-white cupcakes. People milled about in the living room and kitchen and spilled outside onto the deck and lower patio.

Cooper took Henry out of the baby carrier and allowed everyone to ooh and aah over him.

Eventually, he let others hold him, but Joy was the one who took him the longest. She was ecstatic to have another grandbaby to spoil.

She didn’t get to see Marshall’s daughter, Hayden, or Oakley and Dalton’s baby girl, Lilliana, very often.

My father wasn’t here yet, and I tried not to let that bother me. It was hard not to fall

into old patterns of believing he wouldn't show up for me.

I was eating a plate of food outside, Joy holding Henry on the chair next to me, when Clint came outside on the patio. He scanned the room and smiled as soon as he saw me.

When he approached, he said, "Don't get up. I'll come to you." He leaned down and kissed my cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted but happy," I said with a satisfied smile at Henry, who Joy still held.

Clint followed my gaze to Henry. "How's the baby?"

"He's perfect," Joy said. "Do you want to hold him?"

Clint grinned. "I'd love to."

Joy switched places with him, letting Clint sit in the chair, cradling his grandchild. I was aware that Cooper snapped pictures of us, then eventually slipped away to give us privacy.

Clint gazed at Henry's face, his expression a mix of awe and a little regret. "I missed these moments with you."

"We can't get that time back," I agreed.

Clint lifted his gaze to mine. "I can make up for time lost. I want to be a part of your life going forward."

I smiled. "I'm more than okay with that."

"I've enjoyed getting to know you the last few weeks."

“Me too.” We’d exchanged phone numbers, and I’d texted him updates about the pregnancy and our plans for the future.

Clint looked down at Henry, who sighed in his sleep. “Will you bring Henry over to visit with his uncles soon?”

Love surged through me. “I’d love that.”

“They’re excited about being uncles.”

I’d met them once, along with his wife, Sherri. I was surprised that they accepted me so easily into their lives.

There wouldn’t be any pictures of me as a baby with my father. But there would be of me, Henry, and Clint. It filled my heart with contentment. I’d dreamed I’d have my father in my life, and I was finally getting my wish.

Everything was coming true for me at once. I had a beautiful baby, a relationship with Cooper, my father, and my beach house. Life was perfect.

I was worried about how I’d manage work and motherhood, but I’d hired Blakely and talked to another realtor about working together. Everything was working out.

The slider to the patio opened, and a man stepped outside. He looked a lot like the Kingstons' older brother, Marshall.

“What’s Marshall doing here?” Cooper asked his mom. “Did you know he was coming home?”

Joy’s eyes lit up with excitement. “I didn’t.”

Marshall stepped outside, a sullen teen girl behind him.

“He has Hayden with him.” Joy crossed the patio, taking his cheeks in her hands and saying something to him. She moved onto Hayden who reluctantly accepted her hug.

Joy said something to Marshall, and he looked over at us. He crossed the patio and stopped in front of Cooper.

They hugged, and Cooper said, “It’s good to see you. I didn’t realize you would be home.”

“I was at Walter Reed in Maryland to recuperate.”

“You were hurt? Why didn’t you say anything to anyone?” Cooper asked him incredulously.

“I didn’t want Mom to worry.”

“I’m glad you’re home now,” Cooper said, his gaze resting on his niece.

“Tiff wants me to take Hayden for a while. It seemed like a good time to be discharged.”

“Hudson will be glad you’re home for good.”

Marshall’s jaw tightened. “I don’t have any plans for now. I just want to reacclimate to everything.”

“I don’t know anyone here,” Hayden grumbled.

“You know Grandma Joy and your uncles,” Marshall said to her, but her lip curled as if she didn’t care to spend time with them.

“Can I go inside? I want to listen to music.”

“You don’t want to spend time with your family?” Marshall asked, a bite to his tone.

Hayden gave him an exasperated look. “Dad.”

Marshall sighed. “For a little bit, and then come back outside.”

Hayden turned to go inside.

“She’s in full teenager mode, huh?” Cooper asked with amusement.

Marshall shook his head. “When I left for my last deployment, she was sweet and loved to spend time with me. Now she’s irritated about everything I do and say. It’s like I can’t do anything right.”

“I guess that’s what we have to look forward to in the teenage years,” Cooper said, taking Henry from Clint.

“Enjoy this time now. It goes so fast,” Marshall said before turning away to talk to Hudson and Elena.

“I can’t believe he’s home,” Cooper said to me.

“Your mother must be overjoyed.”

“All her family in one place,” Cooper murmured.

“As much as I love being around everyone, I’d love to be alone with my little family.”

Cooper grinned at me over Henry’s head. “That’s my favorite place to be too.”

I hope you enjoyed Ivy and Cooper’s story! To read about Cooper’s proposal

download the bonus epilogue .

Marshall and Saylor are next in Summer Escape .

I recently left the military, navigating fatherhood with my daughter who became a teenager overnight, and dodging the family I disappointed when I walked away from the family business.

But the real problem? My former summer fling—the one woman I never forgot—is now living next door.

Now she's a daily temptation... and possibly the biggest complication of all.